Two Years

by AngularNotions

Summary

When Harry Styles disappears late one night, the impact is felt around the world. But for Liam, it is the end of his world as he knew it.

Notes

This was written over the period of this year and much of it was done prior to the passing of Robin Twist. I thought long and hard about removing him from the story but in the end, after a lot of discussion with my beta, we chose to leave him as a character since it is fiction.

There are extremely dark themes in this story and while it is hurt/comfort, I do caution those who are triggered by descriptions of violence or rape to be forewarned.

Also, I seriously suck at writing summaries. Apologies.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Just a quick note that this fic is completely finished and as per my usual method I'm doing final edits as I post so it might take a little bit of time but do know that it is entirely done!

1 Hour

From: Liam Payne
To: Harry Styles, Niall Horan, Louis Tomlinson
Subject: Happy 2017!
Date: January 1, 2017 12:48 am

Happy News Year’s lads! Can’t believe it’s been a year already!

From: Niall Horan
To: Harry Styles, Louis Tomlinson, Liam Payne
Re: Happy 2017!
Date: January 1, 2017 1:05 am

You too mate! Hope you all didn’t get too tit-faced!

From: Louis Tomlinson
To: Harry Styles, Liam Payne, Niall Horan
Re: Re: Happy 2017!
Date: January 1, 2017 1:12 am

I will have you know Neil that I do not get tit-faced, I just have a good time ;) Happy New Year’s lads! See you all soon!

24 Hours

From: Liam Payne
To: Harry Styles, Niall Horan, Louis Tomlinson
Re: Re: Re: Happy 2017!
Date: January 2, 2017 2:24 am

Haha, haven’t heard from you Harry, did it up a little too much last night?
From: Louis Tomlinson
To: Harry Styles, Niall Horan, Liam Payne
Re: Re: Re: Re: Happy 2017!
Date: January 2, 2017 3:41 am

Yeah Harry, answer your damn texts you diva!

48 Hours

Liam hits send on another text to Harry, the previous twenty or so still sitting unread. They do say that they were delivered, so at least he knew someone was receiving them. Harry had a tendency to change his cell number frequently, somehow always letting it fall into the wrong hands and then being flooded with messages from fans before having to call his carrier once again and apologetically request new digits. When he did that though, he usually sent out a mass message to let everyone know his new number.

Liam waits about a minute before quickly firing off a message to Louis, asking if he had heard from Harry today. He’d already asked Niall, with no luck. He had also sent a message to Gemma with no response yet.

He has no idea why he is so keyed up about this. Harry going silent wasn’t actually that unusual, at least publicly. Hell, he’d been pretty much a ghost on his social media since the hiatus began, only coming to life when the Another Man magazine was released as well as a few other random intervals. But he usually at least kept up with one of the guys to let them know that they might not hear from him for one reason or another. This time though, nothing; just pure blankness that leaves an uneasy pit in Liam’s stomach. Especially since Harry always told Liam where he was or where he was going. Ever since one year ago.

Had it really been that long? Liam ponders the timeline for a moment, going back to a memory that has both haunted and exhilarated him for just over 12 months now. He shakes it off, knowing full well going down that road would lead him nowhere good. He instead opens his phone again and starts scrolling through twitter, checking for mentions of anything about Harry. After finding nothing, he clicks out with an audible snap of his finger before tossing the phone on the soundboard and sighing loudly. There had been no fan sightings of Harry since just around Christmas when he was seen at a pub in Holmes Chapel with his mates. No one had spotted him on New Year’s Eve and there were no Instagram photos or snapchats from his friends that included him either.

It was weird.

Liam’s phone bleeps on the desk. It’s Louis responding that he hadn’t heard from Harry either, but joking that he’d probably just tripped and found himself in some supermodel’s bed and hadn’t been able to find his way out yet. Liam’s lips purse as he reads the message, a mix of jealousy and annoyance coursing through him. He knows Louis means no harm by the joke, but it always burned him when people joked about Harry being promiscuous when he knew it wasn’t true. He resolutely sets his phone down again after firing off one quick response to Louis, thanking him and asking him to text if he did hear from Harry. He turns his attention back to the soundboard and puts his headphones on, forcing himself to focus on the song he was supposed to be editing, but finds his eyes swinging back to his phone constantly. He was worried he might miss a message or that he wouldn’t hear it, but every time he checks there’s nothing but the odd thing from his mum or a junk email and he grows increasingly fidgety.
By sundown the song is still not done, barely even touched really, and there is still no word from Harry. He finally breaks down and texts Niall again about his concern. He knew his friend wouldn’t judge him, or at least wouldn’t tease him as much as Louis would.

_I’m sure he’s fine Liam. You know Harry, he finds something that distracts him and gets lost in it. He’ll show his face eventually._

Liam frowns at the message. While rationally he knew that Niall was probably right and he was being ridiculous, there was still this weird feeling in his gut that something wasn’t right. He vows to be more persistent in the morning if Harry still hadn’t responded. Just to be sure, he fires off another message to Gemma, as insurance.

### 5 Days

Well, at least Liam wasn’t the only one worrying now and that gave him some validation.

At the same time, now there were police and investigators involved and it was actually becoming clear that something was seriously wrong.

Harry hadn’t been seen or heard from since New Year’s Eve morning, when he had gone for breakfast with his mum and sister. Evidently, he was then supposed to meet up with some of his mates to go to a party, except he’d never shown up and his mates all claim to have not heard from him. His mum and Gemma had gone to the constabulary the same day Liam had been texting Louis and Niall, which was why he hadn’t heard back from Gemma. A missing person’s report had been issued and since then, things had been moving rapidly. The only blessing thus far was that somehow the press hadn’t gotten wind of it yet, meaning the fandom didn’t know either. They all felt that was beneficial, because if Harry did turn up hung over and rambling on about some new adventure he’d found, then it would be best to avoid it being public.

As soon as he had heard about the police getting involved, Liam had jumped on a plane back home from LA. There wasn’t a whole lot he could do really, just sit in Anne’s kitchen listening to her talking on the phone or sitting in his own mum’s kitchen drinking endless cups of tea with his knee jiggling. He had decided to stay with his parents rather than at his own house. He didn’t fancy being alone during this, but at the same time found it hard to keep up any conversation as his mind turned and twisted with worry.

Louis and Niall fly back the day after Liam and they all start taking turns sitting with Gemma, Robin, Des and Anne. Comforting them with endless platitudes and empty promises that Harry was probably fine and just being Harry somewhere. But everyone knew that of all of them in the band, Harry was probably the most responsible, most mature and least likely to do something this insane. Even if he did go off on a bender or to explore his inner meaning, he would have at least told his mother or called her by now.

The police make their way through Harry’s friends. Questioning each on their whereabouts and when they had heard from him last. So far they had found nothing to go on, no evidence indicating where he might be or who he might be with. The story was the same with this management and other business contacts. None of them had heard from Harry since he left LA to come home for the holidays. Most annoyingly to Liam, they didn’t seem all that concerned either. This lack of information left them all at a loose end of sorts. No one really knew what to do next, but all felt like they should do something; either organize a search party or put up posters. But they knew that
would draw too much attention and so they sit. Drinking tea and issuing platitudes and inside Liam’s guts churn and twist with fear.

6 Days

They all knew the reprieve from the media being alerted would be short lived, but it still doesn’t prepare them for it. Liam wakes early to the sound of a text coming in on his phone. He’s awake and reaching for the device at lightning speed, praying that it’s Harry telling him that he’s just fine and they have all been silly. Instead it’s Louis and the content makes Liam’s heart sink.

TMZ just posted about Harry’s disappearance. Got pictures from outside his London house. Couldn’t the cops have made some effort to hide themselves?

Liam sits up and sighs loudly, running a hand through his hair roughly before responding.

I thought they already searched his house? How bad is it?

His knee jiggles as he awaits a reply. He considers grabbing his iPad to have a look for himself, but decides to wait to see what Louis says first, to prepare him.

Bad. Real bad mate. They have a copy of the missing person’s report and apparently it’s already hit Perez Hilton as well. And I don’t fuckin’ know what the cops are looking for now. They turned the house upside down already and found naught.

Liam issues another irritated sigh, this one more of a growl and he reaches for his tablet. He heads to Google and types in “Harry Styles”. Within seconds there is a litany of articles from multiple tabloids with breaking news about his disappearance. He doesn’t bother clicking on any of them, he doesn’t even want to know what they are saying and he really doesn’t want to know what’s happening on Twitter or in the fandom. He grabs his phone again and replies to Louis.

We better get to Anne’s.

7 Days

Things are now at a fever pitch outside of Harry’s London house. Not to mention the hoard of news vans parked outside of Anne’s house in Holmes Chapel. The fandom is hysterical. Both Twitter and Tumblr have crashed multiple times since the news broke. Mixed in with the media were groups of them, holding candles and vigils, placing flowers, singing and praying. Liam, Niall and Louis feel useless to comfort them, not really knowing what to do or say since they didn’t have any answers themselves.

That night is the first that Liam finds he is unable to sleep. His brain runs in circles all night long. He imagines all kinds of horrors befalling Harry and sits up sweating and shaking. He doesn’t tell the others about these thoughts. He just curls up on the bed, swaddled in the comforter as the cold realization pours over him: Harry’s gone. The void he’s left behind is gaping and sore. A wound that is just beginning to fester in the middle of Liam’s chest. He’d been avoiding really accepting or believing it for seven days because it just seemed so impossible that a being, a force really, as big as Harry could vanish. It had been so absurd to him, that someone like Harry, as recognizable as Harry, could disappear. But it had happened.
The police are tight-lipped on their theories. They won’t even say if they think it was a criminal act or if Harry just upped and left of his own volition. Those that know him best know damn right well Harry would never just take off and not tell his family and friends. Harry wasn’t that kind of person. He would never intentionally inflict pain. He would never leave and not tell Liam. So that left only one possibility, he had been taken against his will and now who knows what was happening to him.

The following days are slow, blurry, and full of constant worry. The media and fandom spin wilder and wilder stories each day, theories far-fetched and almost comical, but born from a lack of real information. No one can leave the house without being hounded and photographed from every angle; their facial expressions, clothes, coloring of their skin, all being analyzed to the nth degree.

Liam doesn’t leave. He can’t. He sits each day in Harry’s old bedroom, staring at the remainders of his youth, of the time Harry had spent in that room and feeling the ache in his chest as a constant.

He has never felt so useless in his life. He wants to go look for Harry, but has no idea where to begin. No clues to give him a start in investigating and any time he so much as suggests offering his help to any of the detectives, he is brusquely told “no” as they can’t risk him potentially having the same fate.

In retaliation, he starts texting Harry daily. He’s not even sure the phone number still works, if Harry has his phone or what could possibly be happening to his messages but it’s a weird comfort to just send him a text. He tells him about the search, about the theories, about how his mum is so worried and how Gemma looks lost. It is several days before Liam is brave enough to start saying more personal things. Telling Harry how much he misses him, how much he cares about him and needs to know where he is and to have him back home again. He never gets a response, never sees a little flag telling him any of the messages have been read, but that doesn’t stop him from waiting, for hoping for a reply. He sits in Harry’s old bedroom and waits, holding his chest, staring at the walls and sending endless texts.

2 Months

The police have a working theory now. A search of Harry’s LA home and manager’s office had turned up some threatening letters from a crazed fan. They were working hard on identifying the fan and trying to piece together how they might have been able to abduct Harry and they seemed pleased to have a line of investigation going. There is a brief furor over the fact that people in Harry’s team knew about the letters but had done nothing about them, but it blows over quickly.

Liam is frustrated that the police seem more concerned with how Harry’s disappearance happened instead of where he might be currently. He voices as much to the lead detective, Darryl Murphy, and is given a congenial pat on the shoulder and a platitude about how they are doing everything they can and of course they are still looking for Harry. Something in how he says it lodges a block of ice in Liam’s stomach. He gets the distinct sense they are no longer looking for a live person, but instead a corpse.

“Son, we are following every lead and of course our goal is the best possible outcome here: to find Harry alive and well and to bring him home to his family,” Murphy says warmly, dark blue eyes twinkling under his dark brows.

“Then why are you here right now?” Liam shouts suddenly, startling the small group of investigators and police officers in the front desk area of the station. “Why are you not out there
actually looking for him? You’ve got the letters, surely by now you’ve identified the creep and can figure out where he could possibly hide someone. You need to get out there!”

The detective lowers his chin slightly, giving Liam a pitying look and despair washes over him. His anger slipping away almost as fast as it had arrived.

“We are looking Mr. Payne. You need to trust that we are doing everything we can and have Harry’s best interests in mind.”

Liam’s shoulders drop further with each word and he nods despondently before turning and leaving, pushing his way through the photographers to his sister’s car. She takes one look at his face and doesn’t ask, just takes his hand gently and squeezes it before pulling away from the curb.

6 Months

As is normal in the world of news media, with no new information they had moved on to other stories. So too had the fans camped out on the street. All of the hoard leaving made the Holmes Chapel neighborhood feel uncomfortably quiet all of a sudden, and Harry’s old bedroom seemed much smaller.

Liam goes back to Surrey, to his own house, where he sits and waits. He calls Murphy twice a day for updates. He eats mechanically, showers, and does what he should do to take care of himself. Then he waits.

Texting Harry and waiting: the two constants in his life.

He thinks about Harry, all of the things never said between them, or at least by him. How somehow they had been the ones who had stayed the closest and strongest out of all the lads no matter what. He thinks about the last time he had been alone with Harry and how their relationship had changed dramatically. How they never got to talk about that, explore it, feel it, or even understand it. They had spent a year texting, emailing, and talking about everything except that night. Neither of them seemed to know what to say, so they said nothing about it, and had instead discussed nothing really. But still they kept in contact. A strange connection they both felt compelled to maintain.

One morning Liam is sitting on the couch, phone in hand, reading over some of the old messages between them, stilted conversations that neither had been able to let end, when there is a knock on the door. Setting his tea down, he locks his phone and pockets it as he heads down the hall. A quick glance through the peephole reveals Gemma looking a mess and his heart stops, dread washing over him in waves as he slowly opens the door. She looks at him and sniffles, tears rolling down her cheeks and she has to swallow thickly before she’s able to speak.

“They found a body,” she whispers finally, pausing to swallow again and roughly wipe away the tears under her eyes. “They said it matches his description and they want mum and I to come identify him.”

She starts to sob suddenly, shoulders shaking with the force of them and Liam knows he should reach forward and comfort her, give her a hug, but it is by sheer force of will that he isn’t crumpling to the floor himself at the moment.

“She sniffs finally, wiping her nose on her sleeve. “I don’t even know if I can go in there and look, but I can’t make mum do it alone, that
would be cruel of me."

Liam knows with every fibre of his being that he does not want to go with them. If he stays home, if he closes the door and hides behind it, then it’s not real. Then that body isn’t Harry and he’s still alive somewhere and they just need to keep searching.

Despite this he nods dumbly, mumbles something about getting his coat and shoes and closes the door, leaving her on the porch. He makes it upstairs to his bedroom to find shoes and moving on autopilot he laces them. Then he chooses a coat from his closet, slides it onto his shoulders and zips it up. Finally, he walks into the bathroom where he immediately puts his fist through the mirror. The glass explodes in a sea of shards that rain down on the marble countertop and tiled floor, joining drops of blood from his knuckles as his hand drops to hang limply at his side. He stares at his one eye in the shard that remains on the wall breathing hard, shoulders rising and falling with the motion for several long minutes, hand slowly starting to throb. With resignation he eventually goes back downstairs, grabs some paper towel and wraps it around his hand before grabbing his keys and joining Gemma on the porch, locking the door behind him. She looks down at his hand and the bloody paper towels, then back up at his face, but says nothing. He knows she understands nothing needs to be said.

The ride in the car to the hospital is quiet, as is the morgue when they get there, not that Liam would ever expect a morgue to be noisy. Anne, Louis and Niall are already there when they arrive and all three look at Liam’s red paper towed hand with surprise, but say nothing, though he gets the sense that Louis will be asking questions later. Liam has no intention of answering them, talking to Louis, or even worrying about later. His breathing picks up speed as he looks at the white door leading into the exam room, where he knows the body currently lies in wait, probably covered with some scratchy white linen sheet, toe tag peeking out. All at once he’s panicking and feels like he is about to vomit. His mind swirls with denial and fear and desperate attempts to prepare himself for the worst.

He finds himself standing outside again moments later, with no recollection of even moving. The service door slams shut behind him. The parking space reserved for hearses and morgue vehicles is currently empty and two dumpsters sit nearby, filling the air with the scent of garbage. His stomach lurches and he turns to lean over and vomits on the ground, somehow managing not to spatter his shoes, but feeling guilty about leaving a mess nevertheless. An absurd emotion in the moment he knows, but he can’t help it. He breathes hard for a few moments, spitting on the ground a few times before standing up and turning back towards the door, Louis stands holding it open for him wordlessly. Liam doesn’t acknowledge him, wouldn’t know what to do or say anyway, and walks back into the building, back towards that fucking white door.

He notes that Gemma and Anne are both missing from the hall. Niall stands looking haunted and full of anticipation. Liam joins him. Stands next to him with his injured hand cradled to his chest and waits. He hears a strange shout from the other side of the door, but he can’t determine the emotion behind it. Then there are voices speaking, the words muffled. Seconds later the door bangs open and Gemma comes rushing out, eyes wide and wild.

“It’s not him! It’s not him!” She exclaims, body visibly relaxing and hands scraping through her hair with relief before she realizes herself. “But it’s someone, that poor family,” she says more softly.

Anne follows her out, leaning back against the door once it’s closed and shutting her eyes, breathing deeply with her own relief and guilt for that fact. It takes a few seconds before it really hits Liam. When it does his body goes weak with it, knees crumpling as he sinks to the floor,
shoulders sagging as he gulps in air, not even realizing he had been holding his breath. Niall crouches next to him, hand on his shoulder and breath on the side of his face.

“Mate, you alright?” He asks quietly, before adding “Maybe we should take you upstairs to have that hand looked at yeah?”

Liam nods dumbly. He allows himself to be hoisted back up to his feet and walked down the hall away from the white door and the poor unfortunate soul that lay on the cold slab behind it. He wants to feel guilty for being elated that it’s not Harry on that table. He really does, but finds he can’t.

**8 Months**

The scars on his hand have faded mostly to a soft pink, with tiny dots marking the stitches alongside the lines. He finds himself tracing them with the tip of a finger when he’s distracted or in need of a distraction.

Zayn is releasing his second album today and Liam’s scars are a little red from the amount of times his finger has crossed them. Every time he thinks of it, his chest surges with fury that Zayn is just carrying on with his life while Harry is gone. His former bandmate filling his life while Liam’s feels empty.

*Li, please come to the release party! Nialler and Lou are coming and I’d love your support too.*

Zayn has texted him steadily for the past few weeks, trying to persuade him to come celebrate the album and to show them as a united front even though the bastard is the one who left the band first. Liam hasn’t actually responded yet, though he thinks biting thoughts every time one comes in. His mind vicious and cruel when he knows Zayn doesn’t really deserve it. He has every right to carry on. It just means that Harry is more important to Liam. It’s something that makes him weirdly smug. So he continues to ignore the messages and continues to send his own to Harry. He complains about Zayn’s bullshit party and bullshit CD and the bullshit attitude he has that he thinks it’s ok to ask Liam for favours. And like his own ghosting of Zayn, he gets no response from Harry.

Dusk is falling when there’s a knock on the door. He sits a long while debating on answering it, but eventually a brief daydream of Harry being the one on the other side of the door gets him off the couch and he finds Louis standing on his porch with a pitying expression.

“Get dressed, you are coming to this party,” he states by way of greeting, pushing past Liam into the house to avoid having the door slammed in his face. He turns and looks at Liam with a sour expression after a minute and Liam slams the door anyway.

“Maybe go have a shower first, you fucking stink man.”

Liam responds by raising his middle finger and trudging back into the living room and flopping back down on the couch, finger going back to tracing his scars again. Louis follows him in a moment later, intentionally standing in front of the television where an old episode of Coronation Street is playing.

“Liam, snap out of it for fuck’s sake. You’re a bloody hermit now! Do you honestly think moping around your house is going to bring him back?” Louis asks him, arms crossed on his chest like a
disappointed school marm.

Liam responds rationally by throwing the remote at the wall, smashing it into pieces and scaring his dog, who quickly scurries from the room.

“Fuck you! From where I’m sitting, I’m the only one who fucking even cares he’s gone!” He spits back, sitting up on the couch.

Louis’ face darkens, arms dropping and hands forming fists, eyes filling with fire.

“YOU AREN’T THE ONLY ONE WHO LOST HIM PAYNE! DO YOU HONESTLY THINK YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE WHO MISSES HIM? IS TERRIFIED FOR HIM?” Louis shouts, hands flicking towards Liam.

Liam stands from the couch quickly, getting into Louis’ personal space and towering over him.

“That’s what it looks like to me,” he states evenly and Louis’ jaw visibly tightens, eyes glistening with tears.

“Fuck you Payne,” he answers just as evenly, voice breaking at the end.

With that he turns and walks out of the house, slamming the door behind him. Liam watches him go and then turns towards the broken remote, grumbling about having to replace it while tracing his scars again.

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There are plenty of tabloid pictures the next morning of the party. Zayn looking broody and mysterious as usual with Gigi smirking next to him. There is only one picture of Niall and none of Louis. He sees one note about how he had never shown up, despite promising to be there. Turns out the fandom is pretty upset about that. He skims through the news on his tablet idly, always looking to see if there were any sightings of Harry, some random picture of him wearing a loud shirt in the Bahamas with a fan or something. He ignores all of the rude comments about him not supporting Zayn. He doesn’t notice the breaking news on the TV at first, the news station droning on in the background since he can’t be arsed to get up and change it, but he’s just putting the tablet down when he notices the red banner on the bottom of the screen.

_Singer Harry Styles presumed dead according to statement from Cheshire Constabulary. More to come._

Breathing becomes impossible and black dots start to dance in his vision. How could they possibly declare him dead? They had no evidence, no reason to believe he was dead. They have to be wrong. He jumps off the couch and hurries to the front door, shoving his feet into a pair of discarded boots. He doesn’t even bother to check if his jeans and t-shirt are clean or to grab a coat. He just grabs his keys and phone and walks out the door and straight to his car. He gets about three blocks when he realizes that Cheshire is a hell of a drive from Surrey and he could actually just phone the detective. Pulling into a car park at a Tesco’s, he pulls his phone out and speed dials Murphy. When there is no answer the first time, just a gruff answering machine message, he hangs up and tries again. This time the phone is picked up, the detective barely starting to speak before Liam cuts him off, growling into the phone.

“What the fuck are you doing? Why are you releasing false news reports about Harry being dead?
He’s not dead, he can’t be. You have no evidence he is dead!” His voice gets louder as he speaks until he is finally shouting on his last word.

“Liam, son, we have no choice because at this point, we also have no evidence he is still alive.” The detective responds evenly, voice kind. “I’m sorry son, this is just the direction the investigation has led us.”

Liam makes a choked noise in his throat, fighting back the emotion and pain crawling up his chest, his eyes filling with tears.

“No!” He finally manages to say, sounding like a child. “No, he can’t be dead, it’s not possible. We’re gonna find him! You…you have to find him, please find him.” He sniffs loudly, voice pleading and soft. He hears the man on the other end sigh softly.

“Listen son, I know this is hard, that you have kept on hoping, but I’m afraid that this is the reality of the situation. I think its best we accept this and hopefully you and his family can find some closure.”

All at once Liam is incensed.

“CLOSURE!?! How in hell you can possibly think we could find closure when we have no idea what happened to him, where he is, if he is even dead at all?” He slams his fist down on his steering wheel like a petulant child again, causing a short blast from the horn. “You’re just giving up! You’re not doing your job and I want a new detective to take over his case because obviously you can’t be arsed to really make an effort!”

His outburst and horn make several people in the car park turn his way, faces curious. He knows at least one of them has recognized him, despite his shaggy beard and unkempt appearance.

“Liam, I’m sorry that this has been hard for you to hear, but I can assure you that we have done, are doing, everything possible to find Harry and I’m afraid this is the logical conclusion we have been forced to reach. I suggest you call some family or friends to come be with you during this difficult time.” The detective responds, voice a little clipped after being accused of being a slacker.

Liam doesn’t respond, just hangs up and tosses the phone onto the passenger seat. He’s highly tempted to whip it out the window in a fit of anger and despair, but his lock screen picture of Harry’s smiling face from a few years ago stares up at him and he can’t do it. Instead he gets out of the car and kicks the door closed viciously, leaving a deep dent before scrubbing his hands through his hair and breathing hard to stop the tears from falling. He stalks away from the car a few steps trying to calm down, to think rationally, but then he notices the small crowd of people that had formed near the front entrance of the store, all of them watching him and a new surge of anger goes through him.

He can’t even grieve in peace.

He glares at all of them, muttering curses as he storms back to his car and gets in. He throws it into gear quickly and tears out of the lot with the tires squealing, heading back home. His phone lights up several times beside him with missed messages, but he ignores them. When he gets home he only cursorily checks them over to see who sent them before locking the phone again and throwing it on the couch. His sisters have messaged, expressing their sorrow and asking after him. Roo invites him to come stay with her for a few days, but he doesn’t respond. He doesn’t want to be around other people. Doesn’t want anyone to convince him that Harry is really dead. He swears he
knows that Harry is still alive and can feel it deep in his soul. That is what he convinces himself of. He would know if Harry were dead. He would have known already. Therefore they are wrong, they are all wrong and Liam is right. He will find a way to prove it to them.

12 Months

They hold Harry’s funeral exactly one year after he went missing. “The world comes together to mourn” is what the news people say. In reality it’s the fandom, what’s left of them, and a lot of so-called celebrities and tabloids and talk show people all pontificating on about how wonderful Harry was and what a loss it is to the industry and to the world of music. Liam smashes his TV with his new remote in retaliation to their words.

The actual event is just Harry’s family and close friends including Niall, Louis and Zayn. Liam declares them traitors and blocks their numbers on his phone. He had spent the last four months trying to convince them that the police were wrong and that Harry wasn’t dead. He had managed it for the first two months, all of them willing to see his reasoning that there was no evidence to support the theory. But after a while, they realized that there was also no evidence the other way either.

Niall comes and tries to persuade him to come to the funeral. Telling him it will help him start moving on and help him to realize the reality of the situation. Liam throws him out, literally. His sister comes the morning of, her pretty dress a solemn black with a matching fascinator on her head. She goes so far as to pick out a black suit for him to wear before he screams at her to leave him alone. She goes quietly but not before telling him that he is alienating himself, that it isn’t helping and that maybe he should get some therapy. He slams the door behind her in response. He knows full well that he’s alienating himself, but it’s because they refuse to believe that Harry is still alive, something that Liam is so sure of he can taste it. It’s their fault as far as he’s concerned. If they weren’t so blind to the truth, then he wouldn’t have to cut them out of his life.

Liam arrives at the church only five minutes before the service begins with very little recollection of getting there. He’s still in the same jeans and t-shirt he was wearing the day before, but he threw his black suit jacket on over top just before leaving. He doesn’t look for his family, or anyone he knows. He just finds a dark corner at the back, ignoring the curious looks from those around him. He’s grateful for his beard today. It actually helps to hide him better and people do not recognize him as easily. He sees Anne and Gemma standing at the front dressed in black, dark veils over their faces as they dab at their eyes while different people step up to the front of the church to speak. There is no casket, for obvious reasons, but there are plenty of pictures of Harry in front of the altar and thousands of flowers in heaving bouquets placed at intervals across the front and down the aisles. Niall, Louis and Zayn all stand up and say a few words about Harry. Sharing funny stories of life on the road with him, how he was their brother from another mother, and how much they miss him. Liam listens with a mixture of sadness and fury in his gut. Old school friends, people he had met through the years in the business like Nick Grimshaw and Alexa Chung, as well as his manager Jeff all stand up and say something kind about Harry. Liam stays at the back and says nothing. Couldn’t find the words if he wanted to. Instead, he just keeps reminding himself that the entire event is a farce since Harry is still alive. After all of the talking is done, they show a video compilation of Harry. It’s filled with pictures of him as a baby, growing up, glimpses of his childhood, things he loved, his X-Factor audition and the life he had from that moment on. They use Story of My Life as the soundtrack. It pisses Liam off for reasons he can’t quite name.

When its over Liam hurries out before anyone sees him, turning out a side door to avoid the press. It’s the same door he used to get inside. He gets to his car and starts the motor, then sits, unsure of
what to do next or where to go. There was supposed to be some big celebration at the Antrobus Arms where Harry lived for a good portion of his life, but Liam really can’t stomach the idea of standing around with those people. To hear them saying useless platitudes about how it was a life cut short too young, or how it was a talent wasted and such a tragedy. He can’t do it. Instead he follows random roads until he finds himself in a pub called the Red Lion in the town of Winsford where he sits and drinks, far more than he should, far more than he has in many years. Its dark outside when the barmaid finally tells him to leave. He staggers outside, the cold air and drizzle sobering him only slightly. He stumbles down the street and through the door of the Ark Inn, where the proprietor takes pity on him and accepts his credit card before showing him to a room. He won’t remember driving home the next day, but that’s just as well.
Chapter 2

The song comes to Liam the night before Harry’s birthday. Fitting. Since the song is most definitely about Harry. It wakes him up from his restless sleep; the notes on a piano and words full of longing and loss. He writes them down in a notebook in hurried, messy writing, hoping it will leave his system and allow him to go back to sleep. He should have known better. Ever since Harry’s funeral he’s been like this: restless, unsettled and wracked with guilt. About what, he can’t say, or maybe doesn’t want to acknowledge. Nevertheless, after tossing and turning for an hour, he gives up and gets up to let the song have its way with him. By morning he’s fleshed it out and it’s entirely different from anything he’s ever written before. It’s more acoustic and raw, poetic and gritty, more like Harry than Liam.

It’s only natural really that when he’s done, sitting at the piano feeling drained and morose, that a delivery person would show up at his door with a nasty letter from his record company. It would seem they are starting to get testy at his self-imposed house arrest and lack of interest in finishing the album he started over a year ago. An album that is part of his hefty contract. In fact, they are threatening to sue him over breach of that contract, since he hasn’t delivered on his end of the bargain. After an hour of long exasperated sighs and a staring session in the new mirror in his bathroom, Liam picks up his phone and calls his manager, Simon Oliveira, and tells him to set up a meeting with the record company at the studio so they can go over what’s done and what needs to be done. He had been almost finished his first solo album when Harry disappeared. He had a full track listing, all of the songs were recorded and only a few still needed post-production. He had even picked out the outfit he wanted to wear on the cover picture. Then Harry disappeared and suddenly the fancy silver high tops and huge set of chains seemed completely pretentious in comparison to the much more pressing issue at hand.

By two in the afternoon he’s sitting in a studio surrounded by eight people in business suits who are all talking over each other about promo, interviews, exclusive releases, parties and the potential of Liam being the opening act on Justin Timberlake’s next tour. Liam ignores them for the most part, flopped in an oversized leather chair picking at a hole in the knee of his jeans. They are stained, as is his t-shirt and hoody, but he really doesn’t care. When the sound of all the voices making decisions for him becomes too much though, he finally speaks up.

“I want to record another song. I want it on the record.” His voice is quiet, deadpan, and matter of fact.

It takes a minute for any of them to register that he spoke, let alone what he said. And then they all talk at once.

“Are you fucking crazy?”

“The album is already done Liam!”

“We don’t have time for another song to be recorded.”
“I thought we had agreed on the track listing!”

Liam waits until they are done. All of them staring at him wide eyed before he responds,

“I want to record another song, it has to be on the record or I’m not doing a record. Period.”

Simon’s mouth opens immediately, face flushing with fury but Liam raises a hand to stop him.

“If you let me put this song on, then I will do whatever you want. All the promo, bullshit interviews, all of the crap, but only if this song goes on. It has to be on there.” He whispers the last few words, but no one reacts to the power of them.

One of the heads of the record company raises an eyebrow at him wryly, pursing his lips for a moment before speaking.

“Well, you will need to do more than just attend the bullshit interviews and crap Liam. You will actually have to participate and look bloody happy about it, because this attitude you have going on right now, is frankly unacceptable.” He lowers his chin and looks at Liam meaningfully and Liam shrugs in response, making the other man sigh loudly. “Well, then, let’s hear the song,” he grumbles out, voice annoyed. “I assume it’s already written. I want to hear it and know why it’s so fucking important to you to get it on this record, adding yet another bloody delay.”

A pulse of panic erupts in Liam’s chest at that. He hadn’t actually stopped and considered the fact that other people would want to hear the song. He had been so hell bent on getting it on the record because it was for Harry, and intended only for Harry to hear, but he hadn’t really thought it through. He supposes he could just renege. He could tell them never mind and just release the record as it is. But that brings his old friend guilt back to the surface and he shuts his mouth. A few moments later he nods, stands up, walks over to the piano and sits down. The assembled room looks surprised at this development since the piano wasn’t an instrument Liam tended to use, ever. He plays the first few notes trying to forget the other people in the room and starts singing. He closes his eyes and hides away in his own thoughts. It flows out of him as it had right from the beginning. The song had basically written itself and when he’s done, the room is silent for a long stretch.

“Bloody hell,” his manager finally says in a breath. “It’s completely different than anything else on the record. It’s going to stick out like a sore thumb.”

Liam’s heart sinks. Just like he hadn’t considered the thought of other people hearing the song, he also hadn’t considered them not liking it. But the record exec, who Liam thinks is called Bruce, just shakes his head at Liam’s manager, a smirk on his lips.

“Yes, it’s completely different, but that’s our first single right there.” He turns back to Liam, twinkle in his eye. “That’s the song that’s going to establish you. Get it recorded by the weekend. I don’t want to delay things any longer than we have to.”

Liam nods dumbly and most of the executives turn to leave. Only his producer and manager stay behind. Bruce stops just at the door and turns back, the smirk a little wider.

“Do us all a favor and lose the caveman look though. It’ll help sell more records if you don’t look like you just crawled out of a skip.” With that he leaves and Liam scratches at his long beard idly, frowning at the insult.
“Well, let’s get that down on tape yeah?” His producer asks, sitting down behind his sound board. Liam nods and walks into the recording booth. They finish the song by the deadline, choosing not to really add too much to it. They keep the beginning as just Liam and the piano. The haunting quality of the song hitting the listener full on before any percussion or guitar get involved. Liam does his vocals in one take, leaving the cracks and rough parts of his voice as part of the song because it makes it sound so much more real. The pleading, desire and sadness coming through fully. The truth is expressed in every note, yet he has no idea if the person it’s intended for will ever hear it.

**17 Months**

The record company rushes the release of the album and within weeks he’s had a makeover, the cover and interior pictures have been taken, and a layout is designed and ready for printing. Rumors and hype quickly explode around him and suddenly people are curious about Liam Payne again, especially after his long silence. This is made exponentially worse when it is announced that he will perform his first single for its grand release at the Billboard Music Awards in Las Vegas. Which just so happens to be the same award show Louis’ debut solo album is nominated for Best Album. Immediately people are pitting them against each other. The Vegas odds makers taking bets on who will come out on top and Liam is overwhelmed with all of it. He can barely walk through the airport with the throng of photographers following him and he ignores his phone for the most part. He gets the odd message from Niall or Zayn, congratulating him on the album and wishing him success, but nothing from Louis. He hasn’t spoken to his former bandmate since the night of Zayn’s album release when they had argued. Liam knows he should reach out and apologize, but every time his finger hovers over the buttons, he chickens out and instead locks his phone.

Vegas is hot and dry when Liam arrives. A sharp contrast to damp, chilly Britain and he feels uncomfortable immediately. His t-shirt is clinging to his skin and his forehead is getting damp. He is ushered to rehearsal straight from the airport and manages to run through the song once, but it doesn’t go well. His voice is hoarse from his exhaustion and with insomnia having retaken it’s hold he goes off key more than he is on. Not seeing any chance of improvement for the moment and seeing that Liam is obviously overwhelmed and on the verge of breakdown, Simon hurries him to his hotel and deposits him in his suite. Demanding he shower, sleep, and get his shit together. Of the three, the only one he manages is the shower. He spends the night watching the strip outside his windows; the lights glittering and people happy on the sidewalks. He feels envious of them. At around 4 a.m. he texts his manager and says he doesn’t want to do the red carpet, doesn’t feel ready. He doesn’t get a reply for three hours, but when he does it’s angry and full of reminders of his promise to do everything he was told in exchange for the song going on the record. Liam shuts his phone off and deadbolts the door.

The stylists arrive to get Liam ready and he ignores their knocks. He curls up on the bed and finally sleeps for a few hours, defiance more tiring than he expected. He’s awoken at four in the afternoon by his manager shaking him violently, having had the hotel staff open the door for him.

“Jesus Christ Liam! What the hell are you doing? I thought you had tried to off yourself in here!” he shouts.

The stylists stand behind him looking at Liam’s prone form with curiosity and concern. Liam blinks and looks around for a moment before answering.

“I was tired,” he finally replies blankly. Simon closes his eyes slowly, shaking his head a few
“Fucking Christ, get up, you need to get dressed, NOW! We have like half an hour before you are supposed to be leaving for the red carpet.” Simon walks away from the bed, still shaking his head. “You are going to be the death of me.”

Left in the bedroom with the stylists, Liam just stares at them for a few moments, with them responding in kind, before he finally gets up and heads into the bathroom. As much as he wants to continue being defiant, he has enough sense to know that it’s not in his best interest. He would just go get it over with and then he could go home. Away from the desert, the glittering lights and the happy people.

The red carpet is insanity as it usually is. The camera flashes blind him and he does his best not to scowl at them all, but is fairly certain he fails judging by Simon’s disapproving expression. He doesn’t stop to talk to any of them, just walks down the line, stopping for pictures when his handler tells him to and makes it inside in record time. He wasn’t performing until about half way through the show, which feels like an abominably long time to wait. He avoids backstage and the green room, not really wanting to pretend to be friendly with anyone. Instead he finds his seat and sits by himself in the audience to wait for his handler to fetch him. Slowly people file into the room, taking their own seats. Many of them look at him curiously, but only Taylor Swift tries to talk to him.

“Liam! It’s so good to see you, I’ve missed you!”

She sounds fake to him and he can’t help the irrational anger that courses through him. He rebuffs her attempt to hug him. She seems startled by this and after a moment of being glowered at by him she quietly walks off, talking to her friend who she has brought as a date as once again she is between relationships. The time passes slowly. He doesn’t really pay attention to what he’s watching on stage. His own nerves at playing the song, Harry’s song, live in public for everyone to hear, interpret and judge, start to overwhelm him.

When his handler finally comes to lead him to the green room so he can ready himself, his legs are shaky and there is a fine sheen of sweat on his skin. The room is busy when they get there. Other performers are getting prepared or just hanging out, but Liam ignores them. He only shares a quick smile with Ed Sheeran, who seems to understand Liam’s desire to be left alone. Then he sees Louis, sitting off to the side with Eleanor, their relationship having rekindled in the wake of all of the loss in Louis’ life, and their eyes meet before Liam can look away. They are close enough that Liam can see Louis’ jaw tighten, his eyes grow fierce and he realizes that now would be a good time to fix this relationship. His wobbly legs take him over to Louis but the words are more difficult to get working.

“Lou… I…” he starts, scratching at the back of his neck, armpits getting damp with the sweat. “Look, it wasn't my idea to premiere my single tonight, my record company did that. But congrats on the nomination. You deserve it.”

Louis’ eyebrows raise at the strange comment and Liam winces at how it sounded. As though he’s aware that he’s going to overshadow any achievement Louis might get tonight and that isn’t what he meant at all.

“No, I’m sorry, that’s not what I’m…” He sighs loudly, finger going to trace his scars again, a habit he had yet to break. “I’m just sorry, really, for what I said last year and how I’ve treated you.”
Louis relaxes a bit, head tilting to the side slightly.

“It’s fine Liam. We were both just trying to cope with what happened.” he replies, voice still slightly cold. But Liam knows the older lad well enough to know he will need time to really forgive and forget. “Good luck tonight. I can’t wait to hear the song.”

Liam nods and backs away, not wanting to prolong the awkwardness. He returns to his seat to wait. When the commercial starts playing he is quickly moved to the side of the stage. The piano sits in the centre, simple tea light candles surrounding it with the rest of the band in relative darkness near the back. The lights in the theatre dim suddenly, the booming voice of Adam Lavigne filling the space as he stands in the spotlight to present Liam’s performance. Once again, he forces his shaky legs to move as he heads over to the piano and gets seated, fiddling with the microphone and adjusting the stool a few times while Adam reads a long winded paragraph off of the teleprompter. Liam doesn’t really listen to it, but gets the gist of it.

“Our next performer is premiering his brand new single tonight live for us and it’s pretty exciting because we haven't heard from him in quite a while. In fact, I’m sure a lot of us didn’t think he would ever come back.” There are a few titters in the audience and Liam rolls his eyes. “So without further ado, ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Liam Payne!”

The spotlight over Adam darkens and the one over Liam immediately lights up and he freezes for several long moments. Seconds feel like hours as his hands hover over the ivory keys, shaking with nerves. He hears some chatter in the audience, can feel the millions of eyes on him and he is overwhelmed with the urge to get up and run. He wasn’t used to this. Not just because he’s been a hermit for over a year, but because he’s never done this alone before; not on a stage this big for such an important performance. For years he had his best friends on the stage with him, he had Harry with him, and suddenly the space felt very lonely and empty. The hushed whispers grow in volume and his desire to run is eclipsed by a longing to have Harry there with him. The song was for him after all. He should be there to hear it. Liam then wonders if Harry will hear it, wherever he is. Will he see Liam sitting there in dead silence at the piano with his hands hovering in the air? He sincerely hopes so because then this wasn’t all for nothing. Harry has to hear it, nothing else matters. Which means he needs to start playing, so that Harry has something to hear.

It’s this thought that finally spurns him on to move and lower his hands to start pushing the keys to play the melody. He leans forward towards the microphone, taking a deep breath before starting to sing.

*Come up to meet you, tell you I’m sorry, you don’t know how lovely you are…*

His voice is much improved from the rehearsal, but that’s because he’s singing it for Harry now. He can picture the lad as a curly haired 16-year-old when he first met him. His face filled with a grin and asymmetrical dimples. Liam had been taken by him almost immediately. He felt special to just be in his presence. Such was the effect of Harry Styles. Something that had never changed, even as they grew older.

*I had to find you, tell you I need you, tell you I set you apart…*

He continues, feeling the truth in the words.

*Tell me your secrets, and ask me your questions, oh, let's go back to the start…*
Running in circles, coming up tails, heads on a science apart…

The rest of the band comes in, adding depth to his already painfully lovely performance and he forgets the audience and the cameras and the expectations surrounding this moment and just sings the song for Harry.

Nobody said it was easy, it’s such a shame for us to part, nobody said it was easy, no one ever said it would be so hard…

Each part of the song flows out and fills the space, every nook and cranny. He feels better for having done it. Even when he gets to the line that causes him pain every time he sings it. It caused him pain when he wrote it, but he pushes through it and puts his pain behind it.

Tell me you love me, come back and haunt me, oh, and I rush to the start...

How he wished he could go back to the start. Knowing then what he does now, how much he would change or do to not only keep Harry safe, but closer to him and a part of him as he should be.

I’m going back to the start…

He sings out the last words of the song, filling the final space with some long notes. His voice breaks slightly, but he manages it. When the music finally stops the room is deafeningly quiet for a few long moments, almost as long as it took for him to start playing in the first place. And then it explodes. Applause and cheering are at an ear splitting level and Liam turns to look out at them in surprise. They are all on their feet, hands blurred as they clap and so many of them smile at him warmly, as though they know exactly what the song is about. He feels exposed, open, and self-conscious. He’s grateful when the lights on the stage dim again, so he can escape.

He hurries towards the green room, but then his feet are leading him to the exit, his deep desire to run returning in full force.

“LIAM!” Calls Louis behind him, his footsteps following Liam’s. All of the people in the wide hallway turn to stare at them. “Liam, wait!”

Liam stops dead, breathing hard and waits as instructed. Louis catches up to him and comes around to stand in front of him, eyes wide and full of emotion before he dives forward and pulls Liam into a tight hug. Liam doesn’t move for a moment, surprised at the action, but once he accepts it, he sags into Louis. The kindness of the gesture overwhelming him, reminding him of how long it had been since he had let another human being touch him or show him any comfort.

They stay tight for a long while, Liam unwilling to let go. He feels so tired, so full of grief and sadness. The emotions he had been trying to keep away by being depressed in general were closing over him and settling themselves in his heart. Louis eventually pulls back, not far, just enough to talk to Liam.

“It’s about him, isn’t it?” He asks in a whisper and Liam nods, feeling entirely unconcerned about what someone might hear. Louis nods back and smiles softly. “He’d have loved it.”

The urge to cry closes up his throat at that. The past tense manner in which Louis refers to Harry making his chest painfully heavy and his eyes wet.
“I hope so.” Liam whispers back.

18 Months

The song takes off almost immediately. Within 24 hours of the Billboard performance, it’s number one in so many countries that Liam doesn’t even want to know the full count. The sales numbers coming in on iTunes are just as spectacular and he is greeted by an overly enthusiastic Bruce at Heathrow when he lands.

“I knew that song was going to be a hit! It’s a good thing I agreed to let you put it on there, but I knew it was gonna be a winner!”

Liam’s fairly certain if the man could kiss his own ass, he would. He doesn’t respond to the comments, just walks past him towards the doors and his waiting ride home. He was looking forward to closing his door to the world and hiding under the duvet for a few days, or weeks, or months.

Bruce clearly has other ideas though.

“We’re already getting calls for interviews and every late night talk show there is. I’m thinking we start you on James Corden, I know you are friendly with him and right now his viewership is the highest, then we will do Good Morning America, and then maybe Conan, I haven’t decided yet,” Bruce rambles on, oblivious to the fact that Liam is clearly ignoring him. He’s fully aware he has no choice but to do these shows due to the agreement he made, but that doesn’t mean he has to actually care, or listen.

Bruce follows him right into the car, still talking a mile a minute and Simon appears disgruntled when he’s forced to sit in the front instead of beside his client.

“Of course we need to start talking about a tour, but on such short notice it’ll have to be smaller venues and more scattered dates after the album is released next week, but we are already in talks to have you as Ed Sheeran’s opening act on his world tour starting in November.”

London speeds by outside the windows, office workers heading to meetings and lunches hurrying along the sidewalks in their drab attire, and Liam thinks maybe he’d like to join them.

“Oh! I almost forgot. The editor of Another Man magazine called, he wants to do a pictorial on you, like they did with Harry.” Simon pipes up suddenly from the front seat, body turned to face them awkwardly.

Liam’s body turns ice cold immediately, nausea starting to swirl in his stomach.

“Fantastic, it was a great way for Harry to introduce the world to his solo artist self, so I don’t see why it wouldn’t work for Liam.” Bruce adds, pulling out his phone to start adding in notes and Liam finally finds his voice.

“No, absolutely not,” he growls out, throat tight with emotion as he remembers Harry’s excitement about the magazine. He had been so happy to get the chance to be his authentic self. To show people who he really was and to try to shake off all of the negative rumors and perceptions that had plagued him right from the beginning. Liam feels like if he does it, he would not only be copying what Harry had worked so hard on, but that he would be taking it away from Harry and removing
this piece of himself that he had shared so lovingly. Liam cherishes the copies he has, a piece of Harry he hadn’t really known despite being so close to him for so long. But Harry was like that. His ability to give part of himself while still concealing his true depths was something of an art. Liam liked to think that maybe he would have gotten to know more about Harry eventually. That he would be the one who really got to hear his deepest secrets and thoughts. But that chance was gone now.

“Liam, it’s a fantastic opportunity, and with the interest in you right now, it would be a great way to give them a glimpse of who you really are,” Simon says with barely concealed annoyance in his voice.

“No, I said no and that’s it. It wouldn’t be right,” Liam retorts, his own annoyance growing.

“Liam,” Bruce sighs angrily. “The agreement was that you would do what you were told if the song went on the record…”

“THE SONG IS MAKING YOU A FUCK TON OF MONEY SO SHUT THE FUCK UP ABOUT THE AGREEMENT!” Liam yells, facing the man in his pale grey suit head on, his exhaustion only making this moment that much worse. “You have no right to hold me to that stupid fucking agreement when you are already profiting off of the song. I am not doing that magazine. That is final.”

The car is quiet for several long minutes, Liam turning back to staring out the window, willing the traffic to move faster so he can get away from these two assholes.

“Fine,” Bruce sighs a long while later. “We won’t do the magazine, but that is the only thing I’m letting you out of, since it seems to matter a great fucking deal to you. But keep in mind you are still on thin ice kid. That song is a winner, no doubt, but if the rest of the album flops, we are still in the red.”

Liam doesn’t respond, just leans his forehead against the cool glass and closes his eyes. He won’t tell anyone about the fact that rather than sleeping he had spent the entire night going over his dog eared copies of Harry’s magazine, heart hurting more than ever.

19 Months

Turns out starting with James Corden was actually a bad idea, despite their congenial history. Like he had the first time Niall had gone on the show as a solo artist, James pulls Liam out for one of his silly games, the same one actually, Spill Your Guts or Fill Your Guts.

The first question he asks Liam is if the song is about Harry and the look Liam responds with could melt an iceberg. He refuses to answer. He also refuses to eat the testicles sitting on the plate in front of him, making for a very long, awkward few minutes on the show. James tries to play it off with some jokes, but it all goes downhill from there. Liam sits like an angry bull on the couch, answering questions with short, obtuse comments. His performance is lackluster and he shuts his phone off on the way out the door to avoid hearing from Bruce or Simon, because he already knows what they will say.

The next morning, his already grouchy mood gets even more morose when Louis texts him.

It’s finally the premiere of Dunkirk tonight, I think we should go to represent Harry.
There is definitely a part of him that doesn’t want to go, because that part knows it would hurt like hell to watch Harry on a big IMAX screen. He had been glad when the movie release had been pushed back a year because of some issues with edits or reshoots. There had been a bit of a ruffle in the media about how they were going to reshoot scenes without Harry, but Nolan had assured everyone that none of Harry’s scenes would be cut. Liam had basked in the relief of not having to think about the movie for an extra year.

At the same time, no matter how much it might hurt to sit in that theatre, he can’t help but agree with Louis that someone should represent Harry and remind people that he existed.

Exists.

Liam reminds himself once again that Harry is alive. This strange obsession with hanging on to that fact is what gets him through most days. Even though he constantly has to listen to people talking about Harry in the past tense.

And so he texts Simon, tells him of the plan and waits anxiously for a response. He doesn’t read the angry texts from his manager about Corden last night. He pretty much already knows what they say, but he hopes maybe he will be understanding about why he got upset.

His phone dings while he’s in the shower and he checks it the moment he gets out.

FINALLY! This is a great idea Liam. It is a great way for you to get out there for promo and yes, I know it’s important to you and all that, but please promise me you will be better behaved than you were last night!

Liam grumbles slightly at Simon assuming his appearance is all about him and not Harry, but decides it’s not a battle he needs to fight right now. He does have some work to do at repairing his image after last night.

Yes, I promise. Louis will be with me. Thank you for understanding.

Simon texts once more with news that a suit is being sent over for him to wear and he replies with a thanks. He puts his phone down and throws on some comfortable clothes, sits down on the edge of the hotel bed and realizes he has absolutely no plans for the day. Sure, he had to get ready for the premiere at around 3, but that was 6 hours away.

An idea occurs to him, something he thinks might soothe his soul a little and he grabs his phone and texts Louis before he chickens out or finds some reason he shouldn’t.

Got no plans for the day. Wanna hang out? Take a Harry tour of LA?

Harry liked LA, had from the first time he’d been there. He had always been the one who fit in best. But the LA Harry that fans saw was completely different from the more private person who had a bunch of little shops, bakeries and coffee places he frequented under the radar. They had become his favourites. Liam wonders if going to these places might make him feel closer to Harry again, find that sense of him that he was worried he was starting to lose.

Being a shut in for a year, focussed solely on Harry and his whereabouts had made him feel connected to his friend. It was though he was proving his loyalty by stopping his own life at the same time that Harry’s life was stopped.
Now that he was actually living again, releasing music, doing appearances and interviews and being seen in public, even showering daily, it felt as though he was moving on and leaving Harry behind. This troubling thought had been bothering him more and more each day. Corden’s flippant question about the song with a laugh in his voice as he had asked if it was about Harry, as though it was some big joke, had made this fear even stronger.

*I like that idea, can I bring Freddie?*

Since Harry had disappeared, Louis had been spending more time with Freddie. He was even sharing a house with Briana in order to be there every day. Loss has a funny way of reminding you to hang on to what you have a lot harder.

Liam texts him an affirmative and tells him to pick him up outside his hotel in twenty minutes. He throws on some trainers, a snapback and sunglasses and heads downstairs. He hopes he doesn’t get recognized too much. He really wanted today to be more private and about Harry. No such luck though because when he steps out the door he is immediately met with a small gaggle of girls who squeal when they see him.

Hearing his managers scolding voice in his head, he smiles at them politely and tries to be friendly. He gives them photos and autographs until Louis’ black SUV pulls up at the curb. He quickly makes his exit, telling them all he’s grateful for the support and jumps in the front seat before they see the driver.

“Right, where are we starting?” Louis asks as soon as they are a block away, stopped at a red light. He’s wearing a black t-shirt and dark jeans. His own snapback and sunglasses are in place, but it’s his tattoos, like Liam’s, that are a dead giveaway as to who they are.

Liam glances in the back and gives Freddie a smile before answering. The little lad grins back at Liam. He’s getting big now, face more defined and Liam can see all the tell tale signs of Louis in his features.

“I was thinking we would start at that bakery he loved near his first house. The one with the Portuguese buns he used to get us all the time. I haven’t had one of those in forever. Might be a nice breakfast?”

Louis grins immediately, matching his son’s in the back.

“Yes! Love it. I’ve missed those buns,” he laughs and flicks the indicator to turn right. His smile turns wistful after a moment though and he glances at Liam once. “Thank you for this. It’s really a great idea and something we should have done a while ago. To honor him.”

Liam nods. That was the idea.

It’s quiet in the car for a few minutes. Zayn’s new single plays on the radio and neither one of them really know what to say. They have been apart for so long that it seems they’ve grown apart as well. A fact that is true for all of them. Liam can’t even remember the last time he spoke to Niall.

“What’s Niall up to? I haven’t talked to him in ages,” he says by way of conversation, suddenly feeling interested.

Louis shrugs and rests his elbow against the window, other hand steering the car carefully.
“Not sure. He only did the one record and I know it didn’t do as well as he had hoped. But I think he released This Town way too early, shoulda been closer to the album. He hasn’t said if he’s working on a new one. Tell the truth, I haven’t talked to him in a long while either.” He sighs quietly, idly rubbing his face with his hand. “We’ve all gone our separate ways it seems.”

“One of us against his will,” Liam adds grimly.

Louis glances at him, face pained before turning back to the road, the hand gripping the steering wheel tightening.

“I wonder if they will ever find him?” He says quietly, not really expecting an answer and Liam doesn’t give one. Telling Louis that he believes Harry is still alive is a lost cause and will just earn him a concerned lecture about facing facts.

The rest of the ride is silent. Only Freddie babbling nonsense now and then creating sound in the car. But they both try to rally when they step inside the bakery. The warm, delicious scent giving both of them life and Freddie’s eyes go like saucers when he spots all of the brightly colored cakes and cookies in the display case.

They both order a couple of the sweet Portuguese buns and a cup of coffee. The woman behind the counter is in her late 60’s at least and it’s clear she doesn’t recognize them.

They find a corner table and pull up a booster seat for Freddie, Louis deftly getting a bib on him before he dives into the bright blue and green frosting on his cupcake.

The first bite brings back a wash of memories of the first time Harry had brought them treats from this place, excitedly bursting into the recording studio with his arms laden with pink boxes. He had raved on about how it was the best bakery in LA, almost as good as the one he worked at in Britain. From that point it had become a tradition for him to bring a box when they recorded in LA. Liam’s throat closes slightly as he remembers how happy Harry had been to share this with them, the sparkle in his green eyes, curls flopping across his forehead and grin splitting his face. One glance at Louis tells him that he’s not the only one revisiting the past, but neither of them says anything.

Instead a few minutes later, their buns gone and Freddie’s face plastered blue and green, Louis glances over at Liam with a devious glint in his eye.

“So I watched James Corden last night. That was uh… quite the performance you had,” he says with a chuckle and Liam gives him a half-hearted dirty look.

“His game was bullshit.”

“The game wasn’t the problem. His question was bullshit and James should know better, he was Harry’s friend too. I don’t get why he would be such a jackass like that,” Louis spits out and Liam feels gratified that he’s not the only one upset about it.

“Exactly! Why would he think I would joke about it. I wanted to shove those fucking testicles up his nose.”

Louis laughs, “That would have made for some interesting television.”
Despite himself, Liam laughs too, and then feels guilty for it, the sound cutting off sharply.

“Don’t do that Liam,” Louis says suddenly, staring at him hard. “Don’t feel guilty for being happy, even for a moment. Harry wouldn’t want us spending the rest of our lives miserable, you least of all. He would want you to move on, find peace and be happy.”

Pain blooms in his chest because he has no doubt that Louis is right, Harry was the type of person who never wanted to see anyone suffer or be sad. But moving on meant admitting that Harry was no more and Liam just couldn’t do that.

“I know it’s not easy Liam. It’s not easy for me either, for any of us, but life has this tendency to keep going on, whether we want it to or not and we have to go with it, even if we don’t want to,” Louis says gently, patting Liam’s arm.

Liam nods, not really agreeing, but knowing still that Louis means well.

They say no more about it for the moment, but he doesn’t doubt Harry will continue to be their main topic of conversation throughout the day. That was the plan though, a chance to talk about it with someone who understood, who was missing Harry too and who was also facing a life without him in it.

Louis pulls a box of wet wipes out of the diaper bag and sets upon Freddie with them. Liam attempts to help by holding the wiggling toddler still. Freddie is less than pleased with this development and wails loudly after a few minutes of heavy struggling on both sides of the skirmish.

“Listen little lad, I can’t take you home with a blue face, yer mum’ll kill me. So be a good boy and let daddy clean you up,” Louis begs of the child, who pouts at him and crosses his arms over his chest. “Look, I’ll buy you another cupcake for laters if you let me clean you up now, deal?” Louis bargains and Freddie finally relents, though with some whining still.

Half a box of wipes later and they are back on the road, a pair of familiar pink boxes sitting in the back of the car for each of them to take home.

They head to Harry’s favorite book shop next, and then a wooded park he had stumbled across one day that he had declared lovely because of its tall trees. They finish out their tour at his favorite coffee shop, drinking lattes and reminiscing about the past. Harry is a constant undercurrent to their conversation, as Liam expected, but it gets easier as they keep their discussion of him about the past rather than the present.

Whenever Louis isn’t looking, Liam texts Harry. He tells him about their day, the things they were saying, where they were going, and what they had done. A play by play of their adventure because he knows Harry would love to read it, would probably be giving suggestions with winks if he were able.

When Louis drops him off at his hotel to get ready for the premiere, promising to see him in an hour, he has to admit he does feel more settled. The point of the day was to reconnect with Harry and he strangely feels like he has. By touching things and standing in places where Harry had, it was like he was feeling Harry’s presence around him. It is still painful and he is still sad, but the fear that he was leaving Harry behind has lessened.

He takes the time to shave and clean himself up nicely for the night. He couldn't be arsed to do it
for Corden or any other appearance that he had been foisted into, but tonight was special. It was about Harry and for Harry. Liam wanted to look good and respect that.

It’s while he's buttoning his cufflinks that he remembers once again the fact that he’s not only about to be surrounded by a lot of talk about Harry. Interviewers will be asking him questions and people Harry worked with will be issuing platitudes about his loss. He’s also going to see Harry’s face, hear him speak and watch his eyes as he plays his role. The thought makes Liam’s hands tremble and he has serious doubts about going. He even picks up his phone to text Louis to tell him he’s changed his mind, but he stops himself. Like the day’s events, tonight was about Harry. It was about honoring him, being close to him and even if it hurt, he had to believe it would be worth it.

Simon arrives at his door to fetch him at five, and he looks impressed with the effort Liam has made at being presentable.

“What did you do today? I heard you were spotted at a few places around town with Louis,” he asks idly when they are in the back of the town car crawling through LA traffic.

Liam shrugs nonchalantly, not really willing to get into it.

“Hung out with Louis, just as reported. We haven’t really hung out in a while and thought it would be fun to take a trip down memory lane.” He keeps his voice even, trying to keep Simon from asking more questions. It doesn’t work.

“What is tonight really about Liam? Because, from what I’ve heard, your trip down memory lane was all about Harry. I think we all know The Scientist is about Harry and now you are going to his movie premiere. Why is it that everything you are doing seems to revolve around Harry?” Simon’s voice is decidedly less idle and relaxed sounding, having taken on a more accusatory and suspicious tone.

Liam hasn’t really talked to Simon about Harry, hasn’t really talked to anyone about Harry actually. Being a shut in made it easy to keep all of his pain and thoughts to himself. Now that he’s suddenly back out there, he can see how much of what Simon’s saying is true, but that’s also because he orchestrated it that way. How much does he want to tell Simon though, that is the question.

He shrugs again, glancing at Simon and finding the man staring at him pointedly.

“Harry was one of my best friends. I know this movie meant a lot to him, so I thought I would show support,” he answers carefully, wincing slightly at using the past tense in reference to Harry, but he hopes Simon doesn’t see it. “Besides, Louis asked me to go. It wasn’t my idea.”

He decides not to address the Harry-centric road trip that day or the song, once again hoping that Simon would drop those topics.

Once again, it doesn’t work.

“And what about the song? You about took Corden’s head off when he asked that question,” he pushes and Liam can feel his eyes on him now, judging.

He sighs loudly, feeling anger creeping up at being questioned.

“I really don’t want to talk about it Simon. It’s no one’s business,” he spits out.
“Actually, it is Liam. You are my business and therefore it is very much my business. I need to know if this obsession you seem to have with Harry is going to become a bigger problem. I thought when you went back into the studio, finished the record and actually started leaving your house again that maybe you were getting over it. But I don’t think that’s the case at all.”

“I’m not obsessed!” Liam yells, turning to face Simon dead on, blood boiling at being called out like this on this night of all nights. He knows he’s not obsessed, because obsession is a one sided thing and he knows what he feels for Harry is not one sided, it is reciprocated. At least that’s what he believes anyway. “I’m not obsessed,” he says again, more quietly. “He was my best friend. Yes, it was hard for me, but I’m trying to move on and tonight is just to honor him, like Louis said.”

Simon sighs loudly this time, shaking his head slightly.

“Please do not let this become a problem, or I’m out. I cannot deal with this if you are going to be making everything about him for the rest of your life. It’s time to move on mate,” he says with finality, turning to look out the window. “It’s like you’re in love with him or something,” he says more quietly.

Liam’s hands curls into fists at that comment, but he doesn’t say anything more. There’s a part of him that wants to fire Simon on the spot for accusing him, for even forcing this conversation, but he knows that he’s lucky the man has stuck with him for this long. He knows he’s probably considered a liability at this point since despite the success of the song, the rest of the album hadn’t been getting great reviews. The Scientist is quite literally the only saving grace on there.

The rest of the ride is quiet, with only a text from Louis asking how close Liam is so they can walk the red carpet together.

The sidewalk is heaving with people when they arrive. Every tabloid and news media outlet from around the world having turned out to see the movie debut of the tragic pop singer who had been murdered at such a young age. Liam wants to scream at them that Harry is still alive and that they are all wrong, but he controls himself. He doesn’t want to make a spectacle of himself after all.

Upon stepping out of the car, he’s greeted with a massive poster of Harry hanging down the side of the building. It’s a still from the movie of Harry dressed in his army kit. His face is dirty and his short hair is covered in mud, but his eyes are still clear and green and so very striking that they take Liam’s breath away for a second.

He’s pulled from his awed stance by Louis’ hand landing on his shoulder.

“I know, it’s kinda weird seeing that, in’t? And did they really have to make it so big?” Louis asks beside him, a soft laugh at his second question.

“I know right,” Liam responds with his own shaky nervous laugh. “If Harry were here, his ego would be the size of that poster.”

Louis laughs and nudges his shoulder, indicating that they should start making their way up the red carpet.

The second they make their presence known the media starts hurling questions at them, hoping to entice them to come forward to give an interview.
“What’s it like finally seeing Harry on the big screen?”

“What’s it like finally seeing Harry on the big screen?”

“Is there anything new in the investigation of his murder?”

“Do you miss him tonight?”

“Louis, are you going to write a song tribute for Harry too?”

“Liam, is The Scientist really about Harry?”

“What was your relationship with Harry really like?”

Liam’s teeth grind together with the effort he makes in keeping his mouth closed. The smile he’s trying to hold looking fake and more like a grimace with each shouted question. One glance at Louis and he sees he’s not the only one feeling uncomfortable.

They walk up the carpet, stopping for pictures at intervals and they manage to keep their fake smiles on their faces. A small group of fans stand clustered in a gated pen near the end of the carpet, just outside the doors. They all look stricken as Liam and Louis get closer. They don’t say anything, just look at each other and nod, veering that direction.

One young girl starts to cry the moment they are close and Liam doesn’t even hesitate to step up and pull her into a hug. He understood all too well what she was feeling and it was strangely consoling to share in that misery. Louis talks quietly with some of the others. Sharing their feelings of loss, how proud they were of Harry’s work in the movie and how sad they are that he can’t be there to enjoy it himself. When the girl has finally got control of herself, she releases Liam and apologizes, but he waves it off telling her it’s fine.

“I’m really glad you both came to support him tonight,” she says with a wobbly voice, hands wiping under her eyes quickly.

“So am I,” Liam replies and he means it. This was the right thing to do.

They sign some autographs and chat for a little longer, taking a few pictures before they are pulled away to carry on into the theatre.

The mood inside the lobby is subdued. A few of Harry’s costars take the time to come up to them to issue their condolences and say a few words about how wonderful Harry was as a person. They accept it all graciously, but Liam’s stomach starts to knot the closer they get to the time the movie will start playing. They don’t necessarily need to stay to watch, it’s not a requirement of the premiere, but they had agreed they would to honor Harry, the theme of the day.

In all too short a time they are being herded to the doors and then led to their assigned seats in the dark theatre. It wasn’t the IMAX version thankfully, but it was still the big screen and somehow hearing Harry’s voice again was the thing he was fearing the most.

When the lights go out and the screen lights up, his hands start to sweat and his heart picks up speed. He tries very very hard to concentrate on the story, on what is going on in the movie, but the second Harry is on screen for the first time, his breath is stolen from his body. Then he speaks and Liam’s throat closes. The urge to cry, scream, smash things and storm the world to find Harry washing over him. It takes every single ounce of self control to keep his outward appearance as calm as he does and it’s probably only due to the dark in the room that people don’t notice his
stricken face. He doesn’t dare look at Louis, afraid he won’t see the same feelings reflecting back. Or worse, that he will.

At some point, perhaps halfway through, he manages to calm enough to truly absorb what he is seeing and hearing. He commits every flick of Harry’s face and moment he speaks to memory, pulling it in like air, something he needs just to survive. The moment when Harry’s character almost drowns on screen is particularly rough. He knows somehow it will become a part of his nightmares.

When the movie ends, Liam is so completely drained and exhausted mentally and physically that he’s not even sure he can stand. He closes his eyes and takes deep, gulping breaths.

Feeling as though he just went through a war himself, he feels Louis’ hand on his arm and warm breath against his ear.

“Are you ok?” He whispers and Liam nods once, forcing his eyes open a moment later to find the theatre mostly empty.

“Let’s go,” he says finally, making his legs do his bidding by standing. He stumbles up the aisle behind Louis and out into the warm night, sweat coating his body.

The crowd hasn’t lessened much outside. All of them are greedy for information on how the movie was, how good Harry’s performance was and how hard it had been to watch him on screen.

They ignore all of them and just walk back down the red carpet to their waiting cars with their faces stony and eyes forward.

Louis turns and gives Liam a tight hug when they reach the end. Liam returns it willingly and they nod at each other as they part, neither willing or able to say much.

Simon is waiting in the backseat when he gets in the car, eyes critical as he takes in Liam’s sweaty, stricken and exhausted appearance.

“Props for talking to the fans tonight. I was terrified you would say something horrifying to the media so I’m definitely glad you swerved them. But the pictures of you hugging that crying girl are really making up for your deplorable behavior on Corden last night.”

Liam presses his forehead against the window, looking for something cold and ignores his manager.

The ride back to the hotel is quicker, the traffic lighter and Liam doesn’t even say goodbye to Simon before getting out of the car and heading in the door. He does hear something about another appearance he’s supposed to make the next day, but he doesn’t have the energy to think about it right now.

He stumbles into his hotel room, strips down and gets in the shower. The water is tepid to cool his heated skin. It’s a quick hose down before he towels off and collapses into bed. His brain pulling him into a dream almost immediately. It’s a dream about that night. The night that everything changed.

Liam walks into the green room backstage for their soon to be recorded performance that will be shown during New Year’s Rockin’ Eve. They had agreed to pre-record it so they could actually
enjoy New Years Eve themselves. The room is dim and elegant. It’s adorned with leather couches and a kitchenette with gleaming black marble. Harry leans against the back of one of the couches, phone in his hand, face lit up from the screen as he scrolls through his messages. He doesn’t acknowledge Liam at first, hand coming up to tuck his long curls behind his ear and Liam feels that swoop in his gut that had he been getting more and more frequently around Harry. His feet carry him over to the other man to stand him right in front of him. Harry startles slightly and looks up, face innocent, eyes wide and pouty lips parted slightly. He’s dressed all in black. His shirt done right up to his neck, where a crocheted red flower sits looking striking against his skin. On anyone else it would be a ridiculous outfit, but on Harry it’s perfect. Liam will never know who moved first, what the ignition was, or why it happened then of all times. One second he’s staring at that silly red flower and the next Harry is pressed against him full length. Their mouthes slide together greedily and his hands wrap around Harry’s thin hips. Harry’s hands find their way into Liam’s hair, gripping enough to be on the edge of painful, making Liam groan into Harry’s mouth. Their hands pull their bodies closer together. Harry tastes like red wine. His tongue soft but insistent against Liam’s and his cologne fills Liam’s nose. He pushes Harry back against the couch again, grinding his hips into the other man’s, making him groan again. Harry matches it, fingers tightening in Liam’s hair and then suddenly it stops. The door opens to the green room. Niall’s booming voice fills the space and they part quickly. Each move to opposite ends of the room wiping their mouthes surreptitiously and attempting to avoid eye contact, but failing.

They don’t discuss it. Not that night, or any night after. They talk almost daily through 2016, about everything but that kiss, that moment. It sits like a taste on Liam’s tongue, a reminder of something that had been or could have been.

But then Harry was gone.

Liam wakes with a start. The hotel air conditioning is blasting down on him and he starts to cry. Deep, jagged sobs fill the silence when the air shuts off with a click. He cries hard, deep. All of the pain, sorrow, loss and could have been’s storming over him. He cries for the first time since Harry had disappeared. Despite it all, his reaction, shutting himself away, all of it, not once had he cried through it. He hadn’t allowed himself to, crying was giving in to the grief and allowing the knowledge that Harry was gone to really take hold. But after that dream he can’t help it, because it really is real.

Harry is gone.

Chapter End Notes

Song is The Scientist by Coldplay

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB-RcX5DS5A
Chapter 3

21 Months

After the night of the Dunkirk premiere, when Liam’s brain gifted him with that stunning, technicolor revisit of the kiss, it then decides to relentlessly punish him with all of the potential ways in which Harry could be suffering while in captivity. As he expected, the drowning scene gives him a point of reference and it all just goes downhill from there. He dreams of Harry being beaten, dragged behind a car, drowned, skinned, hung, buried alive, and many other horrifying things that leave him soaked with sweat and hyperventilating when he wakes.

Because of this, he is a walking zombie during the day. Dark circles are permanently etched under his eyes and his attention span is about two seconds long. He does all of his appearances dutifully. He sings the song over and over again with no emotion in his voice and forgets each day as soon as it’s over.

Simon’s patience wears thin. One day he shows up and declares that he is taking Liam somewhere. Liam doesn’t question it, just assumes it’s another interview, appearance, or they are off to the airport to fly somewhere for something and obediently follows him.

Instead he finds himself sitting in a smart office with wood paneled walls and a soft cream suede couch that he is led to while a gentle looking therapist sits opposite him.

It’s then he becomes alert, head swiveling faster as he realizes what’s happening.

“Liam, do you know why you are here?” The kindly doctor asks him and Liam’s eyes snap back to him, mouth open in shock and he shakes his head once. “Your manager, Simon, thought you might like to talk to me. He thinks you might be having some trouble coping with a loss in your life and that maybe I could help you with that, give you a listening ear.”

Santa Claus.

That is the first thought that pops into Liam’s head as he stares at the doctor. The man is portly, with rosy cheeks, white hair and a thick white beard that looks just like Father Christmas. Liam almost laughs out loud at the ridiculousness of it all.

The doctor waits to see if he will get a response and when he doesn’t, he tries to start the conversation again.

“I’m sorry, I sort of jumped ahead there. Perhaps I should introduce myself first,” he reaches a hand forward for Liam to shake, his fingers chubby. “My name is Dr. Alan Wilson. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Liam stares at his face a moment longer, his dark eyes glittering in the light, the skin under them thin. His eyes then move down to the proffered hand, still sitting in the space between them invitingly, but he suddenly feels defensive and quickly tucks his own hands under his arms as he crosses them on his chest.

His shock was quickly being replaced by anger and fury that Simon would be so sneaky to do something like this to him.
Alan gives him a soft knowing smile and pulls his hand back, dropping his chin conspiratorially.

“Listen, I know this is a shock and you are probably not feeling particularly happy about this right now, but I would ask you to consider it. I can see you are suffering under the weight of something and maybe having someone to talk to about it will give you the opportunity to start healing. I give no judgement and get no personal gain from this Liam. I just want to help you and I promise you anything you say to me in this office is confidential and doesn’t leave this room.”

Liam rolls his eyes.

“And you getting paid to talk to me isn’t personal gain for you?” He spits out, openly glaring at the doctor now. “You know what? Forget it, this isn’t happening.”

He stands quickly from the couch and storms out of the office before the doctor can even respond.

Simon jumps up from his seat in the waiting room in surprise, eyes wide as he takes in Liam’s furious expression.

“Liam, wait, listen to me, you need to do this. I can’t take you walking around like a lifeless shell every day anymore,” he starts and then hurries to catch up to Liam who hasn’t even stopped walking. “You just seem dead. There is no life in your eyes. You answer questions like a robot and don’t even bother trying when you sing anymore. Something has got to give. We can’t keep going on like this.”

That about does it for Liam. His anger turns to pure rage as all of the months of listening to Simon hand wave off Liam’s feelings come rushing back to him. He stops abruptly and spins on his heel to face the man, finger coming up to point in his face for emphasis.

“NO, WE can’t keep going on like this, you know why? I’m sick and fucking tired of you acting like it’s all no big deal that I lost someone very important to me and I should just get over it already and start worrying about making more money and getting more famous. None of this is my plan Simon, it’s all yours and I’m fucking sick of it. I’m going home, I’m done.”

He turns again, resuming his rapid pace and bursts through the front door of the office building with startling force, the wood banging into the frame making people on the sidewalk turn and stare. It’s another hot day in California, too hot for Liam and he craves the cool rain of Britain, the dark gloomy clouds and grim light.

Simon follows him out the door, shouting his name to get him to stop.

“LIAM, wait, what do you mean you are going home, that you are done? You have a contract. You can’t just renege on that. You still have two more months of promo to do if we hope to even break even on that damn record. After everything I have done for you, to try to salvage your career and you haven’t even bothered to pretend to be grateful…”

“BECAUSE I’M NOT!” Liam cuts him off, more people staring at them now. “Do you think I’m happy you are dragging me around promoting an album you have declared garbage? Promoting a song that is incredibly personal to me with you constantly telling me to just get over it? I didn’t want any of this Simon! None of it! I only released this fucking record because the record company was threatening to sue me. I thought if I added the song then maybe it would be easier on me, but guess what? I was wrong and you haven’t made it any easier. I can’t do this anymore. I’m done!"
I’m done with you, the album, the record company, all of it. I’m done.”
He turns to the road and starts looking for a cab, desperate to get back to the house that Simon demanded he buy to pack his bag before heading for the airport.

“Are you firing me?” Simon growls behind him.

“Yup, I am,” Liam replies flippantly, hand going up as he sees a taxi coming his way. The driver puts his indicator on and pulls up to the sidewalk in front of him. “We are done Simon. Good luck with everything.”

He climbs in the back seat of the cab, giving the address to the driver and speeds away without looking back.

23 Months

The record company sues him.

It’s not unexpected, but it’s still annoying nonetheless. His lawyer argues that he was put under undue stress and forced to comply with an extreme schedule that caused him to become medically compromised, but the judge still decides to award the record company some compensation in the form of £5 million. It’s the amount they decide they took as a loss on his first album and covers any payout they had given him at the time of signing.

He sells his house in LA, pays the money to the company and finds himself grateful for it all to be over.

The media follow the story with keen interest while it is happening, parking outside his Surrey house and peering in any crack they can, but when it’s over they move on. Liam finds himself quickly falling back into the routine he had only months prior. He grows out his beard, wears dirty clothes and just putters around the house aimlessly. The nightmares don’t decrease or change, causing him to avoid sleeping altogether. On the upside, he gets caught up on pretty much every single thing on Netflix. On the downside, he loses weight and becomes an insomniac.

His sister Ruth is the one who finally decides she’s had enough, showing up almost daily and dragging his ass upstairs to shower and dress before making him go do innocuous domestic things with her like shopping and taking her kids to school. He balks at first, annoyed at having his isolation interrupted. Especially when he still has one season of the Great British Bake Off to watch, but it doesn’t take long before he starts to wait for her to come through the door. Soon he’s even showered, dressed and ready for her before she even arrives.

As Christmas draws closer, she brings him into even more family activities. They rope Nicola into going to find a tree for their parents together, setting it up and decorating it when they are out one evening. When they get home, the three of them jump out from behind it and yell surprise. It’s the first time he’s laughed since he saw Louis in July.

He still talks to Lou by text. It’s not frequent, maybe only once every two weeks, but they check up on each other, acknowledge their continued existence and then carry on. Niall joins in with this, forming a group chat and it’s another thing that Liam finds himself getting attached to.

“Have you considered what you are going to do next with your life dear brother?” Ruth asks him one day near the end of November as they wander through a toy store picking up gifts for the kids.
“I know you do enjoy being a hermit, but at some point you must realize that isn’t really a career and it might be time to find something that actually earns you a living.”

Liam grumbles under his breath. He wasn’t worried about earning a living. While the payout to the record company had been a hit, it certainly hadn’t even come close to ruining him and he still received handsome royalty cheques from One Direction related sales. So he hadn’t really thought about needing to find a new career.

Ruth turns and looks at him head on, hand resting on her hip meaning she was about to lay out some serious truths on him.

“Li, you need to find something that makes you happy again. I don’t care if it’s making music, flipping burgers or dancing in a club. But you know damn right well you can’t keep going on like this. You are still young and you are wasting away your life right now.”

Liam sighs loudly, rubbing his forehead in exasperation. A headache was threatening because he had actually slept last night, albeit brokenly with Harry’s screaming face waking him abruptly several times.

“I don’t know Ruth. I haven’t really thought about it to be honest. I don’t know what I would want to do. Nothing really interests me,” he replies, knowing full well that answer will not be acceptable.

“Fine, then start looking. Try things, see what fits, but stop sitting on your ass watching TV every day and turning into a damn lumberjack. It’s not a good look,” she retorts, returning to the shelves to make it clear her word was final.

Liam frowns, rubbing at his beard.

“I happen to like my beard and I’ve been keeping it clean,” he replies, miffed at the accusation.

“Yes, now you have. You sure as hell weren’t when I first started coming to your house.”

“There you go then, progress. Let’s just be happy about that and leave me alone about the rest for now.”

She turns and gives him an exasperated look, head cocked to the side.

“No,” is her final response and he sighs again, louder this time with emphasis, earning an eye roll from her.

Somewhere deep inside him, he knows she’s right, but he’s not about to admit that out loud to her.

**24 Months**

As a Christmas gift to his mother and Ruth, Liam shaves his beard for the holiday. It is a lively affair full of noise, family and frivolity and for the first time in almost two years, Liam doesn’t want to go home to his empty house. But he does. He spends New Years alone, declining offers of parties from friends.

New Years holds it’s own special meaning to him now and he doesn’t want to cheapen it with potentially kissing some stranger at midnight because of too much alcohol.
He watches New Years Rockin’ Eve heart sick and goes to bed before the ball drops in New York.

He wallows for the first few days of January. Then Ruth starts showing up again and he’s once again dragged back out into the world, forced to let go of his morose mood and after a few weeks, he’s glad for it.

He gets a call from Julian near the end of the first week of January, a surprise in and of itself, but the request he receives is even more shocking.

“Listen, this guy is a great singer and performer, but he needs someone who understands how to put a song together in the studio with him. I thought maybe you might want to try your hand at producing since it always seemed to interest you back in the day. It’s just a few songs. The record is ready otherwise and it would be a great way for you to get started at this,” his former producer says, voice hopeful.

“But you are a producer,” Liam points out bluntly.

“Yes, Liam, I am aware of that, but I can’t seem to find the right vibe and it just feels like something you would be better suited for.”

“Did my sister put you up to this?” Liam asks abruptly, sensing Ruth’s fingerprints all over this phone call.

“Your sister? What? No.” Julian replies, voice incredulous. “I haven’t spoken to anyone from your family in years.”

Liam listens for any sign of falsehood in his voice and finds none. He considers the offer, and finds that he’s somewhat interested. It would be a nice change from sitting at home or grocery shopping and it would be cool to be on the opposite side of the board for once.

“Alright,” he sighs. “I’ll come in and meet with him, see what I think, but I’m not making any promises,” he replies finally.

“Perfect! Thank you Liam, you are doing me a huge favor. We are on a tight deadline!” Julian gushes and quickly relays which studio and what time to be there the next morning.

The kid is a little too Justin Bieber wannabe for Liam’s taste, but he’s nice enough and so he agrees to hear the rough cut of a song and give some suggestions. By the end of the day he’s signed a contract to produce several songs. Suddenly he has a new, super tight schedule to keep to. One that promises to keep him busy for at least a few weeks since they hoped to release the first single at the beginning of February.

Ruth is over the moon when she hears, happy to see him finally doing what she asked him to do weeks ago, but he’s less sure it’ll be a good thing. He decides to be open minded and give it a shot.

With his days now full and busy, often lasting into the night, Liam finds himself more tired and able to sleep without nightmares every night. They don’t entirely disappear, but two weeks after he starts working with Zac Gregory, the next Justin Bieber, the dreams take on a new, extra nefarious direction.

They are usually the same, Harry standing in front of him, just out of reach. He can never really see
the location, but it’s dark and Harry is hard to see. His hair is long again, just past his shoulders, hanging in curls. He’s wearing an oversized white button down, dark trousers and he’s dirty with smudges all over him. This in itself isn’t too bad. It’s what Harry is doing that makes him wake up shaking, heart aching and fear pulsing through his chest.

He’s reaching for Liam. His face is pained and his voice hoarse as he calls Liam’s name over and over again, reaching as far as his arms can, but never getting there. Liam tries to get to him, to take his hands, to call out his name and let him know that he is there, but Harry never seems to see him or hear him. He just keeps reaching and calling, panicked and scared. Liam doesn’t tell anyone about the dreams. Not that he told anyone about any of the nightmares, but there is something about these in particular that feels so very important and personal. He tries to figure out what they mean, but he just can’t.

Harry just keeps reaching for him and calling to him, and he doesn’t know how to get to him.
They finish the album on schedule and the record company (not Liam’s most recent one thankfully) is very pleased with the result.

Liam is just glad it’s over with. He only has the launch party for the first single to attend and then he’s free. Though Julian is already in his ear telling him that there is a lot of interest in getting Liam to produce more records for other artists. He decides to wait and see and cross that bridge when he gets to it.

The party is pretty typical for a new artist of Zac’s age, at a club with a pulsing bass and plenty of young girls and up and coming celebs in attendance to make sure it is top of the page on the Daily Mail tomorrow.

Liam nurses one drink, mingles a little bit and then calls it a night. He figures he’s done his duty, fulfilled his requirements and is free to go.

His house is dark and quiet when he gets there, same as always. He grabs a bottle of water from the fridge before heading up to bed.

One quick check in text to Louis and Niall and he shuts the light off and settles back against the pillow where he stares at the ceiling for a good hour before he finally falls asleep. He doesn’t have the dream, the first time in weeks, but he still wakes with a jolt and his heart pounding.

He glances at the clock and grousers at the 2:30 glowing back at him and wonders why he woke up.

Then he hears a sound downstairs, the soft whump of his fridge closing and he frowns immediately.

His mind starts running through possibilities. Dismissing them just as quickly, he slides out of bed as soundlessly as possible. Then he tip toes across the hall to the spare room where he keeps his golf clubs, a gift from Niall. He pulls out the heaviest looking one and then creeps to the stairs, coming down each one carefully. Bracing the golf club in his hands, his eyes scan the dark living room for any sign of movement.

It strikes him as very odd that if he were being burgled that the person would be in his fridge. A bizarre thought to have while preparing to confront said person, but it comes to him anyway. He also realizes that rather than coming downstairs, he might have wanted to consider calling the constabulary first.

It’s his first burglary though, so he can hardly be blamed for being a little disoriented and forgetful.

He makes it to the bottom of the stairs and rounds the corner towards the kitchen, where the light over the sink gives a soft glow. It was one of those lights that didn’t need to be turned off, it just helped prevent you from stubbing your toe if you came down for a midnight snack.

Tonight however, it illuminates a figure standing only a few yards ahead of Liam, stock still and about as stunned as Liam is.
His eyes adjust slowly to the dark and he starts seeing more detail: the long curls, the height of the person and the deer like eyes.

Time comes to a halt and his breathing becomes very loud in his ears.

Harry stands in front of him in a dirty, oversized white button down, dark trousers and bare feet. His hair hangs limply, thin and tangled, and his eyes are the size of saucers. He’s holding a half empty water bottle in his hand, the contents vibrating as he shakes in fear in front of Liam. His mouth is open slightly, bottom lip quivering as he takes Liam in, waiting to see what he will do.

They both jump when the golf club lands on the floor in a clatter.

Words fail Liam and his breathing comes in gulps as he tries to process this. A flurry of emotions barrel through him and his hand comes up of its own volition, reaching for Harry as he hadn’t been able to do in the dreams. He prays that right now, in this moment, he isn’t dreaming and that this isn’t just another mean trick his brain is playing on him.

Harry’s eyes dart to his hand and then back to Liam’s face and he shifts his weight from one foot to the other, moving just slightly closer and Liam’s body and brain reconnect. He closes the distance in two long steps and pulls Harry in against him, gripping hard as he still tries to come to terms with what is happening. The water bottle hits the floor spilling on the tile, but Liam doesn’t care. He only cares that Harry’s arms wrap around his waist and grip on to him. His face pressing into Liam’s shoulder and he threads a hand into Harry’s hair to hold him there.

They stand like this for a long while, holding tight and breathing hard. Neither willing to break for fear that it wouldn’t be real.

Slowly, Liam becomes aware of certain things.

One, Harry is terrifyingly thin. His spine and ribs are very evident, sharp and pushing into Liam’s forearm. He feels so small it’s as though Liam could easily wrap his arms around him twice.

Second, he stinks. A mixture of sweat, body odor and dirt that is coming off of his greasy hair and grubby clothes. Liam is grateful for it though, because he knows his brain would never add a bad odor into his dreams.

But it doesn’t matter, what matters is that Harry is there. Solid bones and skin pressed against him, his breath short puffs against Liam’s collarbone, fingers digging into Liam’s back as he holds on for dear life.

After what feels like hours, but it is likely only minutes, he can feel Harry’s arms getting loose around him, as though he is tiring and Liam comes out of his own revelry, releasing him enough to pull his face back so he can see it. Harry’s eyes dart around Liam’s own face, taking in the changes, staring and analyzing. Liam tries to understand what he’s seeing, what he’s looking for, but decides right now it doesn’t matter.

His own fingers trace across Harry’s features, touching his sunken cheeks, his brow, his chapped pale lips and down his sharp jaw. Each touch committed to memory and releasing memories all at once.

“How…” Liam whispers, breath shaky as he barely dares to blink. “Where…” he breathes out a
few seconds later.

Harry’s eyes dart down to his mouth to watch the words and then back up, a soft whine coming from his throat before his hands knot in the front of Liam’s shirt and he crowds back in against him, head tucked under Liam’s chin, which is awkward considering his height.

Harry’s reaction answers zero questions, but it does pull Liam back into reality a little more solidly and logic starts to take over. He realizes that there are things he needs to be doing. Yes, he wants to know where in hell Harry has been for over two years, what happened to him, and why in hell he just turned up in Liam’s kitchen of all fucking places, but he needed to prioritize a little.

First, Harry probably needed some medical help. He can’t be sure of any injuries because he hasn’t really examined him entirely, but his frail frame needs to be seen to and he should probably make a phone call to the police.

“Harry, we need to call for help,” he says gently, arms encircling the shivering body against him. Harry responds with another soft whine and presses in a little tighter, knuckles digging into Liam’s chest and a sense of gravity settles over him. He wasn’t so naive as to believe that if Harry came back he would be the same guy he’d known before he disappeared, but it was becoming painfully clear he had been through some serious shit and his reactions were proof of that. “Harry, babe, I’m sorry, we need to get help, but I promise I’m not going to leave you, ok? I’m going to stay with you.”

Harry huffs a breath and shudders once but his grip releases finally and he backs away slightly.

“Ok,” Liam breathes out, more to himself than to Harry. “Ok.”

He looks around the room, as though trying to find answers to how to deal with this situation, but finds none. This was definitely a first for him.

The water on the floor is soaking into his socks and he realizes that Harry had been holding it when he came down. This thought gets him moving, gives him some direction and he gently leads Harry to the couch where the frightened man can still see Liam while he hurries back into the kitchen and fetches another bottle of water from the fridge. He assumes that Harry must be thirsty, and probably hungry, but he’s not sure if he should give him food if the hospital needs to run tests.

He opens the bottle and flips on the lights in the kitchen and living room on his way back to the couch. Grabbing the phone last he stutters to a stop a few feet from Harry, the brightness in the room really giving Liam a good look at him and panic threads through his chest.

Harry looks sallow, pale and gaunt. His eyes are sunken and missing their familiar spark. His lips are pale and chapped, signs of cracks in each corner of his mouth with small dots of blood. Where the collar of his shirt drapes open, the fabric hanging off of his shrunken frame, the bones of his chest are clearly visible and there is a litany of scars around his neck and his wrists where Liam can see. His hair is still the same dark mahogany colour, but it’s dull and hanging limply below his shoulders, the curls valiantly trying to make an appearance despite the dirt and oil.

Harry starts to visibly shrink under Liam’s stare and it shakes him out of it. The pain in his chest steals his breath as he looks at the person Harry has been forced to become by someone else’s hand.

He holds out the open bottle of water and after a few moments Harry tentatively takes it. Liam
notices the dirt under his fingernails, many of them broken and jagged. His pinkie finger on his right hand appears to have been broken at some point and has healed in a strange, crooked way. Liam has to swallow hard to get the lump out of his throat, a combination of sorrow and rage.

He sits down next to Harry carefully, now aware that he could be in pain and is clearly a bit on the fragile side. Harry takes a long pull from the water, his throat moving with it and Liam takes the moment to start dialing 999. He considers finding the number for the detective who was investigating Harry’s case, but decides that would be too time consuming. Better to get immediate help now.

He’s just considering exactly what to say to the operator when Harry turns and all but crawls into his lap, burrowing into Liam’s chest and settling against him with a sigh.

“999 what is your emergency?” comes a tinny voice on the phone and Liam is so startled by Harry’s actions that it takes him a moment to reply. “999, is there anyone there?”

“Uh… yes… sorry, yes…” Liam starts, Harry jumping slightly when Liam starts speaking, as though he wasn’t expecting his voice. “I…”

Liam stops, what in hell is he supposed to say in this moment?

Hey, you know Harry Styles, guy who’s been missing for two years? Yeah, he just turned up in my house.

Liam still hasn’t come to terms with it himself, how in hell is he supposed to explain it to someone else?

“Sir, is there any emergency you need to report?” The operator asks again, voice a tad terse.

“Yes, sorry, just trying to figure out how to explain,” Liam replies. “Um, I’m going to need an ambulance and probably the police. Well, yes, the police. A friend, who’s been missing for a long time has just shown up at my house and I think he needs some medical help.”

“I… ok…” the operator draws out, clearly now just as flummoxed as Liam. “What is your name?”

“Liam Payne. My friend’s name is Harry Styles.”

He’s not even slightly surprised at the length of time it takes before she responds again, he just waits. The hand not holding the phone gently runs up and down Harry’s bony shoulder, trying to offer some sort of weak comfort.

“I’m sorry, did you just say Harry Styles is at your house?” She finally asks, voice slightly shrill in her shock.

“Yes, I did and I think he needs to get to the hospital,” Liam responds carefully.

“Right,” she replies, and it sounds like she shakes her head rapidly once. “Right, I need your address… Liam…”

He relays it, and he can hear her typing in the background. She assures him they are on their way and it is not even five minutes later that he can hear sirens approaching rapidly.
“Harry, babe, I gotta go unlock the door. Help is coming,” he says quietly to the hair just below his chin and like last time, Harry latches on tighter. “Harry, I’m sorry, I have to let them in, but you can come with me.”

The sirens are now just outside the door and Harry suddenly seems to take notice of that, sitting up and staring at the door with panic. Liam quickly sits up as well, arm going around Harry’s shoulders protectively without him even thinking about it.

“Hey, hey, it’s ok. That’s the ambulance and the police. They are coming to help,” he says quickly, and Harry rapidly turns to stare at him wide eyed. “Shhh Harry, it’s ok. I’m going to stay with you ok, I promise. I’m not leaving you.”

He hopes that is the assurance Harry is looking for. He only has the last ten minutes with him to go off of in figuring out what Harry might want or need. He’s happy when he’s proven right and Harry relaxes against him, nodding once. The first real communication he’s given.

A rapid knocking comes on the door, lights all flashing red and blue through the front windows and there is a cacophony of sirens outside.

Liam helps Harry stand up leading him gently to the door, but Harry stops short when several voices come through the door.

“Mr. Payne! Are you in there? Open the door!” Shouts a man, fist still pummeling the door. His voice comes again a second later, telling someone else outside to prepare to break the door down and Liam moves.

Leaving Harry a few feet back with some quick hand gestures that he hopes convey his meaning, he hurries up to the door and unlocks it. He opens it a crack to speak to the people just outside, all of whom stop talking and start crowding in with wild eyes.

“I’m gonna have to ask you to please try to calm down and lower your voices. Stop the sirens and lights,” he pleads with them. “He’s very frightened and I don’t think any of this is helping.”

The officers standing outside look entirely startled by this request. All of them start talking at once, balking and demanding he open the door. A young woman dressed in civilian clothes with a badge on her belt steps up though and raises her hand. Her dark blond hair is knotted up on her head and her green eyes are a bright contrast to her ivory skin.

“Hey, we can do that, can’t we gentlemen?” she addresses the others, all of which go quiet and moments later they start relaying instructions. The lights all dim and the noise level decreases significantly. The woman turns to Liam and smiles gently. “Hi, I’m DC Warner. I’m here to help,” she introduces herself and holds out a hand for him to shake.

He hesitates for a moment, but decides that she seems trustworthy enough and he opens the door a little farther to shake her hand.

“Would it be ok if I came in?” she asks. “Just me for right now, just so I can assess the situation and talk to him a little?”

Liam glances back at Harry, who has taken up a position slightly behind the hall table, his eyes are wide but sharp as he watches the door and it’s clear he’s been listening. Liam cocks his head slightly at Harry, posing the question again with the action and after a few moments, Harry’s eyes
go down to the floor nervously, but he nods once, very slightly.

“Yes, that’s ok,” Liam finally replies, opening the door wide enough to admit her and quickly closing it behind her.

She gasps quietly, only loud enough for Liam to hear, but she recovers quickly and smiles gently at Harry, who starts backing down the hall, eyes on Liam pleadingly.

Liam’s heart hurts from the expression and he quickly goes to Harry. This time he’s not that surprised when Harry tries to burrow into him, gripping tight and watching the detective from under Liam’s chin.

The detective takes this in stride and continues to smile gently, though it’s clear she’s getting a read on the situation. She makes no moves to come any closer.

“Hi Harry, it’s really good to see you. We’ve been looking for you for a long time, since before I became a detective actually,” she says quietly and conversationally, voice even and soothing. “Listen sweetheart, Liam and I think you need to go to a hospital to get checked out. There is an ambulance outside to take you. Liam can go with you and stay with you, but we need you to be ok with it.”

Harry tenses in Liam’s arms, fingers tightening in his shirt.

“She’s right Haz,” Liam says quietly. “I will be with you the entire time. It’s just to get you checked out, make sure you’re ok and then we can come home.”

Liam isn’t sure he should be promising that, but the detective nods quickly, agreeing with him.

“You’ll be perfectly safe Harry, I promise,” she adds, giving him a hopeful smile now.

Harry huffs a breath, body still shaking, but after a few long moments of deliberation, moments that Liam has no doubt he’s spending staring at the detective and out the front window, he finally relents. Though it’s clear by his face when he pulls back from Liam slightly that he’s not particularly pleased about it and Liam feels guilty. What if this isn’t what Harry wants? Why is he forcing this on him? He could have just as easily run him a bath, fixed him a sandwich and curled up with him under the covers.

But as delightful as that sounds right now, he knows it’s not feasible. Putting aside all of the potential medical issues that Harry might be dealing with, he has been missing for over two years. People have been looking for him as the detective pointed out. People have been mourning him and they deserve to know he’s alive.

But first, he needs to be checked out.

With that decided, the detective slips back out the door to rearrange everyone outside. The ambulance pulls closer and the EMT’s are made aware of Harry’s general mental state.

Meanwhile, Liam finds Harry some shoes and a sweater and throws on some trainers himself.

The detective comes back in and they lead Harry out the door and up into the back of the ambulance. The frightened man clings on to Liam with his fingers digging into his arm.
Liam guides Harry to sit on the stretcher and he perches on the narrow ledge seat beside it.

An older woman, short with dark hair piled on top of her head in a bun follows them on, looking at Harry critically as she considers what to do and Liam frowns. Harry needs someone kind and gentle and this woman did not appear to embody that in any way, shape, or form.

“I’m going to follow you to the hospital,” Detective Warner says from the open back door and Harry turns to look at her, distracting him from the EMT who reaches forward and grabs Harry’s arm to try to push him down to lie on the stretcher.

There is an almighty clatter and thrash as Harry flails and dives off of the stretcher landing on the floor. His hands clutch on to Liam’s legs as he also tries to hide behind them.

“HEY! What the fuck? What part of ‘he’s scared’ do you not understand?” Liam yells at the EMT, bending over to shield Harry as best he can protectively. He turns to the detective immediately, as she stares in horror at the situation. “I thought you told them to not touch him unless he says it’s ok? That’s what you promised you were going to do!”

She recovers from her shock quickly and turns a critical eye on the EMT, who is standing with wide eyes and her hands in the air on the other side of the now crooked stretcher.

“I did. Is there a reason you chose not to listen to my instructions?” The detective demands.

Another EMT comes around the back. She’s younger, blond and gives Harry a pitying look.

“Hazel, we were told. What did you do?” She asks, eyes still on Harry as he peers at her from under Liam’s thigh.

“I was just trying to get him to lie back. We can’t drive if he’s just sitting on the edge. He’d get hurt if we had to stop quickly,” Hazel replies defensively. “I didn’t know he was this bad. Maybe we should sedate him.”

“NO!” Liam answers immediately. The last thing he wanted to do was let them take Harry’s control from him.

“Hazel, why don’t you drive and I’ll ride in the back? I’ll let you know when we are ready to go.”

The older EMT opens her mouth to balk, but quickly shuts it when she gets a stern look from both Detective Warner and the other EMT.

“Fine, good luck Rachel,” she spits as she gets out and Liam gives the Detective another angry look. It was one thing to promise him that she would make sure Harry was treated kindly and gently, but she had also promised Harry that.

Rachel gets in to the back and sits down on the bench on the other side of the stretcher, not touching anything or making any sudden movements.

“Harry, I’m sorry about that. Take all the time you need,” she says softly. “I’m just going to put the bed back where it should be, but you don’t have to get up here yet if you don’t want to.”

She adjusts the equipment so it’s back in its locked position and replaces the pillow on the top. Liam is just about to suggest he drive Harry to the hospital himself for all the trouble this was
turning into when he feels Harry start to relax, coming out of his hiding place.

He seemed to have these odd moments of lucidity, where he saw what he was doing, his own behavior and would become understanding. Like when he had agreed to let Liam call for help and to go to the hospital at all. This was obviously another of those moments as he carefully pulls himself up from the floor, Liam lending a hand the moment it’s clear he’s struggling, and he sits back down on the stretcher. He keeps a wary eye on the EMT, but after a few more moments he relents further and pulls his legs up and settles back.

Rachel gives him a gentle smile and leans forward slightly.

“Ok, here is what I would like to do and you can let me know if any of these things aren’t going to work for you, alright?” She asks nicely and after a moment Harry nods. “First, I would like to get an IV into your arm, to get some fluids going in because I do think you might be a bit dehydrated. I promise it will just be plain fluids, no medicine or anything without your approval first.”

Harry nods again.

“Second, I need to attach some leads to your chest, just a few, to monitor your heart.” She opens a cabinet and pulls out several little packets and opens one, revealing a patch that sticks to the skin and has a spot to attach the wire to. “See, they are stickers. They don’t hurt, they just stick on so I can attach these,” she picks up the wires and shows him the monitor. “This way I can keep an eye on what your heart is doing.”

Harry’s hands fidget in the borrowed sweater but he nods again a moment later.

“Finally, I just need to take your blood pressure with a cuff, something I’m sure you’ve had done before.” She finishes with another gentle smile and Harry sighs, glancing at Liam once and nods.

“Oh Harry, that’s good. Let’s start with the IV, if that’s alright?” She asks while pulling out the necessary tools.

Liam helps him get his arm free from the sweater. Rolling the dirty shirt sleeve up as high as they can and Liam has to fight his reaction at how thin Harry’s arm is. His tattoos look shriveled. The mermaid is mangled with a large, deep, painful looking scar running right through it. The EMT looks at the scar, fingers probing it for a second before she catches herself and goes back to the agreed upon task.

Liam dutifully holds Harry’s other hand while she inserts the needle, issuing soft platitudes to keep him calm until it’s over.

“Ok Harry, all done. This is the fluids as promised,” she holds up a plastic bag for him to see and Harry studies it for a second before nodding.

With the clear liquid now dripping down the tube going into his arm, she moves on to the heart monitor.

“This is where the stickers need to go,” she shows him using herself as a guide, pointing to several points on her chest. “We will need to open your shirt a little, but once they are on and the wires are hooked up, we can cover you back up so you don’t get cold.”

Harry’s lips tighten slightly, but he nods.
Liam gives her some credit for her swiftness and the beeping of the machine following Harry’s heart fills the space quickly.

“Ok sweetheart, last thing and I’m going to need your other arm to do it, but I think Liam can help me with that,” she hands Liam the cuff and he gently releases Harry’s other arm from the sweater and fixes it into place as per her instructions.

Like with the heart monitor she moves quickly, filling the cuff and watching the monitor for the read out.

“Alright, all done. I think you are ok to head to the hospital without me doing anything else. I do have one favor to ask though,” she asks carefully and Harry’s eyes narrow. “Can we at least put the belt about your waist to keep you in place on the bed? Hazel is right that we need you to be secure for your safety. Even Liam needs to put a seat belt on,” she points out, looking at Liam with a flick of her eyebrow. He scans the sides of the seat he’s on and finds the parts, bringing them together about his middle obediently. He looks up to find Harry watching him and evidently Liam’s acquiescence to the request is enough to convince him.

When they’ve got him secured and settled, the detective closes the doors on the ambulance with a promise to see them at the hospital. Rachel opens a small window leading to the cab, letting her driver know that they are ready to go.

The ride is quiet with the sirens still shut off, though the lights are on to warn traffic they are coming. During that time Liam starts to really worry about what’s going to happen at the hospital if it was this difficult to just get Harry into the ambulance.

Harry’s eyes shift around the enclosed space, landing on Liam at intervals, but his expression tells Liam that he is likely worrying about the same thing.

When they are only a block from the hospital, Harry turns his head towards Liam, face lucid again and he leans a little closer.

“Sedate me if you have to, it might be the only way,” he whispers, voice sounding harsh and Liam is startled by it.

“I don’t want to do that Harry,” Liam replies, brow furrowing. It seemed cruel somehow. Harry shakes his head.

“No, it’s ok. You have my permission to do so if it becomes necessary,” he answers and leans back, effectively ending the conversation.

Liam can see Rachel watching them out of the corner of her eye, but she says nothing and he’s glad for that. He doesn’t get the chance to really process the exchange before they pull up to the emergency doors. Then there are doctors, several of them, all standing and helping lift the stretcher out of the ambulance and several instructions are quickly shouted about.

Liam remains glued to Harry’s side, holding his hand and reminding the doctors several times that they need to explain what they are doing and to speak softly. One kindly doctor, another younger woman, which was becoming the theme for the night, takes charge and makes the effort to communicate everything with Harry as best she can. But when she starts removing his clothes, explaining that they need to check for injuries, Harry goes into panic mode.
It’s then that Liam realizes why Harry gave him permission to sedate him. Letting him sleep through this wasn’t cruel, it was kind. He wouldn’t know or feel anything, a far better option than him lying there panicked being held down, poked and prodded.

“Harry! Please! We just need to assess your chest for injuries. I promise we won’t hurt you,” the doctor pleads as Harry struggles. His eyes search the room wildly until they find Liam, where they bore into him almost painfully.

“Sedate him,” Liam says quickly, squeezing Harry’s hand gently. The two of them were still connected despite the mass of moving bodies in the room. “He gave me permission. It’ll make it easier on him.”

The doctor glances at him and he can see the relief on her face at this. She turns to a nurse immediately to get the medication.

They administer it through his IV and moments later he’s limp and unconscious on the bed. His eyelashes a fan across his cheeks and for the first time since Liam had found him in his kitchen, he looks peaceful.

It’s as though the entire room breathes a collective sigh of relief and the doctors start working more mechanically, clinically, though still with care. Liam remains as long as he can, as long as they let him, but when they take Harry up to get a CT scan he is led to a waiting room where he sits.

It is then that the entirety of the situation finally rolls over him.

Harry is alive.

Harry showed up at his house.

Harry is alive.

Holy fuck, Harry is alive.

His hands shake as he is hit fully with the emotions that this revelation brings down. His breathing speeds up and he finds himself almost hyperventilating one moment and laughing hysterically a moment later.

He was right. Harry is alive. He was never dead and Liam had known all along.

He scrubs his hands over his face, smelling Harry on them and he laughs again.

“Holy fucking shit,” he whispers to the empty room.

Suddenly he wants to call Ruth or Nicola, text Louis, tell everyone the miraculous news.

Then he realizes he forgot his cell phone at home and he curses himself.

Then he remembers Gemma, Anne and Des. Harry’s family. They should know he’s alive, Liam should tell them.

He stands and is about to hurry out to the nursing station to ask to use their phone when Detective
Warner comes in.

“Where are you going?” She asks him, looking surprised.

“Harry’s family, I have to call them. They should know,” he babbles out.

“Oh don’t worry, we’ve already called them. They are on their way. They are catching the first flight back from LA,” she assures him, squeezing his arm. Liam is startled at hearing they are out of the country. Then he remembers with a shock that Harry was nominated for an Oscar this weekend as Best Supporting Actor for Dunkirk. He can’t help but wonder what they will do on Sunday at the awards show when they learn Harry’s family has abruptly pulled out. Will the word that he’s alive be out by then? He hopes not. He also can’t even imagine being his family and having to sit on a plane for 11 hours after finding out this news. “While we are waiting, can we talk? Can you take me through tonight?”

He slumps in relief knowing that at least Harry’s mum is on her way and flops back down into his chair.

“I woke up, heard something downstairs and came down to find him standing in my kitchen drinking a bottle of water. He must have used the spare key to get in. He knew about it,” Liam explains. Only a select group of people knew about the key hidden in Liam’s back garden, for emergency purposes.

“Did he say anything about where he’s been? Where he came from?” She asks, notepad and pen in her hands.

Liam shakes his head.

“No, nothing. The only thing he’s said at all was that I could let the doctors sedate him if necessary, which it was, but that’s it.” He shrugs once, everything had happened so fast that he hadn’t really even asked questions fully or pushed for answers. “He’s not been really communicative, as you’ve seen, but he seems to be aware sometimes.”

She nods, lips tightening as she considers it.

“Hopefully we will know more when the doctors have finished their physical examination.” She stops then and looks at him carefully for a moment before asking her next question. “Why would he come to your house do you think? Instead of going home, to a relative’s, or even to the police?”

Liam shrugs again, but a sense of defensiveness comes over him. He suspects that she means more with her questions than she’s letting on.

“I don’t know. Like I said, he knew about the emergency key, but so do Louis, Niall, and my family, so it’s not like he exclusively knew about it and I mean, I haven’t seen him for two years…” he trails off as horror creeps through him. “Do you think I have something to do with his disappearance?” He asks loudly, voice shocked. “Because I don’t! I called you the moment he showed up tonight!”

The Detective raises her hands quickly and starts talking over him to get him to shut up.

“Liam! Liam, stop, no. That is not what I’m saying at all,” she assures him, lowering her hands when he stops balking. “I’m asking because of his behavior tonight, the way he clung to you and
looked to you every time he had to make a decision. I need you to be honest, is there more between you two than you’ve let on?”

Liam fidgets in his chair, he never really had a great poker face and moments later she nods and closes her eyes slowly.

“It’s fine Liam, there’s no judgement, I’m just trying to sort out why he came to your place in Surrey. It might provide some clues as to where he came from.”

He nods. That made sense, but it still leaves him feeling awkward. If he were honest, he had absolutely no idea what there was between him and Harry besides that one kiss on that one night and it’s safe to say he’s taken that memory and made it into its own creature. With two years spent analyzing it without word or input from Harry, he may have completely deluded the entire situation.

But then there was the fact that Harry came to him. His house. His kitchen.

And the way that Harry clung on to him, sought comfort from him, it made things a bit harder to sort out.

Before he gets the chance to explain or ask questions about the investigation the door opens and the young doctor pokes her head in.

“Detective?” She asks.

“Yes, coming.” Detective Warner replies, standing quickly.

“Wait!” Liam says quickly, standing as well. “How is Harry? What did you find? Where is he?” He questions the doctor, quickly scooting between the two women to avoid being shut out.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you Liam. You aren’t family so his medical information is private,” she answers, giving him a pitying look. “He’s in a room and he’s still unconscious. When I’m finished speaking with the detective, I will take you to sit with him. I know you promised to be there.”

Liam is irate immediately.

“So you can’t tell me, but you can tell her?” he points at the detective, knowing full well why the doctor could speak to her, but irrationally still pissed about it. “It’s not like his family isn’t going to tell me anyway, or Harry himself for that matter. I just want to know so I can help take care of him. Know what he’s up against.”

The doctor steps forward and puts a hand on his arm gently.

“Liam I know, but this is the policy. It would be illegal for me to tell you and the only reason I can tell Detective Warner is because his medical information is part of the ongoing investigation.” She lowers her chin and gives him a sad smile. “He just needs you there. That’s how you will take care of him, ok?”

He gives her a dirty look, but nods. Pushing it further would just make him look like a petulant child. He knew it was the law, but it still felt wrong since as the detective had pointed out not five minutes ago, Harry did choose to come to Liam, not his family.
He flops back down in a chair to await his escort to Harry’s room while the two women step out into the hall. The second the door closes he’s back up with his ear pressed to the crack between the door and the wall. He was hoping that they might be talking just outside the room, since it was late at night and the hall was pretty much empty except for the odd nurse and the two of them. His hope pays off.

“What am I looking at?” Detective Warner says, and Liam strains to hear, holding his breath for long moments.

The doctor speaks more quietly, and he can’t catch entire sentences, just broken pieces, but enough to make his body feel cold.

“…initial examination…he is underweight…vitamin deficiencies…dark space.”

Liam curses under his breath. He could somewhat come to a conclusion from those bits of information, but he didn’t feel like that was enough.

“Ok, so he was kept in a dark place. We thinking underground? With no access to sunlight?”

The Detective asks and Liam could kiss her for speaking more loudly.

“Yes, appears so,” the doctor replies.

“How long ago do we think he left? A lot of the scars I saw were healed.”

“Hard to say, but… no more than a week ago… had to guess.”

Only a week ago Harry was still being held. So potentially the place he was being held wasn’t far from Liam’s home. Considering Harry’s condition, he wouldn’t have been able to travel long distances.

“It’s important to note,” the doctor starts again, voice more grave and just a little more clear because of that. “There are obvious signs of prolonged sexual abuse. Not to mention multiple scars from restraints.”

Liam swallows hard. It’s weirdly not that surprising, but still sickening at the same time. His worst nightmares come true.

He hears the detective sigh loudly, tutting once.

“Yeah, I figured on that by how he was behaving. I’m assuming you collected evidence?”

“Of course. It’s in a bag at the lab. You can pick it up when you’re ready. Here is the rest of the report. The rest of his injuries are not life threatening. Most are already healed actually,” the doctor answers and they finish up their conversation quickly. The moment he hears footsteps coming to the door Liam scurries back to his chair and sits down, trying to appear nonchalant, like he’s been sitting there the entire time.

The look on the detective’s face tells him she doesn’t believe his act for a second, but the doctor just smiles at him and motions for him to follow her.

“It’ll probably be at least another hour before he wakes up, but I think he would feel much better if
you were there,” she says gently, leading him down several corridors before stopping in front of a closed door. She pushes it open quietly and holds it for him. He nods at her in gratitude and steps into the room.

Harry’s on the only bed in the room. He looks almost lifeless with his arms neatly laid on top of the blanket and his face pale in comparison to his dark hair. They’ve redressed him in a thin blue paper gown and there are still wires and tubes leading to his arm and chest, the heart monitor beeping in a steady rhythm. They’ve added an oxygen meter to his finger, just to complete the ensemble. His face is turned away from Liam, flopped in a way that a limp body does when jostled. It’s frightening to see how little his body seems to show under the blanket, so thin he’s barely a bump in the blue wool.

Liam pulls a chair up beside the bed and is about to sit when he decides he doesn’t like Harry’s position because it looks uncomfortable. He gently rights his head so he won’t have a crick in his neck. His throat feels tight at the angry looking scars there. He adjusts the pillows slightly, so they are supporting his shoulders better and then he sits down, taking Harry’s hand in his and lacing their fingers together.

Harry doesn’t respond to any of this, just continues to sleep. His chapped lips are parted slightly and his lashes fan across the dark circles under his eyes.

With his unoccupied hand, Liam pats his pockets. He remembers tucking a chapstick in one of them at some point and he is glad to find he hasn’t lost it. He lets go of Harry’s hand and stands back up, opens the tube and gently swipes it across Harry’s lips. They looked painful and this was one thing Liam could help him with at that moment. When he’s satisfied with his work, he sits back down and takes Harry’s hand again.

Then he waits, eyes never leaving the sleeping man’s face for a moment. He fears if they do, he will disappear again.
Chapter 5

*Day 1*

The sun is just starting to rise when Harry wakes up. He does so unlike how Liam thought he would, slow and groggy and perhaps a little confused.

Instead, his eyes just pop open and he starts looking around the room frantically.

It startles Liam from his revelry of watching him sleep.

“Hey, hey, shhh,” he whispers, leaning forward and gently squeezing Harry’s hand.

Harry’s head snaps his way and his wild eyes search Liam’s face, his body tense like a coil.

“Harry, shhh, babe. It’s ok. You’re in the hospital. It’s ok,” Liam says carefully, trying to get through what appears to be a fear induced fog.

Harry’s chest pumps quickly as he breathes hard. His eyes quickly scan the room and then land back on Liam for another moment before they go around the room again, a bit slower, his mind clearly connecting the dots. The hand in Liam’s starts to relax a bit, fingers squeezing a little less painfully.

He turns back to Liam, face calmer and more lucid.

“Liam?” He says quietly, voice a croak.

“Yeah mate, I’m here. You’re ok. You’re safe now,” Liam answers, smiling gently as his chest fills with joy.

*Harry is alive.*

Harry’s eyes close slowly as he nods, throat moving as he swallows dryly.

“Do you want some water?” Liam asks quickly, already standing to fill the plastic cup from the jug a nurse brought in an hour ago. Harry starts trying to sit up further. Liam releases his hand and slides it between his shoulders, gently lifting and helping him get the straw in his mouth. He takes a few gulps of it and sighs softly before lying back down.

Liam puts the cup back on the table and sits down, fingers coming up to trail through Harry’s dirty hair gently before he even realizes what he’s doing. Harry glances at him once, face innocent before he relaxes into the touch, almost pushing his head into it while looking around the room.

“How long do I have to stay here? I don’t want to be here,” he says quickly before turning back to Liam, eyes wide. “Can we go home?”

Liam starts, brows flickering as he tries to make sense of the last question and to come up with an answer.

“I’m… not sure how long you have to stay? I can ask the doctor, but your family is on their way.
I’m sure they will take you home as soon as they can,” he answers, finally assuming that the home Harry is referring to is his home with his family, not Liam’s house. A pang of sadness runs through him, ridiculous as he knows it is.

Harry’s lips quiver a little at this and his eyes scan Liam’s face.

“I want to go to your place, stay with you,” he whispers.

Apparently Liam’s assumption was wrong.

The sadness quickly becoming a smug kind of happiness, he tries to keep an even head about it.

“I would have no problem with that. But your family Harry, I know they’ve missed you too, are desperate to see you. They are on a plane on their way here now,” Liam says quietly, mind already trying to come up with a solution that would make everyone happy.

Harry appears slightly confused by this, the lucidity disappearing for a few moments. But then it’s back and he nods and looks away.

“Look, I mean, you can all stay at my place if that will make you happy. I’m fine with that, but Har, do you not want to see your family?” Liam asks carefully. Now he is the confused one because he wasn’t expecting this. He had assumed Harry would be dying to see his mum. He was so close with her and his sister. They were all so tight that his behavior now was very strange.

Harry’s mouth tightens and he looks down at his hand, the IV taped to the back of it.

“They buried me. They gave up,” he states quickly.

Liam breathes out loudly. So he knew about that.

And no one knew Liam had gone to that farcical funeral. He was the notably missing one the media talked about. Harry clearly took that as a sign that Liam hadn’t given up, which was technically true. That explained why he had come to Liam and why he was avoiding everyone else.

“Harry, they didn’t want to. Trust me they didn’t. That was the hardest thing they’ve ever had to do and I’m sure they doubted themselves every single day since. But the police made the call, told them that there was no hope and they were devastated. I think they were convinced by others that holding a memorial was the way to find closure, but I know it didn’t work. They didn’t find it and they miss you so much,” he pleads with Harry, taking his hand again and squeezing it. “So very very much, we all have. I’m sure deep in their hearts they knew you were still alive.”

He’s not entirely sure that’s true, but what he did know was that everything else he said was accurate. They were devastated. After the funeral they had cut off contact with all of Harry’s old friends, including Liam. They couldn't handle the reminders. Harry’s house in London still stood as a shrine to him. It had not been touched since he disappeared, except by his mum going in once a month to clean it and keep it up in case he came back there. Their pain was palpable every time you looked at them.

Harry considers all of this, searching Liam’s face for falsehoods and he nods after a moment. It’s clear he might need some more convincing. He was obviously very hurt by what he saw as a betrayal.
“Look like I said, you can all come stay at my place, neutral territory I guess, if that will make you happy. The choice is yours.”

Harry nods in assent this time.

“Ok, good,” Liam says softly, glad to have one thing settled. “Why don’t I ring for the doctor and we can find out when they might release you.”

Harry perks up a little at this and Liam laughs softly as he pushes the little red button.

The young doctor comes in a few minutes later, a gentle smile on her face.

“Hi Harry. Glad to see you awake. How are you feeling?” She asks while going to check his IV and the monitors. “Your blood pressure is a little low, but otherwise you are holding steady.”

“I want to go home. When can I leave?” Harry asks immediately, voice cracking, but determined.

The doctor laughs softly, but looks at him critically, assessing his mental state.

“I know you probably aren’t feeling comfortable here, but we need to keep you in for the day at least honey. You’ve been through a lot and we need to make sure you are going to be alright.”

Harry deflates, eyes flicking around the room again. It occurs to Liam that being stuck in a room was probably not that comfortable for him. A little too close to the same type of situation he had escaped from perhaps. He tries to think of a way to fix that, to make him feel more settled there and show him that it wasn’t the same.

“Maybe tomorrow morning, ok?” The doctor asks Harry nicely, smiling at him warmly.

Harry nods, but doesn’t look too pleased.

“Why don’t I get you some tea, maybe some breakfast?” She asks politely and Harry frowns again, nodding when it becomes clear she expects no other answer. “Ok, I’ll be right back.” She turns towards Liam and nods at him. “I’ll bring you some tea as well. I’m sure you could use it.”

With that she’s gone and Liam resumes playing with Harry’s hair. It was soothing for both of them it seemed.

“I know you probably want to know,” Harry says quietly, eyes intense as they hold Liam’s.

It takes him a minute to realize what Harry means by the statement and he shakes his head quickly.

“Harry, you don’t have to tell me anything. I would never make you talk about anything that is painful for you,” he assures him, Harry’s face softening. “Listen, I’m just so happy you are back, that’s all that matters. And I’m going to be here for you, take care of you. It’s gonna be ok.”

Liam isn’t sure he can promise that, but he sure as shit is going to try.

“Does anyone else know?” Harry whispers, brow furrowing slightly.

“Not that I know of. I forgot my cell phone at home so I can’t tell the other lads, but the police called your family. I don’t know if they have spoken to anyone else.”
Harry nods, saying nothing further on the subject. It’s then that Liam wonders if word has gotten out. The media would have no doubt got wind of the large presence of emergency vehicles at his house last night, but would they have connected the dots?

The door opens again and the doctor comes in with an orderly who is holding a tray. On it is two tea cups and a pot of tea, along with a small covered plate and a bottle of Ensure.

“Here we go Harry,” she says gently, helping the orderly slide the tray onto a table. “I think we will start a little slower to begin with, see what your stomach can handle. But I would like to see you at least drink the Ensure as it has a lot of what you need right now. Otherwise, if you think you can eat a piece of toast or two that would be great. We just don’t want you overdoing it.”

Harry watches her critically through this, his mouth actually turning up in disgust slightly at the mention of the Ensure and he makes no effort to sit up.

Not to be discouraged, the doctor goes to the end of the bed where the remote for the mechanics is and a whirring noise fills the room as the bed folds upward so Harry has no choice but to sit up. It’s about then that Liam decides she’s being far too pushy and steps in.

“Thanks doctor. I’ll sit with him and see that he tries things,” he assures her, giving what he hopes is a confident smile. “I do know how he takes his tea after all.”

Her eyes narrow slightly, but she nods and steps out of the room, promising to come back and check on Harry in a few minutes.

“Thank you,” Harry says quietly in a tired tone.

“She’s not wrong that you need to get some food into you, but her approach needs some work.”

Harry hums in agreement and relaxes back against the pillows. It’s easy to see he’s getting tired and Liam feels for him.

He stands up and pours tea into the two cups, adding Harry’s usual two sugars with a splash of cream and stirs it for him. He quickly doctors his own before picking up Harry’s cup and turning to hand it to him.

Harry’s face is unreadable. He watches Liam carefully and he doesn’t immediately take the cup from him.

“Just try a little tea if you can,” Liam pleads quietly and Harry’s eyes go down to the cup and back up to Liam’s face.

“I haven’t had tea in over two years. I was just realizing that.” His brows furrow with emotion. “And you made it the way I like it…you made tea for me.”

Liam isn’t entirely sure what to do with this revelation. It’s heartbreaking, but he’s at a loss as to how to respond.

Finally, Harry’s hands come up to take the cup. They shake slightly and he has to use both, but he manages to get ahold of it after a minute. Then he sits just staring down into the cup at the contents, the emotional look on his face again.
“It’s gonna get cold Harry,” Liam says a few moments later, feeling like an idiot the second the words leave his mouth. Harry seems to stir from some sort of daydream, glancing up at him in surprise before looking back down at the cup and nodding.

“Right, sorry,” he mutters before lifting the cup to his lips and sipping at it. His hands shake more with the effort of lifting the cup, showing just how weak he really was. But he manages it, humming with what Liam assumes is enjoyment at the first taste.

Liam picks his own cup up, so it’s a little less weird that he’s just sitting there staring at Harry drinking, and takes a mouthful of it. To him it’s pretty terrible tea. Clearly it’s a cheap brand and it’s weak, but to Harry it’s something wonderful.

Harry takes a few more sips, only drinking a small amount before he tries to put the cup back on the table and Liam has to shoot a hand forward to avoid him dropping it on his lap.

“Sorry,” Harry mutters quietly.

“No worries. Just let me know when you want more,” he says gently, smiling at Harry. “Do you want to try some of this Ensure stuff?” He picks up the bottle and examines it. The flavor is vanilla and it looks sort of chalky in the picture on the label.

Harry eyes it critically, mouth turning up in disgust again and he shakes his head.

Liam puts the bottle back down. He doesn’t blame Harry, it doesn’t look appetizing at all.

“How are you doing? You’ve had some tea. How about we try this shake?” She asks kindly, clearly trying to keep things upbeat while Harry lifts one brow at her with exasperation. “Ok I know, not really the most appetizing looking thing, but these are meal replacements and they pack a lot of calories and vitamins in here. It’s a great way to help you get some strength and energy back and will kick start you gaining some weight. Trust me, they taste better than they look. It’s like a vanilla milkshake.”

She opens the bottle and pours some out into an empty glass. The liquid thick and slightly foamy and even Liam wouldn’t touch it if he were paid. She pops a straw into it and hands it to Harry, who hesitates before taking it carefully into his shaky hands.

Eyes still on her critically he puts the straw in his mouth and takes the tiniest of sips, face crumpling in disgust almost the minute it hits his tongue. He quickly shoves the cup back at her and motions at Liam to hand him his tea. He accepts it gratefully and shakily sips at it to clear the taste from his mouth.
“Ok, so we don’t like that. There are other flavors though, like chocolate, banana, mixed berry and strawberry. I’ll bring them later for you to try,” she suggests, not willing to be dissuaded just yet. “But I’m glad to see you drinking tea. I’ll make sure more is brought up and more water as well.”

With that she leaves again, the offending milkshake still on the table.

When Harry is done with his tea again, Liam puts it back on the table and settles back in his chair. The sun is completely up now, birds chirping out in the trees and Harry turns towards the window with wide eyes.

Liam remembers the conversation in the hall the night before and the doctor saying how Harry had been kept in a dark place without sunlight, hence his pallor. But it wouldn’t have just been damaging to his health, it must have been awful not to see the light of day for over two years. Pain and sadness fill his chest as he watches Harry staring out the window in wonder, face eager despite his exhaustion.

Immediately, Liam starts looking for a way to help him get closer to the window, to really see outside and feel the sun on his face. The trouble was, he was still hooked up to an IV and the heart monitor. If they could be moved in any way, then he might be able to pull this off. If all else fails, he will just unlock the wheels on the bed and push the entire thing over to the window, monitors and all, but that was his last ditch idea.

He stands quickly and heads over to the other side of the bed, Harry’s head snapping his way in surprise at his sudden movement. Liam issues a happy exclamation when he realizes both medical devices are on hangers on a metal stand contraption that is on wheels.

Hurrying over to his chair, he quickly picks it up and moves it over in front of the window since it was the only one in the room. Then he comes back to Harry, lowers the bar on the side of the bed and gently pulls the blankets out of the way.

Harry frowns at him in confusion, but doesn’t fight him when Liam starts motioning for him to stand up. It takes some effort and a few false starts, but eventually Harry is on his feet, clinging on to Liam like he was only a few hours earlier. Almost immediately he starts to shiver and Liam grabs the blanket on the bed and pulls it off, wrapping it around Harry’s shoulders.

Shifting Harry so Liam is supporting him with one arm, he manages to get ahold of the main bar the two machines are attached to and they start shuffling towards the chair. It’s a slow process, but they get there eventually and Harry’s eyes are so wide when they get close to the window that he looks almost cartoonish and Liam can’t help but smile.

He discovers a new problem though. The chair is low with a reclining back and if Harry sits down he’ll be able to see the blue sky, but not much else.

Pushing the machines to a comfortable location he quickly comes up with a solution, but he wasn’t sure how Harry would feel about it.

There was only one way to find out.

He sits down himself, hands still bracing Harry and then he pulls him around so he can sit sideways on Liam’s lap, giving him the leverage to be able to see everything outside.
Harry doesn’t fight him, just settles and leans slightly on his chest. Eyes still staring out the window, Liam pulls the blanket around him a little tighter before wrapping his arms around Harry gently, cradling him.

They remain this way for an hour, the tea and toast long gone cold. Harry is so happy to be sitting in the sunshine watching people outside on the sidewalk, the cars, the squirrels, the birds and white puffy clouds sailing past in the sky.

It was only a matter of time before his exhaustion caught up with him though and he falls asleep with his head on Liam’s shoulder, swaddled like a child in the blanket and circle of arms.

It’s just as comfortable for Liam, like the weight of the world is off his shoulders and Harry feels considerably lighter on his lap than his worries did.

With Harry’s soft puffs of breath on his neck, Liam soon starts to doze as well.

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He’s awoken when Harry suddenly jolts in his lap, thumping against his chest and hands gripping onto his shoulders. It take a minute for Liam to even remember where in hell he is, who he’s with and why he’s there in the first place.

Then he remembers the scent of Harry, still dirty, surrounding him and it all washes over him once again.

Harry is alive.

Harry is also currently flipping out. Liam needs to figure out why.

“Sorry Harry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” comes Detective Warner’s voice from the door. Liam turns his head and sees her standing just on the threshold. She must have just opened the door and the noise clearly woke Harry. He was already pretty skittish, but he was especially so when he woke up it seemed.

He turns back to face Harry and finds him hunched down, eyes wild as he stares at the woman over Liam’s shoulder.

“Hey, hey,” Liam whispers, one hand going up to rub up and down Harry’s arm gently. “It’s alright. It’s just Detective Warner.”

Harry’s lips quiver slightly as he watches her, still unsure, almost as though he was still remembering how in hell he got here as well. After a few moments he looks at Liam, eyes scanning over his face, brows twitching through his confusion before he finally seems to settle and calm down. He turns and looks out the window as final confirmation that he really is in this place. Liam can only imagine what’s going on in his head. It was jarring for him to wake up just now and remember the events of the last twenty-four hours, but it must feel completely insane to Harry.

“I was hoping maybe we could talk Harry. That you could give me a little information,” the detective says quietly, coming a little further into the room and closing the door behind her. Harry tenses immediately, shrinking down again. “It won’t take long, but I do have some questions. Maybe you could come back and sit on the bed? Liam will be just outside.”
“No,” Harry states bluntly, and Liam wonders what part exactly he’s disagreeing with.

“You… you can stay in the chair then,” the detective amends, sounding just as confused.

“No,” Harry declares a second time, a little more forcefully. “Liam stays.”

So what if Liam feels a tad smug about that?

“If that’s what you would like,” she agrees and Liam can almost hear her nodding.

“Haz, we should move you back to the bed though. At least so you can talk,” Liam points out. His legs were numb and he could feel that Harry was cold.

Harry turns and looks out the window again, disappointment crossing his features and Liam’s heart breaks a little.

“We will come back to the window, I promise,” he assures him, rubbing his arm again. Harry glances at him and nods, shifting to get his feet onto the floor. Liam supports him carefully up to standing and he waits wobbling as Liam gets up and tucks an arm under his shoulders.

The detective comes over quickly to help move the machines, smartly choosing not to attempt to touch Harry, though he eyes her warily anyway and they begin the slow shuffle back to the bed.

When he’s resettled against the pillows, the blankets pulled back over him, she stands at the end of the bed while Liam pulls the chair back over and sits with Harry’s hand in his.

“Understandably, our top concern right now is finding who did this to you. It would help if I had some idea where you were held. Do you know the area or an address or anything?” She asks carefully, pulling out her notepad and a pen.

Harry looks down at the blankets, his thin fingers picking at a loose thread.

“There were two of them,” he says softly.

“Two?” She asks confused before understanding crosses her face. “Two people held you captive, is that what you’re saying?”

Harry nods.

“Two men, I don’t know who they are. I’d never met them,” he adds, swallowing dryly before continuing. “I don’t know the address. We were near the airport, Heathrow, somewhere in Hounslow. I could hear the planes. It was a basement. It was dark,” he stops for a second before whispering “so dark.”

“Ok, Hounslow. Did you see anything near the place? Was it a house?”

Harry nods.

“Yes, townhouse, end one. I… wasn’t awake when I got there and there were no windows. They had dug out the wall in the basement, right into the dirt, made a hole where they kept me.”

Liam has to swallow hard this time, anger and sadness warring in his chest. He pours a cup of
water for Harry just for something to do. Harry accepts it with a nod, eyes only flicking to Liam as though he is ashamed of what he is saying.

“What about when you left, did you escape or did they let you go?” She presses, phone out as she quickly texts someone the information.

“It rained. When it rained they always took me out of the hole because it could get damp. So they would lock me in the toilet. They were going out, to the pub I assume, I don’t know. They got drunk most nights, but when they shut me in the toilet they didn’t check the lock this time. I just kept shoving at it until it finally fell off and I got out, ran upstairs and out the front door,” Harry stops and thinks for a moment, eyes going distant. “It was still raining… I hadn’t felt rain for so long.”

“Did you see anything then, any landmarks or shops or street signs?” She asks, eyes trained on him as though willing him to remember something useful.

Harry’s brow furrows as he thinks, but eventually he shakes his head.

“I just started walking. The streets all looked the same. It was dark and cold. When I saw a bus I snuck on the back and rode it until it took me to the airport. Then I got on the next one to Surrey, to where Liam’s house is,” he stops and looks at Liam. “I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t even know if you still lived there or would be home. I was so happy when I found that key. It gave me hope that you still owned the house. And then you were there.”

Liam reaches out and gently takes Harry’s hand again, squeezing it.

“I’m glad I was there too,” he answers, meaning it with every fibre of his being.

The detective sighs loudly, interrupting their little moment and clearly frustrated at how little information Harry was providing.

“Right, can we talk about the men who held you?” She asks softly and Harry looks down at the blanket, face troubled. “Can you give me a description? Maybe even their first names if you ever heard them?”

“One was Gary,” Harry says quietly. “The other was Brian. I remember thinking they were such normal names. Um, Gary was tall, taller than me. It was his 25th birthday a few weeks ago,” Harry swallows loudly. “I... I had to be part of the celebration,” he whispers.

Fury rips through Liam, his hand convulsing and tightening on Harry’s because of it, making the poor man jump slightly. Taking a deep breath, Liam gets control of himself. This isn’t about him, he has to remember that. He gives Harry a gentle smile, nodding to show support and Harry’s eyes return to the blanket.

“Um, yeah, Gary was tall, thin, blond, dark eyes. He had a tattoo on his neck, a snake.”

“Good Harry, this is good, this helps, you are doing really well,” the detective encourages. “What about Brian?”

Taking another deep breath, Harry swallows loudly before continuing.

“Same height as me, a little heavier, actually a lot heavier, he was big into body building. Dark
short hair, dark eyes, dark skin. I don’t know how old he was, but he was loud. He had a loud laugh and he has a scar on his temple,” he motions at his own face, vaguely illustrating the area.

“Ok, awesome. We will get started on this. There must be some security video from the buses. That might give us an idea where you first got on the bus and coupled with your descriptions, we can go from there,” she tells Harry, staring at him kindly. “But if you remember anything, no matter what, please call me and tell me. We want to get these men off the street Harry, to keep you safe. But we have to find them first. I’m going to head out and get started. Again, please do not hesitate to call.”

With that she hurry from the room, eager to follow the lead and Harry starts hyperventilating on the bed suddenly, doubling over at the middle. Liam leaps from the chair and sits next to him on the bed, pulling him in against his chest and holding him carefully.

“Shhh, it’s ok, it’s over, she’s left,” he says into the dark hair below his chin and Harry continues to shake and wheeze.

“What if they find me?” He pulls back suddenly, staring into Liam’s face in terror. “What if they find me Liam? What if they find me? What if they find me?”

He repeats the question over and over, panicking more and more with each passing second and Liam has to grasp his face gently but firmly to get his attention, to get him to stop.

“Listen to me, they are getting nowhere near you. Do you hear me? I will make sure of that alright? I will keep you safe,” he promises vehemently, meaning every word even if he doesn’t know how he will do it. “I will keep you safe. It’s going to be ok Harry, I promise.”

Harry’s eyes hold Liam’s in place, searching them for the truth of his words and he must find it because he starts to calm again, sagging against Liam and breathing hard.

Liam doesn’t even hesitate, he just gently lays Harry back against the bed while he turns so he can lay next to him. Harry cuddles right in immediately, curling so his head is on Liam’s chest, his arm tight around his middle. Liam pulls the blankets up over both of them and wraps his arms around Harry’s bony shoulders.

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Later in the day the doctor makes another valiant effort to convince Harry to drink an Ensure. She brings chocolate this time. He refuses to try it, but he agrees to sip some broth in exchange. Seeing a stalemate forming, she leaves with the unopened shake.

Only seconds after she leaves there is a bit of a commotion in the hallway and a lot of voices. They had stationed some officers just outside his door for safety and they were in charge of vetting who got in and out of his room.

They made the mistake of attempting to stop Anne from getting in.

“That is my son in there! Get out of my way!” She starts hollering and Harry jumps from the suddenness of the noise.

They were back to lying on the bed facing each other, Harry tucked right into Liam’s chest with his head under his chin, arms tight around Liam’s waist.
There are some more raised voices as the nurse gets involved and explains to the officer who Anne is and Harry presses in closer to Liam the moment the door opens.

She barrels in to the room at full speed, dark hair loose around her face and clothes creased from traveling. Her eyes are wide as she searches for Harry in the pair on the bed. The second she sees him her face crumples, tears dripping down her cheeks and while Harry doesn’t seem to have moved his head, Liam has the sense that he is watching out of the corner of his eye.

“Harry, my baby…” she starts as she moves to the side of the bed he’s on, hands already reaching and Harry jolts away. His breathing picks up speed, heart fluttering under Liam’s hands and his arms tighten around him.

Liam has flashbacks to the ambulance and how Harry had reacted to being touched when he didn’t want to be and quickly puts his hand up to stop her progress. He knew she probably wasn’t going to understand, at least not right now, but he had to do what was necessary to protect Harry, who has his face pressed right into Liam’s shirt now. As though if he can’t see them, then they can’t see him.

“Stop, Anne. Don’t touch him,” he says quickly and she stops. Her face looks flummoxed and her mouth moves slightly as she tries to understand. “Just give him a minute.”

Out of the corner of his eye he sees Gemma standing at the end of the bed, Des beside her, both of them looking at the pair of them and their position with confusion and dislike.

Liam understands their feelings, he does. But he also understands what Harry needs right now better than they do.

“Harry, hey, it’s ok. It’s your mum, sister and dad, that’s all. I told you they would come,” he whispers into the dark hair below his chin and Harry huffs out a breath, fingers twitching on Liam’s back. A few moments later and Harry’s head shifts slightly, turning to look at the people in the room just a little.

“Harry?” Gemma says quietly, voice thick, but she makes no moves to touch him. She just waits to see what he will do.

Harry shifts slightly so he can see her, only one eye exposed and he stares at her, taking in the changes in her appearance that two years of grief have provided. Her make up is smeared, hair knotted back in a loose bun and she’s wearing one of Harry’s old sweatshirts with the collar cut as usual.

Gemma shifts from foot to foot under his scrutiny, smiling at him softly, hopeful and he relaxes just the tiniest bit. Next he moves on to Des, who is alternating his expression from hard and cross towards Liam and confused and impatient with Harry. Liam can feel Harry start to frown and tries to convey to Des that he needs to chill out a little with just his eyebrows. Hard to do considering the situation he knows, but there was no playbook for this sort of thing and right now of all of them in the room, he had the most experience with Harry’s general state of mind.

Des gets the hint after a moment and schools his face into a state of kind neutrality.

“It’s ok son. Just take your time,” he says softly, relaxing his posture and Harry relaxes a tiny bit more.
He finally makes the effort to turn his head more to look at Anne, hair plastered across his face. Liam brushes it away gently, earning him another suspicious look from Des.

Anne hovers at the side of the bed, face still stricken as her hands twitch with her overwhelming desire to touch, to take her child into her arms and comfort him.

He can feel Harry twitching in his arms, the need to be held by his mother warring with the fear and prejudice that are his constant partners right now.

It takes a few, long, agonizing minutes but Harry relaxes more and more as his eyes go to each person in the room a few more times. Finally he rolls back, though he keeps his hands on Liam.

“Let’s sit up yeah?” Liam asks quietly and Harry’s face snaps back to him, blank for a moment but then he nods.

Liam starts to sit up, hand gently on Harry’s back helping him and on instinct Anne’s hands come out to help and Harry jolts away from her again, almost knocking Liam off the other side of the bed. She yanks her hands back immediately at the cold look Harry gives her and starts to cry again.

Quickly righting himself, Liam gently puts a hand on Harry’s cheek and pulls his face around to look at him, giving him a meaningful look.

“Har, hey, listen, she’s your mum, ok? She’s not gonna hurt you. She never meant to hurt you, ok?” He says softly and Harry’s eyes narrow slightly. “Harry, I mean it. You can trust me on this.”

Harry huffs a breath but nods after a moment, though he still pulls in tight against Liam’s side, eyeing Anne warily for a long moment.

“Hi mum,” he says finally, voice soft though his posture is the same. It’s a step in the right direction.

“Hi honey,” she responds tearily. “Would it be ok if I sat down here?” She asks carefully, wiping under her eyes and indicating at the space just below where Harry’s legs are curled up on Liam’s lap. Harry nods once, face still guarded.

“Ok,” she says quietly, sitting down. “Ok.”

“Hey Gem,” Harry says quietly to his sister. “Dad.”

Gemma lets out a half sob, half laugh and smiles at him as best she can and it releases some of the tension in the room. Though it remains awkward.

“We’ve missed you darling,” Anne says quietly, hand coming forward again but she stops herself, putting it on neutral territory on the bed again. Harry watches it carefully, but doesn’t pull away or react. “I could hardly believe it when they called…”

“I’m sure you couldn’t,” Harry cuts her off coldly and the room stills.

“Harry, I told you, we discussed this…” Liam starts, knowing already where he was going with this and why he was reacting so negatively.
“I need to hear it from them,” Harry cuts him off, glancing at him once, face unreadable.

“Hear what from us? What did we do?” Des asks suddenly, voice sharp and impatient and Liam winces.

He knows that Harry’s family probably considered many possibilities of how this reunion could play out on that 11 hour flight, but he doubts it even crossed their minds that Harry would be pissed at them.

“You buried me,” Harry answers simply, voice blank and to the point and Anne pulls in a breath sharply.

The tension refills the room like a thick fog, no one really knowing what to say for a few moments. Like Liam, they never considered that Harry would know about that.

“Harry, son, we didn’t know what else to do. We searched for you for a year. The police told us they believed you were dead, but we still waited for months after,” Des says finally, shock filling his face.

“We didn’t want to honey. We never wanted to admit it was a possibility and even after I still didn’t accept it, didn’t feel like it was true,” Anne says softly. “I still held out hope. I would have held out hope forever.”

“I never believed you were dead Harry. I would have known,” Gemma adds, brows pulled together with sadness, knowing how betrayed he must feel.

Harry processes this quietly, looking down at the blanket for a few moments before moving on to picking at a thread on Liam’s sleeve. But then he seems to decide to choose to believe them as he reaches out a hand and takes Anne’s on the bed and a collective breath in the room is released.

Moments later he lets Anne pull him into a hug and relaxes against her and she grips him with all her might. As though she’s terrified he will vanish again and Liam knows exactly how she feels.

It opens the flood gates as Gemma and Des both end up coming forward to hold on to Harry as well, to feel him and know he is real. When they all finally step back his hair is standing on end and he huffs out a soft laugh at them all, but he resettles against Liam again.

Liam can feel Des’ eyes on him as he does so and suspects a conversation is coming, but nothing is said at the time. Harry relaxes against Liam’s chest, head flopping down as exhaustion washes over him again.

“How long do you have to stay in the hospital?” Gemma asks from her perch at the end of the bed. She had moved Liam’s feet to get the space with a smirk on her lips.

“I’ve been wanting to leave all day, but the doctor is now saying maybe tomorrow morning,” Harry replies, clearly annoyed.

“They just want to make sure you’re ok honey and so do we,” Anne replies, squeezing Harry’s hand. “It gives us some time to get a car down here and get you some clothes to get you home in.”

Harry tenses slightly and Liam knows another difficult topic is about to be broached.
“I want to stay at Liam’s,” Harry declares, leaving little room for argument.

Liam decides to mitigate the situation before the tension returns.

“You all can stay at my place. Then we are close to the hospital and his doctor here and it might be best for his safety. Since my address is unknown.”

“Fair enough,” Gemma nods. “But Harry, you will still need some stuff I’m sure.”

“He can borrow some of my clothes for now, we will figure it out more later on. One thing at a time yeah?” Liam points out and Gemma nods, agreeing easily.

“What is being said on the investigation? Have they got any leads?” Des blurts out suddenly and it’s Liam’s turn to give him a dirty look.

“No, they are working on it,” Liam replies tersely as Harry tenses up beside him.

Des, thankfully, realizes quickly that Harry really doesn’t want to talk about that subject and drops it and Harry relaxes again.

“Tell me what’s happened since I’ve been gone,” he says softly. And they do. Each taking a turn to fill him in on their lives, keeping it as light as possible and Harry asks the odd question here and there. It’s not until after an hour when he frowns and cocks his head to the side, looking at them curiously. “Why were you in Los Angeles?”

“I… did Liam not tell you?” Anne asks hesitantly, looking at Liam with wide eyes and he shrugs slightly. He wasn’t sure if he should tell Harry or not. Unsure how he would take the news.

Harry looks at her and then at Liam suspiciously.

“What?” He demands.

“You’ve been nominated for an Oscar honey. The ceremony is this Sunday. They wanted us to come accept it for you if you win,” Anne tells him carefully and Harry tenses slightly in surprise.

“An Oscar for what? For being abducted?” He asks incredulously.

“No, for Dunkirk. The release got delayed for a year because of production issues,” Liam answers this time. “You’re nominated for Best Supporting Actor.” Liam realizes suddenly that Harry would likely be part of the In Memoriam section this year, having been omitted last year because despite the funeral, the academy apparently wanted to wait another year to make it official.

Harry huffs a sarcastic laugh, closing his eyes slowly.

“Out of pity, I’m sure,” he spits out.

All of them stare at him silently. This was a new Harry. One they all realized in that moment they were going to have to get used to. He was dark, sarcastic, suspicious and angry. Not to mention anxious, skittish and prone to forgetting where he was.

“I… I don’t think so Harry,” Gemma says after a moment. “You deserve it and I’m not just saying that as your sister. You got critical acclaim for your performance.”
Harry looks down at the blanket sadly.

“I barely even remember filming it. It seems so long ago,” he whispers.

“I know honey,” Anne says quietly, squeezing his hand again. “Look, you are tired. Maybe you should rest a little while. We will all stay with you.”

Harry nods and nudges Liam to get him to lie down, quickly settling in against him. Liam swears he can feel Des’ eyes glaring at him, but doesn’t look at him.

Harry dozes off quickly, his body weak and tired. Liam follows him not long after. The other three silently watch over them, quietly discussing plans that would begin in the morning.
Chapter 6

Day 2

The sun is pressing incessantly against Liam’s eyelids when he wakes up and his stomach feels hollow. It occurs to him that he ate absolutely nothing yesterday, only having a cup of tea with Harry.

Harry, who is pressed against his chest with his arms snaked around Liam’s waist still. Judging by his grip and the trembling under Liam’s hands, it’s clear he’s awake.

Harry’s palpable fear is enough to make Liam come to full consciousness and he pays more attention to the room. A quiet conversation is going on and it’s clear that Des is agitated.

“They better find those sons of bitches before I do, I will kill them for what they did to Harry,” he growls out in a harsh whisper and Anne shushes him.

“You heard the detective, just let them do their job. We just have to keep quiet for now. We don’t want this getting out to the media,” Anne whispers back.

Clearly this conversation has been going on for some time and Harry’s been listening while pretending to sleep. He’s upset by his father’s anger, fearful of it, and Liam tightens his hold to try to comfort him. Harry was prone to his own anger, but he didn’t seem to handle it well coming from someone else. Liam has a pretty good idea as to why.

“What are we gonna do about tomorrow? We were supposed to be there for the ceremony. Our sudden absence coupled with all of the talk about the police being at Liam’s house is bound to start rumors,” Gemma points out softly.

Just another thing Liam forgot about. What with his lack of cell phone and therefore social media. He had assumed there would be interest in the police presence at his house, but Gemma is right. If Harry’s family doesn’t show up at the Oscars, having left in a hurry, talk is going to really start ramping up.

“We will just say it was too difficult or we had an illness in the family,” Anne suggests.

“Right mum, because saying it was a family emergency isn’t going to make this any worse,” Gemma retorts.

“Don’t snap at your mother Gemma. Who cares what they think or say? If the police are any good at their jobs they will have found the bastards by the end of today,” Des says in a louder voice, no longer concerned about letting Harry rest apparently. “Though what am I saying, if they were any good at their jobs they would have found him two years ago and stopped this from happening at all.”

“They did do their jobs back then dad and have been ever since. You heard the detective, this is random. They don’t think there is any connection between Harry and the suspects. So there was no trail they could follow. They did their best,” Gemma points out and Liam frankly agrees with Des more. He always thought more could be done to find Harry all this time.
Harry snuffles against his chest, body tense and still trembling. Liam decides it’s time to put an end to the arguing since it clearly wasn’t doing Harry any good.

He sighs loudly and opens his eyes. He starts shuffling his legs to indicate that he’s awake, but none of them take notice.

“Thereir best? This was their best? Leaving him to rot in that hole for two years? To find his own way out because they gave up after six months? They couldn’t be arsed to keep going because they didn’t know where to look?” Des all but yells now and Harry jumps, whimpering once.

“Des! Stop, you’re scaring him,” Anne jumps in. She’s right next to the bed and leaning down over Harry now, one hand on his shoulder.

“Shit, son, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you,” Des says in a much quieter tone, but Harry continues to tremble.

“Maybe you should step out for a minute, go cool off,” Liam suggests bluntly, not bothering to look at the man because he knows he will get another dirty look.

“Or maybe you should just bog off. He’s not even your family Liam. I don’t even understand why you are still here or why you think you can just hold on to him like that,” Des retorts, anger back in his voice and Harry cowers despite his position.

Anger boils in Liam’s veins, but he controls it. He doesn’t want to make Harry scared of him as well, so he takes a deep breath before he responds.

“I will leave when he tells me to leave,” he answers calmly, squeezing Harry gently.

“He doesn’t know what he wants, the doctor even said that. So why don’t I tell you, it’s time to go. Family only,” Des replies snidely and Harry tenses again, hiccuping slightly.

Liam lived with him long enough to know what that sound meant and what was coming next. Seconds later Harry is scrambling to sit up, stomach already starting to heave, while Liam sits up fast as well. He reaches for the bin they keep nearby for such occasions and gets it in place before Harry vomits into it.

It’s a horrible retching sound he makes, stomach mostly empty anyway and he coughs harshly afterward, face wincing.

Liam gently pulls his hair back from his face with one hand and rubs his back with the other. He glares at Des the entire time, who looks only slightly guilty at what he caused.

“Well this isn’t how we want to be starting the day,” the doctor says suddenly, appearing out of nowhere as she hurries up to the side of the bed. She places a hand on Harry’s forehead as though checking for fever. “I’ll get you something for the nausea, but I am going to suggest that everyone in the room learns how to keep a cool head. This isn’t about you, it’s about him.” She gives Des a scolding look and goes out the door. Only then does he look reproachful.

Gemma returns from the bathroom, having disappeared a moment earlier, with a damp washcloth that she hands to Harry for him to wipe his mouth. The bin is moved away when he’s done and he slumps sideways into Liam, burying his face into his chest.
“I want to go home,” he whispers so quietly Liam barely hears it and his heart breaks a bit more.

“I know mate, I know,” he replies quietly into Harry’s hair, wrapping his arms around his slight body and cradling him gently.

The doctor returns and adds the promised medication into his IV, letting it trickle down slowly as she assesses him with her eyes.

“I know I said you could probably leave this morning Harry, but I’m concerned about how weak you still are. With you vomiting as well, I think it’s best you stay for another twenty-four hours.”

Like a wilting plant, Harry’s body droops with disappointment and sadness and Liam feels compelled to speak up for him.

“I don’t think being here is helping him though,” he says carefully. “Not that you aren’t doing a good job of trying to help him, but it’s not where he wants to be. I think he would do better if he were somewhere he was comfortable and felt safe.”

He feels Harry tense slightly as he listens, fingers twitching against Liam’s side. The doctor regards him with slightly narrowed eyes, considering his argument.

“It’s what he wants,” Liam adds. “He won’t be far from the hospital if he gets any worse and he promises to reconsider the Ensure drinks when he’s feeling better.”

The doctor’s lips twitch up into a slight smirk.

“Liam, the doctor needs to decide what’s best for Harry. If he needs to stay in for a while, until he’s gained some weight and strength, then that’s that,” Anne says softly.

“You’re right that I need to decide what’s best for Harry and I think what Liam is saying is what’s best. He needs familiarity and comfort right now, but I am still concerned about your current condition Harry. I’d like you to stay at least the morning and we will see how you are doing in a few hours,” she decides finally and Harry turns slightly to nod at her, grateful for her consideration of his opinion on the matter.

“Right, why don’t you try to get some rest? The medication will likely make you feel dozy and I think it would be best for everyone to just relax. Maybe pop down to the cafe to get some tea or coffee while Harry sleeps?” She suggests, indicating towards the three people not currently on the bed with Harry. Somehow, at some point, she had got on board with supporting Liam and his protection of Harry. Probably because he wasn’t the one yelling. “Maybe one of you could bring Liam some tea and a scone? I’m sure he could use it as well.”

Des glowers at that, likely still smarting that Harry was choosing Liam over his own family, but he had his reasons for that. Even if Liam didn’t know what they were right now.

Gemma is the one who decides that the doctor is right and starts herding her parents out of the room.

“We will be back soon honey. Robin is on his way. He can’t wait to see you,” Anne says from the door. Then they are gone and it’s just Harry and Liam again.

“Ok, you heard the doctor. If you do what she says and get some rest, you might get to go home
this afternoon.”

Harry nods eagerly and lays down, leaving space for Liam. However he decides that he’s going need a few minutes first, his own bodily necessities making themselves known.

“Give me a second. I’ll be back,” he says quickly, hurrying off the bed and into the bathroom.

He makes use of the facilities and washes his hands, throwing some cold water on his face. He’s still wearing the same pajamas he was wearing when Harry showed up at his house. He really needs a shower and a shave himself as it’s not just Harry who stinks anymore. It occurs to him then that his own family is probably wondering where in hell he is.

Fuck, they could be scared the same thing has happened to him that happened to Harry. But the police don’t want anyone knowing about Harry. This was problematic.

He heads back out to the room and stops when he sees Harry sitting on the bed with his knees under his chin, face worried and nervous. It’s so sweet yet heartbreakingly and pain shoots through Liam’s chest.

“I’m sorry babe. I just needed to use the bathroom. I’m back now. Did you want any help going in there yourself?” He asks and Harry considers it a moment. He nods finally and it is a long, slow shuffle in there.

He waves off Liam’s offer to leave him in private and just heads to the sink where he rinses his mouth with cold water, throwing some on his face like Liam had.

The short trip is enough to make him wobbly on his feet and Liam all but carries him back to the bed. His eyes droop from the use of energy and the medication and he settles back against the pillows as soon as Liam is sitting next to him.

Before lying down, Liam reaches for the hospital phone, intending to at least let someone know he was alive and fine and would explain later. He decides to call Ruth. She was generally the most level headed in his family.

“Hello? Liam?” She answers, voice a little panicked.

“Hey, yeah, it’s me, listen…” he starts and she cuts him off immediately.

“Liam James Payne where the hell have you been! You had the whole of Surrey’s emergency services at your damn house two nights ago and then you just vanished! Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been? Where the hell are you right now? Is something wrong? Are you hurt?”

“Ruth! Ruth, stop, listen, I’m fine, ok, I’m fine. It’s a really long story and I promise you I will tell you later, soon, but I just can’t right now,” he says, hoping she will accept this because she was quickly proving his belief in her calmness wrong.

“Yes you can,” Harry says quietly behind him, words slurring slightly. “She won’t tell anyone, I trust her.”

“I… alright, apparently I can tell you,” Liam starts again, feeling warmed at Harry’s words. Ruth cuts him off again.
“Who is that with you? Why are you calling from the hospital?”

“Shut up and I’ll tell you, but you have to promise me you will not tell anyone else. No one, not a soul,” he warns and she grumbles slightly.

“What in hell Liam? Have you gone into hiding or something? Is the mafia after you? Because I cannot see what could be such a big secret,” she huffs out, insulted that he thinks she would break his confidence.

“Ruth, I’m serious,” he warns again.

“Fine, what is going on? This better be good,” she warns right back.

“Harry’s alive,” he says bluntly.

“Yes, Liam, I know you still believe that. Despite what you might have us think,” she retorts.

“Ruth, it’s not a theory, it’s fact. He showed up in my kitchen two nights ago, which is why the calvary was at my house. I’m at the hospital with him right now, have been ever since,” he says more quietly and he hears her sharp intake of breath.

“What?” She whispers harshly. “He’s… he’s actually alive? What?”

“Yeah, again, it’s a long story, but it needs to be kept quiet for his safety. So I need you to keep this to yourself for now. You can’t even tell Thomas.”

“Yeah, Liam, I fucking get it. Holy shit,” she breathes, and then she comes back to herself. “Is he ok? Where the hell has he been? What happened?”

“He’s… well he’s alive. It’s going to be a long road of recovery,” he says, glancing over his shoulder at Harry who has fallen asleep, hand reaching for Liam. “He was abducted and went through absolute hell, the kind I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy, but he’s here. He’s still alive and that’s what matters right now.”

He hears her sniffle quietly, becoming emotional over the news and he understands.

“Yes, it is,” she agrees with a thick voice. “I promise I won’t tell anyone, but I should let you know that there is a lot of rumors and chatter going on about you disappearing the last few days. The media knows all about the police and ambulance at your house. Is there something I can do about that? Tweet something about how you’re fine?”

“No, probably best to just stay quiet right now. The police don’t want to arouse any more suspicion or anything, just keep to yourself for now. You can tell mum and dad you talked to me and that I’m fine. Tell them it was all a big mistake and I set off the alarm by accident or something.” He hated to lie to his own family, but it was in the best interest of Harry’s safety, so it was a good reason.

“Ok, will do. Let me know if you need anything yeah?”

“Will do. We’re hoping to go back to my house later today. That’s where Harry wants to stay so I’ll text you later. I forgot my cell at home or I would have sent you a message sooner,” he says sheepishly. He still felt stupid for that mistake, but it was understandable considering the situation.
“Well I will warn you now, there will be around four hundred messages waiting for you. Only half
of them from me.”

Liam huffs a quiet laugh.

“Uh huh, alright, I’ll talk to you later. Harry needs to sleep so I should get off the phone.”

“Ok, keep me updated though,” she pleads and he remembers just how much she liked Harry. They
had always got on and she had been the most understanding of Liam’s devastation when he
disappeared.

“Will do, talk soon,” he replies and hangs up after she says goodbye.

He carefully settles on the bed next to Harry, resolutely ignoring his grumbling stomach and pulls
the frail man into his arms. Harry doesn’t fight him, just sighs softly as he snuggles in and latches
his arms around Liam’s waist.

Liam doesn’t sleep, doesn’t need to. Instead he just enjoys the feeling of having Harry in his arms
again.

Harry is alive.

***

It was incredible what could happen in the span of three hours that hadn’t happened in two fucking
years.

It’s not even noon when the detective pops in to say that they have made an arrest. Apparently,
Gary had been caught sniffing around the bus depot looking for Harry. Liam almost chokes on his
scone hearing this. It seemed so fast.

She believes that he will flip on his partner pretty quickly. His arrest has also given them a location
and the police are combing over it with a rapidly amassing press representation hovering nearby.

The news reports are all theorizing that Harry’s body has been found. Hence the arrest and police
presence at the home and back at Harry’s house. They strangely haven’t made the connection to
the furor at Liam’s house a few days earlier. The two events not being matched up just yet.
Apparently their biggest concern is how Harry died.

The fandom is full of rumors though. At least a few of them have guessed at the truth, but they are
being shot down by those who think they are raising false hope.

“We don’t believe we have to wait until we have the second suspect in custody before we release
any information. Unless you would like us to wait longer?” The detective asks.

“Let’s see if I win the fucking Oscar. We’ll announce I’m alive then,” Harry says sarcastically, but
Gemma tilts her head in thought.

“Actually Harry, that’s not a bad idea. It would be the easiest and fastest way to get the
information out. Cleanly and ahead of the press and paparazzi. We would decide what’s said and
it’s in a completely separate location from where you actually are.”
Harry looks at her like she’s lost her mind for a moment, but then he starts to think about it more and his expression changes.

“How would we do it though? Clearly I’m not going to Los Angeles. Do they even know you left and won’t be attending?” He asks and she shakes her head.

Within seconds a plan starts hatching in Liam’s mind. There’s a person they could likely rely on to help.

“I have an idea, but let’s just wait and see, yeah?” Liam interjects, working out details quickly in his head. He doesn’t want to tell anyone just yet. He needed to be sure the person he was thinking of could be relied on first.

Harry frowns at him slightly but nods a moment later, knowing full well there was no point in pressing Liam on telling them anything judging by his face.

At lunch, the doctor returns with another hopeful expression and four fresh bottles of Ensure. Seeing that bringing one flavor at a time was getting nowhere, she decides to bring four options to let Harry choose one himself.

“I’ve got the chocolate again, since you didn’t try that one last night,” she says as she indicates towards the first bottle, showing each like she is a TV game show model. “And this is banana, this is a nice berry medley and finally a strawberry one. Which would you like to try?” She asks eagerly.

Gemma snorts quietly at the expression on Harry’s face. It’s a mixture of annoyance, disgust and disbelief at her determination to push these shakes on him.

“Harry, you promised me you would drink them in exchange for going home today and I do expect you to continue to do so at home. I will be checking up on you,” she looks pointedly at Liam who tries to look innocent.

Sighing with resignation, Harry vaguely waves at the banana one. A choice no one is surprised at.

Satisfied, she opens it, pops a straw in and hands it to him. He lifts it to his nose with two shaky hands, taking a suspicious sniff before shrugging slightly and sipping some of it. He looks genuinely surprised when he discovers that it’s not that bad and takes another sip.

No one is more pleased with this development than the doctor though, her shoulders sagging with visible relief.

“Alright, I’m assuming you are still determined to leave today?” She asks him carefully and he nods eagerly.

“Actually, I think it might be for the best. So we can get him home and safe before the media stakes out the hospital,” Anne points out and everyone nods in agreement, realizing that she’s right.

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“Alright, I’m assuming you are still determined to leave today?” She asks him carefully and he nods eagerly.

“Actually, I think it might be for the best. So we can get him home and safe before the media stakes out the hospital,” Anne points out and everyone nods in agreement, realizing that she’s right.

“Ok, your vitals are good and your blood pressure has stabilized, but like I said I will be checking up on you. I’m going to give you a chart showing how many calories I want you to try to take in each day, with some suggestions on foods that will help with that and most importantly, you need to take it easy. Rest Harry, ok?” She stares him down until his nods and agrees. “I’m also sending you home with a course of antibiotics and some pain killers, but only if you need them.”
He nods more meaningfully this time.

“Thank you,” he says softly.

“You’re welcome,” she replies gently, smiling at him warmly. “Right, I’ll be back in a few minutes with a few things for you to wear home, since the police took your clothes for evidence, as well as the discharge paperwork.”

While they wait for her, Harry drinks the rest of the shake slowly, and a nurse comes in to remove the IV, heart monitor leads and various medical paraphernalia.

The doctor returns with a pair of jogging pants and a sweatshirt with the hospital logo on them, items from the gift shop apparently, and a pair of flip flops that are kept around for podiatry patients.

Liam helps him get up to standing and Harry glances at his sister and parents nervously a few times and they seem to realize that he wants some privacy getting dressed. Des huffs an annoyed noise, but acquiesces when Gemma pushes him out the door.

They take their time, starting with the pants that Liam pulls up under the cover of the hospital gown. He gets the sweatshirt over Harry’s head before they remove the gown. Harry quickly slides the shirt down to hide his body again, but Liam sees the bones, the scars and the pale skin. He looks shrunken like a famine victim and the butterfly tattoo is concave on his stomach. He says nothing though, keeps his face even without reaction because he knows it would bother Harry.

The shoes cause both of them to laugh softly. They look ridiculous and really aren’t that practical, but it’s the only choice they have.

There’s a knock at the door when they are done and Gemma pops her head in.

“It’s ok, he’s dressed and ready,” Liam tells her, helping Harry to start the shuffle to the door.

“Perfect, mum’s called a car. It’s outside already and I brought a wheelchair to help you get down there,” she says as she wheels it into the room.

Harry sighs in relief and accepts it willingly, sitting and relaxing back against Liam when he starts to push him out of the room. Anne and Des meet them in the hall, the promised medications and papers in their hands and they are led through some back halls to a service elevator. The doctor had mentioned setting this up when she brought Harry’s clothes. It was early afternoon, there were a lot of people about and someone was bound to recognize Liam at the very least and then Harry. So instead they use the staff entrance and are able to scurry out to the car quickly. Anne hops into the very back of the black Range Rover, Gemma beside her and Liam all but lifts Harry up to help him into the middle row of seats, letting him settle up against the window so he can see. He sits himself in the middle and Harry almost immediately leans against him while Des slides in the other side.

The ride is quiet, the driver silent as he navigates his way through the London streets and past the airport. Past where Harry was held for two years. Harry’s hand squeezes Liam’s as they go through Hounslow, something that was unavoidable to get to Surrey, and Liam squeezes back.

When they get out on the open highway he relaxes again, leaning more towards the window to watch the sky and the scenery with eyes wide.
The streets become even more familiar the closer they get to Liam’s house and he finds he’s just as eager to get there as Harry. It felt good to be going there on such a positive errand. Not to sit and sulk and hide away.

Things are thankfully quiet outside the gates, the media having left to go follow the police investigation in Hounslow, and the driver pulls them around to the side for extra privacy. Liam can’t help but be mildly amused at the irony that they are going in the same door Harry did.

His dog is there barking as soon as he hears the key in the lock and it gives him such a sense of familiarity that it’s comforting. He’s also glad that he invested in an automatic feeder and water fountain so Winston was ok while he was away, though he suspects there will be a mess in the basement. Harry leans on him, Liam’s one arm around his waist to help him walk and they all pile into the living room and stand awkwardly for a few moments.

“Right, well, make yourselves at home… um… bedrooms are upstairs. If you turn to the left, those are the guest rooms. Just pick one I guess and uh, the kitchen’s over there. I’ll make up a grocery list and have stuff delivered. So if there is anything you want, just let me know,” he says carefully, stilted and Anne and Gemma smile quickly and nod at him.

Harry shifts slightly against him. He looks at the now empty water bottle on the floor, long dried before turning towards Liam.

“Can I have a shower?” He asks carefully, quietly.

“Uh, yeah, of course. I’m sure you really want to,” he replies, thinking that he should really have one as well. But then he realizes, Harry is going to need help. He already can’t stand well on his own and was visibly starting to wilt from the exertion of just getting to the house. “Why don’t I help you?”

Harry nods, closing his eyes slowly, as though relieved that Liam offered.

“Ok well, while you do that, why don’t Gemma and I make up that grocery list Liam? Then maybe we can come up with something nice for tea?” Anne suggests.

“Yeah sure, sounds good. Like I said, just help yourself.”

That leaves Des looking awkward in the middle of the living room, turning slowly until he spots the TV.

“Would it be ok if I popped the news on when you’ve gone upstairs? I want to see what they are saying, but I know you probably don’t Harry,” he asks carefully.

“Yeah, that’s fine dad. Someone should be keeping an eye I suppose,” Harry replies, grateful that his father considered his feelings.

With everything settled, Liam and Harry make their way to the stairs and the exhaustion and pain is clear on his face as Harry looks up them. A bone deep sigh leaves him and Liam barely hesitates before he gently lifts him up bridal style to carry him up the stairs. Harry smirks slightly at him, but looks grateful all the same.
It’s not until they are standing in the room that Liam realizes he brought Harry into his own bedroom, but he had a sense that Harry would likely be staying with him. Judging by Harry’s lack of reaction to the space, he was right.

They shuffle into the master bathroom and Liam gestures for Harry to sit on the toilet lid.

“Right, wait here. I’ll get you some towels and clean clothes to wear, something warm I think. Some socks and maybe some slippers.” Harry dutifully sits with his hands in his lap and watches as Liam completes his tasks. He grabs his warmest hoodie and a long sleeved t-shirt as well as some jogging pants with a draw string since obviously Harry was quite a bit thinner than him now. To the pile he adds some clean underpants, warm socks and a new pair of slippers he got from his mum for Christmas. Harry’s feet were a bit bigger than his, two shoes sizes to be exact, but Liam tended to like his slippers on the floppy side, so his mum always bought them two sizes too big. He hopes that fact wasn’t foreshadowing in any way.

Once he’s got a wardrobe put together, he grabs two big fluffy towels from the linen closet and places them on the towel rod outside the shower.

Happy with that done he turns to Harry and realizes with a start that he’s completely neglected to realize that he will need more than clothes and towels as help. Judging by Harry’s facial expression, he knows it too.

“Right, um, how do you want to do this?” Liam asks awkwardly and Harry glances towards the shower and then back to him. It was clear he really was desperate to get clean and Liam briefly considers offering a bath instead, but decides that would take much longer and more energy out of Harry in the long run.

“Look, Haz, I can just get in with you. I mean, it’s not like I haven’t seen you naked before and it’ll make it easier on you.” He suggests carefully. Harry and naked were a constant partnership through their years of touring. He had never been shy about showing his body, not like he was now, and Liam had secretly always enjoyed watching him strut through the green room bare arsed before or after a show, or on the tour bus. “I’ll keep my pants on, of course, and I’ll just be there to help you stay standing ok?” He didn’t particularly want to get his clothes wet, it would make moving around more difficult and it was impractical. But at the same time, he didn’t want to make Harry uncomfortable or scared by also being nude.

Harry sighs once, glancing at Liam shyly before finally nodding.

“Ok, I’ll get the water going and get down to my pants and then we will get you out of your hospital kit,” he says gently. He figures it’s best to keep a running commentary of what he’s doing and going to do so that Harry knows what’s coming, but also to give him an out, to say he wants to stop or change the plan.

He twists the handles on the tap, testing and retesting the water a few times before he finds a comfortably hot temperature. Then he quickly slips his sweater and t-shirt off, leaving them in a pile in the corner, adding his pajama pants on top a moment later, leaving him in only his black shorts. He waits a few moments, giving Harry the chance at an out again before nodding at him and receiving a quick one in return.

He lifts Harry up onto his feet, carefully helping him slide the sweatshirt off, adding it to the pile of his own clothes. The flip flops are quickly pulled off and then Liam puts his hands on Harry’s thin waist to keep him upright while Harry pushes his pants down, kicking a little to get them fully
Liam keeps his eyes carefully trained over Harry’s shoulder and Harry does his very best to avoid eye contact.

“You ok?” Liam asks quietly and Harry nods, trying to look determined, but instead looking lost and scared. “Ok.”

Sliding an arm around Harry’s back they shuffle over to the shower door and in under the hot stream. Instantly Harry forgets his modesty and Liam and everything else in favor of basking in the water. He turns his face up into it and lets it course over his shoulders. Liam just stands behind him and holds his waist steady, letting him enjoy it. Such a simple thing that he had never even considered not having and Harry had been without it for so long.

Once he’s got his fill of the water for the moment, Harry glances over his shoulder at Liam and then looks down at the bottle of shampoo. He tries to pick it up, but his hands shake and Liam quickly changes the plan.

“Here, just hang on to the soap shelf. I’ll do your hair, it might be easier.”

Harry nods with relief and does as he’s told, tilting his head back as Liam pours a large dollop of shampoo into his hand and starts massaging it into his scalp. After having Harry’s dirty smelling hair under his nose almost constantly for the last two days, he had to admit it was nice to finally wash it. Harry sags slightly as he relaxes into the touch, trusting Liam when he seems unable to trust anyone else. It was a heady thing to take on, to be that person for Harry, but Liam was more than happy to take on the role because he would do anything for Harry, no matter what.

Once he’s scrubbed it well, he guides Harry’s head under the water letting the lather wash away down the drain. He gently runs his fingers through the strands, rinsing the shampoo and trying to loosen as many tangles as he can.

After a moment’s deliberation, he decides to give it another shampoo before he puts in conditioner, just to get it really squeaky clean. Harry doesn’t complain or say anything when Liam picks up the shampoo again, just tilts his head back and lets him scrub away the rest of the dirt and traces of the last two years.

When that’s rinsed he gently massages in some conditioner, working at more of the tangles until he’s got them all and rinses away the excess.

With that done, he picks up a clean washcloth and lathers soap into it and starts working on Harry’s back, shoulders, down his arms. He’s happy for the water because it hides the hot tears dripping down his cheeks as he sees the damage two years of malnutrition and abuse have done to a once perfect and beautiful body.

Harry seems to sense his upset though, turning once his back is done and standing in front of Liam shaking with his face haunted, full of sorrow. The trauma is written into every angry line on his skin and in his eyes. Forgetting the soapy washcloth and the water, Liam just steps forward and pulls Harry into his arms. Holding him tightly and pressing his nose into Harry’s shoulder. Harry slides his arms around Liam’s waist, holding on as tight as he can and leans on him.

They stay this way for a long while, long enough that their skin starts to prune and the temperature of the water starts to cool. When Harry’s trembling becomes shivering, Liam quickly turns up the heat on the water and steps back to carry on washing, to get him cleaned up and into warm clothes as fast as possible.
He goes over his face, neck, chest and stomach before turning Harry to sit on the bench in the shower, kneeling down to wash his legs and his feet. He resolutely keeps his eyes on his task to keep from embarrassing Harry or seeing the rest of the scars on his hips. Harry huddles in on himself, arms around his middle and eyes elsewhere.

Once that’s done, he helps Harry stand again and they both know there is only one area left, but neither says anything. Liam just helps him turn around, wrapping his hands around Harry’s waist again to keep him upright and steady while Harry completes the rest of the task himself, whimpering from pain a few times, tears being masked by the water again.

When he’s finally done and rinsed clean, Liam turns the water off with one hand while holding Harry with the other and helps guide him out onto the plush cream bathmat. He grabs one of the towels and quickly wraps it around his shoulders to keep the chill out. Harry is already shivering though. His teeth chatter loudly in the quiet, steamy room.

He grabs the other towel and starts working on his hair, trying to get out as much water as possible before tossing it to the side. He rubs Harry’s shoulders and back, using the towel around him to absorb what was on his skin before grabbing the second towel again and drying his legs.

Harry now wobbling dangerously from exhaustion, Liam quickly guides him to sit on the toilet again and grabs the clean clothes. He helps Harry get his feet and legs into the pants, getting them up to his thighs before standing him up for a moment to pull them the rest of the way on. Repeating the process with the jogging pants. Back on the toilet, Harry shivers more violently and Liam hurries to get the long sleeved shirt and hoodie on him. He then kneels to get the socks and slippers into place.

He decides that bed is the best place for him right now and helps Harry out of the bathroom, where Gemma stands awkwardly at the door. She glances at Liam’s wet pants once, but says nothing. When she sees the direction they are heading she hurries forward and pulls the blankets back, helping Liam get Harry under them and pulling them right up to his chin. Harry immediately reaches for Liam, wanting him to get in there with him. But he’s still soaking wet and honestly would like to quickly suds himself down as well after two days in the hospital, just so that both of them are clean.

“Harry, I’m gonna quickly shower too and get dried off. Then I’ll be here with you,” he says softly and Harry frowns but doesn’t balk.

“I’ll stay with you while he does that,” Gemma offers and Harry relaxes a little, nodding. She quickly circles the bed and settles beside him on top of the covers, doing her best not to encroach too much, letting him come closer if he wants to. She notices the remote to the TV on the bedside table and snags it. “I think there’s an episode of Bake Off on right now. Do you want to watch that while Liam showers?”

Harry glances at her and then the TV and then Liam before he finally nods at her.

Once they are settled, the voices of Paul Hollywood and Mary Berry filling the room, Liam grabs some clean clothes for himself and a towel. He hurries into the bathroom again and turns the water back on. He manages to get his soggy pants off and steps back under the stream before he breaks down. For the past two days he’s felt elated, on top of the world. He’s been so happy that Harry is alive and that he’s here with him and wants to be close to and taken care of by him, that he hadn’t really taken in the darker side of it all. He knew what had happened more or less, but he hadn’t
imagined it. He hadn’t witnessed it fully until he saw Harry’s body. The pain was so clear in every mark and it made it seem so much more real, so much more horrific to see it spelled out in angry red welts and scars. Bruises that were black like ink and pale grey skin with bones poking through sharply.

He cries leaning on the wall for a long moment, letting himself have this time and this reaction while he’s alone because he knows he needs to get his shit together for when he’s back with Harry.

When he feels he can regain control he starts washing himself. Quickly scrubbing away two days’ worth of hospital before he shuts the water off, dries and gets dressed at lightning speed. Before he steps out he quickly brushes his teeth, digging in the drawer for a new toothbrush for Harry that he puts in the holder next to his own.

When he steps back out into the bedroom, Harry and Gemma haven’t moved, both of them watching the TV idly while a contestant’s bread sculpture slowly crumbles with a few quips from Sue.

Despite it being a struggle, Harry is determinately staying awake and turns towards Liam as soon as he hears him. Liam quickly grabs his cell phone, unplugging it from the charger and heads over to the bed.

Gemma looks at him sadly and starts to get up to clear space for him, but Liam just motions for her to move over, and Harry follows her with some help. Liam slides in on his other side, pulling the covers back over both of them. Gemma smiles at him, happy to be a part of this, even when Harry immediately curls up against Liam, head on his shoulder and arm across his chest. He’s still shivering slightly, but it starts to slow down as Liam’s body gives off heat.

He takes a deep breath before he unlocks his phone and almost chokes when he sees the number 734 in a red bubble on his texting app. His sister wasn’t kidding when she said he would have a lot of messages.

Harry huffs a laugh from below Liam’s chin, clearly looking at the screen as well.

“You might want to check those,” he says sleepily and Liam laughs. “How many are from your sisters?”

Gemma leans over to look as well and laughs herself.

“I’m gonna guess at least 90% are from Ruth alone,” she giggles and Harry laughs again.

Liam taps his finger on the app and the list of conversations comes up. Ruth has sent 245 messages, his mum has sent 132, Nicola is up for 127 and Louis comes in at 120, while the rest are from a mix of people: Niall, Zayn, a few mates, Julian and his dad.

“Ruth is the most, yes, but she warned me she would be. The rest are my mum, Nicola and Louis as the top contenders,” Liam laughs, tapping on Ruth’s name.

He doesn’t bother reading the messages, he pretty much knows what they will say. He just sends one saying that they are home and all is well.

He does the same with his mum and Nicola, just saying that he’s home, everything is fine and all will be explained in the coming days.
That leaves Louis whose messages become increasingly panicked as they go on. Until he seems to conclude that Liam has found out about Harry’s death and offed himself. He starts threatening to come over if he doesn’t hear from Liam by 3pm today. Liam looks at the clock, it’s 2:54.

“Can we tell him?” Harry asks softly and Liam startles from it. He half thought Harry was asleep.

“We can, if you want. The choice is yours,” Liam answers and a moment later Harry laughs once.

“We should just send a selfie and see what he does,” he laughs and Liam can’t help but chuckle himself.

“That would be cruel Harry. Hilarious, but cruel. I think we should tell him first and then send the selfie. No doubt he will demand one, but at least he will be prepared for it.”

He quickly taps out a message to Louis and sends it:

I have good news and amazing news. The good news is, I’m not dead. The amazing news is that neither is Harry. Don’t believe the media. I’ve been gone because I’ve been at the hospital with him. And no, I’m not joking. We just got home. I forgot my phone here and the police didn’t want us telling anyone until today. But still, we are keeping it quiet for the time being so please do not tell anyone.

The message is read pretty quickly and the bubble with three dots indicating the receiver is typing comes up and disappears about ten times, as though Louis is trying to find words.

“Picture?” Harry asks.

“Yeah, I think he’s gonna need one,” Liam replies, opening the app.

Harry is already cuddled in close so it’s not hard to get both of their faces in, though Harry has his hand up on Liam’s chest so only his nose upward is showing. But it’s probably the best type of picture to start with. It’s clear that it’s Harry, but the majority of the damage is hidden, though his eyes are still dull and sunken and his skin pale.

He’s about to send it when Louis finally replies, one word only and a lot of punctuation:

What????????????????????????????????????

Liam sends the picture, a little flurry of nerves in his chest, and a strange sense that this just made it all so much more real.

He watches Louis receive it and knows what the next question is going to be.

“Would you be ok with him coming to visit?” He asks carefully and Harry nods against his shoulder. “Ok good, because he’s probably already hurrying out the door right now.”

See you soon.
Really, they should have waited until Harry had had a nap before responding to Louis and letting him come to visit. Harry is out cold not three minutes after Liam sends the last reply, but it will take Louis at least an hour to get to Surrey if he’s lucky with traffic.

In the meantime, Anne comes upstairs and laughs at the three of them on the bed before letting him know what was on the grocery list and asking if there was anything he wanted.

Gemma starts to worry at having a delivery person coming to the house. They could easily tell the press that the Styles family was staying with Liam Payne and that could bring all kinds of insanity down on them.

“I could ask my sister Ruth to get it and bring it over?” Liam ponders. It seemed the most sensible solution since she did already know about Harry.

“That’s a good idea,” Gemma whispers happily, the conversation being kept quiet to avoid waking Harry.

And so, Liam spends ten minutes typing out an email to Ruth with the grocery list after texting her with a heads up and getting her approval. It was a good thing she lived close by because he senses they will be needing her help quite a lot over the coming days.

While they wait for Louis, Ruth and Robin’s arrivals, they start another episode of Bake off and Anne brings one of the chairs by the window up to the side of the bed and puts her feet up. Twenty minutes later, Des comes upstairs, surveys the scene with a laugh and takes the other chair.

They are just about to announce Star Baker when the doorbell starts ringing, repeatedly, followed by heavy knocking.

“Louis’ here,” Liam says idly, a calm contrast to his friends battering of his front door.

“I’ll get him,” Des says with a laugh as he heads out the door and downstairs.

Harry doesn’t move through any of this. He’s completely out and Liam worries at Louis waking him up too harshly since Harry clearly didn’t do well when he first woke up.

He doesn’t get time to come up with a solution though before Louis is there with Niall beside him and the two of them just stand at the end of the bed, halted by their shock as they stare at the sleeping man on Liam’s chest.

Liam quietly puts his finger to his lips to indicate that they shouldn’t wake Harry, but neither one acknowledge the action. They are too busy staring at Harry.

Niall moves first, whispering ‘Jesus Christ’ before his hand comes up to press against his mouth. It seems to shake Louis out of his own trance. His face crumples slightly as a tear snakes down his cheek and his hand comes up to quickly swipe it away. It’s a shock for Liam, who hasn’t seen Louis cry since his mother’s funeral.

Liam glances at Harry, though he can really only see his ear and some dark hair, but he hasn’t moved and his body is still relaxed.

“The other night, when the emergency services were here, I found him in my kitchen. He just showed up and used the spare key,” Liam whispers and Niall comes back to life again.

“They said he was in Hounslow. They caught one of the guys, but they haven’t said they found Harry,” he whispers back, eyes still on Harry’s face.

“I know. We’ve kept it quiet for his safety, until they caught the guys and to keep Haz from having to deal with the media and public. It would be too much for him, he’s very skittish and frightened still.” Liam reflexively tightens his arms around Harry, reassurance that he’s there and safe.

“I can imagine,” Louis retorts. “He’s so thin.”

“Yeah, it’s going to be a long recovery,” Liam says sadly, leaning his cheek against Harry’s forehead. Louis gives him a curious look at the action, but says nothing.

“ Took two years for him to get this way,” Niall replies. “So yeah, it’ll take a bit for him to recover too.”

Louis finally moves from the end of the bed, walking around to be closer and kneeling down beside it to get a closer look.

Harry’s instincts kick in sensing an approaching person and he tenses, eyes snapping open the moment Louis is there. This causes Louis to fall backward in surprise while Harry jolts back away himself, thumping into Gemma. As soon as he hits her he sits up fast and whirls to look at her, which just leads him to clamber into Liam as fast as possible, pressing in tight against his side with his knees curled up under his chin.

“Hey, hey! Harry, shh,” Liam says quickly, grabbing his attention. “It’s just Louis, ok? You said he could come visit. It’s ok. Niall is here too.”

Harry’s eyes are wide and wild again and it’s clear he’s forgotten everything. Liam just waits while he processes, head twitching as he goes from face to face in the room. Gemma had moved away and was ready to get up off the bed if necessary. His eyes keep returning to Liam at intervals.

“Harry look at me, it’s ok. You’re at my house. You got out of the hospital today, remember?” Liam says calmly. Harry’s green eyes search his face rapidly. They flick back to Louis again, who to his credit, remains stock still with his hands in the air while Harry assesses him thoroughly.

Harry wilts a moment later, having remembered it all and accepted his surroundings as reality again.

“Sorry,” he whispers, curling up against Liam again.

“It’s alright,” Liam replies, rubbing his shoulder gently. “Let me sit up, yeah?”

Harry nods and gives him some room and Louis finally drops his hands.

They shuffle into position and then Harry finally acknowledges the two new guests in the room.
“Hi,” he says shyly, glancing between the two of them.

Louis awkwardly stands, shifting his weight from foot to foot a few times before he turns and sits on the bed near Liam’s feet.

“Hi yourself. It’s really good to see you mate,” Louis says through a thick throat. “Really good.”

Harry nods at him, giving him a small smile.

Liam glances at Niall and sees him staring with a face full of pity at Harry’s now revealed scars on his neck and wrists. Harry notices as well and looks down sadly, pulling the sleeves of the hoodie down to cover his hands and Niall shakes his head, clearing it and fixing his face.

“We’ve missed you, a lot,” Niall says softly.

Louis nods in agreement, glancing at Niall before turning back to Harry.

“Any chance of a hug? I think I might need it to believe this is real,” he asks softly and Harry glances at Liam, as though expecting him to have the answer.

“It’s ok,” Liam tells him, knowing that Harry will trust that he wouldn’t put him in harm’s way.

Harry turns back to Louis and nods. Louis quickly determines that Liam won’t be moving and so he crawls up the bed to Harry who leans forward and lightly wraps his arms around Louis’ shoulders. Louis hugs him a little tighter, sniffing into Harry’s shoulder. Liam sees when his eyes go wide as he realizes just how thin Harry is, the hoodie doing well to mask what is missing.

He schools his face before sitting back though, only smiling softly at Harry and rubbing his shoulder. He quickly moves to let Niall in and the process is repeated, complete with wide eyes full of shock. Niall isn’t as adept at hiding his feelings from his face though and Harry wilts a little at his expression.

“Sorry mate. I didn’t realize,” Niall says softly.

“Couple of weeks with his mum’s cookin’ and he’ll be fine,” Louis says cheerfully from the end of the bed where he’s retaken his seat.

“Damn right,” Anne adds from the door, having popped her head in. Liam hadn’t even realized she’d left the room. “Ruth’s here with the groceries, could use a few hands. Also, it’s time for your antibiotic Harry.”

“I’ll come help,” Gemma offers, already getting up. “Let these guys reminisce for a few.”

As she leaves, Liam grabs the pill bottle and pops it open, pouring out a dose and handing it to Harry before handing him the glass of water they had for this occasion. Harry dutifully pops the pill into his mouth and swallows it with the water, handing the glass back to Liam.

“How about sommit’ to eat?” Louis asks. “A banana or the like?”
Harry shakes his head no, but then seems to reconsider.

“Are there any Kit Kats about?” He asks Liam quietly. “I haven’t had one in so long.”

The reaction in the room is one of sad gasps and pity filled faces and it makes it clear that any one of the three of them would walk across hot coals or through barbed wire to get him one at this moment. Luckily that won’t be necessary because Liam keeps a stash in his junk food cupboard downstairs. Niall volunteers to go down and fetch some, promising to bring a plethora of tasty, bad for you things up for them all to snack on. While they wait, Louis tells Harry about how Freddie is doing, the milestones he’s reached.

Niall makes good on his promise, coming back five minutes later with his arms laden with crisps, pretzels, biscuits, candy and at least ten Kit Kats, which he hands straight to Harry.

Harry just laughs quietly and accepts them, shaky hands working one of the packages open to get at one of the sticks. He crunches into it and hums happily.

He’s about halfway through the second stick when Anne comes back in, looking mildly apprehensive for a moment until her eyes hit the pile of food on the bed and she frowns slightly.

“Niall Horan, I know you are responsible for this since I saw you sniffing about the kitchen not long ago. I’m making homemade chicken soup for tea, so please do not pig out,” she scolds, a laugh in her voice. Then she notices Harry munching on the Kit Kat and relaxes, smiling warmly at him. “Harry, my darling, you eat whatever you want.” It’s then she seems to remember why she had come upstairs in the first place. “Um, Ruth is here. She wondered if she could pop her head in for a quick hello.”

They all turn and look at Harry, whose cheek is filled with Kit Kat at the moment and he stops chewing as his eyes take in the audience staring at him.

“S’fine,” he answers a few moments later, mouth still full.

Anne relaxes and nods at him, opening the door further to admit Liam’s older sister.

She pops her head in first, eyes wide as she takes in the scene. When they land on Harry they immediately start to well up.

“Oh my God,” she says quietly as she steps into the room. “Hi sweetheart, long time no see.”

Harry swallows the Kit Kat and smiles softly at her.

“Hey Roo,” he replies just as quietly.

She grins and then hurries towards the bed, still taking care not to spook Harry. She just about sits on Liam as she reaches for a hug, waiting for Harry to close the gap if he wants to. He does after a moment, laughing softly at Liam’s groan as his sister kneels on his thigh.

“I should have brought more Kit Kat’s huh?” She asks with a laugh, eyes still damp.

She finally gets off of Liam’s leg with one final grunt of pain from him and it’s then she notices the rest of the junk food on the bed as Louis shoves several crisps into his mouth with a loud crunch.
“Some things just never change,” she laughs. “But Anne is right. She’s making a lovely tea so don’t pack all of this away right now.”

Liam can’t help but notice himself how easily they just slid back into being as they always were. Mates and brothers, happy to just lounge on a bed with crisps and Kit Kats watching stupid telly. He senses that Louis and Niall might be doing this on purpose, trying to keep things casual so as to make Harry more comfortable and he appreciates it. Harry needs help feeling normal again and this is a start.

“Are you staying for tea?” Harry asks Ruth, and it’s easy to see he’s feeling lighter, happier. Not the same Harry, probably never will be, but he’s ok right now.

“No, can’t honey, I’ve gotta get back to Thomas. We have a thing tonight and I don’t want to arouse any suspicion by cancelling. But I’ll be back,” she replies, clearly sad that she has to go.

“Come watch the Oscars with us Monday morning. We’re going to get up early and watch it live,” Liam suggests, thinking having people Harry feels comfortable with and cares about around him will make it easier and more celebratory. It reminds him that there is a text he needs to send and soon.

Ruth nods and grins again.

“Of course. I’ll bring more Kit Kats,” she laughs and then starts her farewells.

She kisses Liam on the cheek and then Harry, who is startled by it but not frightened. Louis gets a playful swat up the back of the head and Niall gets a super squeeze before she heads out.

“You two are staying right?” Harry asks them after Ruth leaves and they both nod eagerly.

“Your mum is cooking, of course we’re staying,” Niall laughs and Harry snorts himself.

“So what is the plan for the Oscars?” Louis asks a moment later. “I know Anne, Gemma and Des were supposed to be there, but I don’t think anyone knows they left. What happens if he wins?”

“That is something I’m going to try to take care of now,” Liam says, pulling out his phone. “The police have given us the go ahead to let the cat out of the bag, but we thought doing it at the Oscars if Harry wins is a way to do it with a bang. Beat the media by getting ahead of them and it’ll still be night here.”

Louis considers it and nods a moment later, shrugging slightly.

“Makes sense. It’ll be announced in Los Angeles, far from home, and it means at least another day of peace and quiet,” he surmises. “Once it’s out they are going to go bat shit though. What’s the plan for that?”

“My house is gated. They can’t even see the front door. That was part of the reason we thought it best Harry leave the hospital today, just in case word got out earlier. He’s safe here,” Liam replies, opening the texting app on his phone and starting a new conversation with someone he hasn’t spoken to in several months. It’s safe to say they didn’t part on good terms.

James, I need a favor and safe to say you owe me.
Harry leans on his shoulder and reads the screen.

“James Corden? That’s your big plan?” He asks incredulously. “What does he owe you for?”

Liam and Louis lock eyes for a moment, neither knowing how to answer. Liam hasn’t told Harry about the song and was doing his damnedest to keep him from finding out for the time being.

“It’s a long story, but I figure he’s a good choice. He’s already in LA, it’ll be easy to get him on the guest list and he knows us,” Liam replies, feeling the heat of Harry’s stare on his cheek. He was clearly trying to figure out what Liam was hiding.

The message shows as read and a moment later James replies in two messages.

LIAM! Long time mate, too long. So sorry for what happened. I didn’t mean to offend.

What can I do for you?

“He offended you?” Harry asks, still reading the screen. “How?”

“It was nothing really. I’m over it now,” Liam replies, once again feeling Harry’s judgement heating his ear.

I need you to go to the Oscars tomorrow night and accept the award for Harry if he wins. I’ll text an acceptance speech for you to read. Just take your phone up with you.

Liam is proud of this plan. This way they get to decide the dialogue and it will actually give Harry the opportunity to give a speech without having to be there.

I thought his family was going? I saw the news, the arrest, has something happened?

“Just a little bit,” Liam mutters while typing out a reply and Harry huffs a laugh in his ear.

They changed their minds, asked me to come up with a solution and I was hoping you would do this for them.

Nothing like a little guilt trip to make someone want to do something.

Of course mate, no problem. I’ll have my people let the academy people know of the change and the plan. Let’s hope he wins!

Liam breathes a sigh of relief. James doesn’t seem to have become suspicious of the motive and that’s good because Liam kind of wants the truth to be a shock to him as well. A little payback.

“What about the In Memoriam?” Niall asks suddenly. “Aren’t they putting Harry in this year?”

“Jesus, that’s morbid,” Harry frowns. “How about waiting until I’m actually dead.”

“They don’t know you’re alive,” Louis points out with a smirk. “I think that’s the point of Liam’s little plan, but Niall is right. Are we just hoping his award is announced before the In Memoriam section?”
Liam shrugs, he wasn’t too concerned about that now. If it worked out that the truth was revealed and the producers could fix the segment, then fine. But if not, it wasn’t their problem. He was more concerned that they would use the song he wrote for Harry as the accompaniment. Then he would have to answer Harry’s questions about it.

He and Louis share another meaningful look and it’s clear he’s thinking the same thing.

It’s frustrating that he can’t do anything about it either, since his former record company currently had the rights to the song and had no legal reason to tell Liam if it was going to be used. Maybe he would distract Harry during that part so he wouldn’t notice.

They settle in for the rest of the afternoon. Harry dozes on Liam’s shoulder until dinner is ready and then they shuffle downstairs. After so many months and years spent alone in his house, feeling morose and empty, it was strange to have it so full all of a sudden. And for such oddly domestic things to be taking place in the midst of something so incredible and out of the ordinary.

Harry sits next to Liam at the table, shuffling closer and he does sip at the soup, not eating a lot but he tries and praises his mum for her effort.

He’s exhausted after and Liam carries him back up to bed, where he passes out almost immediately. Louis and Niall say goodbye quietly, promising to be back tomorrow to hang out and to spend the night so they are there for the Oscars as well.

Des stays downstairs watching the news while Anne and Gemma come sit with Liam and Harry again, watching a Gordon Ramsay cooking special. Liam doesn’t pay much attention to it, instead he spends the time typing out the speech on his phone he wants James to read. He plans to show it to Harry tomorrow, to get his input and let him add if he wants to, but Liam wants to flesh something out to make it easier for him.

When he’s done, Gemma takes his phone and plugs it into the charger for him before coming back over to gently kiss Harry’s forehead as she heads to bed. Anne does the same and then it’s just the two of them again.

Liam slides down under the blankets, adjusting Harry’s grip on him so he can wrap his arms around the slight man and pull him close. Harry nuzzles in under Liam’s chin and sighs, snoring softly a second later.

“I love you,” Liam whispers quietly. So quietly he barely hears it himself.
Chapter 8

Day 3

“Um… It’s kinda wordy isn’t it?” Harry asks quietly, staring at Liam’s phone. He’s supposed to be drinking his banana Ensure, but he’s put it down to use both hands to hold the phone. Fair enough, he is weak and does need both hands to hold things, but he could have waited until he was done to read the speech.

“I thought you’d want to thank Nolan and the rest of the cast and crew. It’s kinda standard practice at the Oscars,” Liam replies, feeling just the tiniest bit miffed. Harry had hummed and hawed his way through the speech, only happy with the end bit, the reveal.

“Yeah, I guess, but… I mean, I don’t even remember filming it really. It just feels so, I don’t know, pointless and meaningless now.” He sighs loudly, trying to explain himself. “I mean, it was a really big deal for me at the time, you know that, I was excited but, so much has happened and, I don’t know, it just feels like that was a completely different person, I was a different person entirely and I’m not even sure who the hell I am now.”

It was an odd bit of self-reflecting lucidity, Liam had to admit, but it was also strangely comforting. Harry had been vacillating between being completely lost and unable to process where he was or what had happened to feigning normalcy. Having him sit with Louis and Niall and eat a Kit Kat while watching footie was nice. So was having him sit down for a family dinner. But there was this undercurrent of him just going through motions unsure of what else to do and there were moments when Liam looked in his eyes and wasn’t entirely sure he was seeing reality.

“I know mate. I know. That’s gonna take time and you will have to be patient, we all will really,” he says gently, wrapping his arm around Harry’s shoulder while handing him his Ensure smoothly, earning him a side eye glance. “It’s only been a few days and this is just the start. It’s gonna be hard at times, but it’ll get easier, I promise. You have been doing well for the most part.”

“I’m not really sure that’s true,” Harry mutters, somewhat confirming what Liam already thought.

Liam had the distinct sense that a breakdown or collapse of some kind could be coming. Harry could only ride on this strange euphoria of being free for so long before the reality of what he went through hit him. He just hoped he would be able to help him when it happened.

“Drink that,” Liam says lamely as Harry starts to pick at the label on the bottle. It earns him another side eye, but he dutifully takes a drink after anyway.

They fiddle with the speech for James for a little while longer, getting a little input from Gemma. Harry eventually finishes the Ensure, after much goading from Liam.

Anne kindly brings them both a sandwich at lunch and Harry valiantly takes two bites before he’s done. Liam finishes it, making up for his lack of food when he was in the hospital with Harry. Afterward, he helps Harry into the bathroom, showing him his new toothbrush and giving him some time alone while hovering outside the door. They decide to shower tomorrow, both presuming they would need to repeat what the process had been the day before since Harry hadn’t gained any strength whatsoever.
They settle in for an afternoon nap, knowing they would have to get up at four in the morning for the awards. They had debated on just staying up, but the show would be at least 3 hours and with Harry’s exhaustion, it wasn’t feasible. Besides, Liam liked napping with Harry in his arms.

Harry wakes up first with a jolt that leaves a bruise on Liam’s side. It takes a solid five minutes to calm him down. Harry sits up with his knees under his chin and eyes wild as they swing around the room in circles. So fast that Liam is certain he will make himself dizzy. He actually starts to become worried that the break has happened and Harry isn’t going to remember or that he will have to be sedated, drugged and held in a mental facility. But then he starts to come back to himself, eyes clearing and seeing Liam properly.

Once he’s accepted that it is Liam and not a mirage sent to taunt him, he dives into Liam’s arms and holds him as tight as he can, which isn’t that tight sadly and he refuses to let go for a long while. His soft whimpers and sniffles can be heard and Liam’s heart breaks at the sounds.

The rest of the house sleeps on while they sit huddled together and Liam hates that he revels in it slightly. Obviously he doesn’t want to see Harry so upset and frightened, but there was this deep warmth in his chest every time Harry turned to him for comfort or clung on to him because he trusted Liam more than anyone else. He still couldn’t entirely account for it though. Other than to surmise that, like himself, Harry had turned that one kiss and moment they shared into a much bigger deal in his mind over those two years. If that is true, they really are quite the pair.

Louis and Niall arrive just before tea with Robin in tow and there is another awkward greeting moment. But Harry’s step-dad is very kind and understanding and doesn’t come too close.

By that time Harry has returned to the person he’s been for the last few days. He’s mostly lucid, but still watches the situation around him like he would watch a reality TV show, as though he’s not entirely a part of it.

They eat bowls of pasta in front of the telly downstairs and Harry picks at his, only taking a couple of mouthfuls. No one says anything, but Anne throws him a few concerned looks. They were supposed to be following the chart for his calorie intake and they were trying, but it was tough when he didn’t seem to have any inclination to eat and they couldn’t very well shove it down his throat.

They watch another couple of episodes of Bake Off on Netflix after dinner and then all retire, promising to see each other in a few hours.

Liam sets the alarm for a half hour before they should be waking up because he quite honestly wants to make sure they have some time alone if Harry has another meltdown when he wakes up again.

And he’s right to be prepared.

Harry actually wakes before the alarm with muffled screams in Liam’s chest and bony fists flying. It startles Liam awake with a shock.

“NO! NO NO NO! STOP!” He starts yelling then, shoving at Liam who easily lets him go. Harry shoves until he’s on the other side of the bed, curled up in a ball with his arms around his head. “No no no no no… please don’t please don’t…” he whimpers out, voice breaking and pitiful. Liam’s heart shatters, eyes filling with tears as he listens to Harry plead with a memory to be granted mercy. His fingers itch to reach forward to comfort, to shake him awake, something, but he
doesn’t know if that will help or not. The tears take on an angry edge, fury at those who did this to Harry and towards himself for not knowing how to help.

The bedroom door opens and the hall light streams in. Anne and Gemma stand on the threshold in their pajamas looking startled and worried.

“Nightmare, don’t touch him,” Liam says quickly, holding a hand up and sitting up to watch over Harry. He quickly wipes under his eyes and tries to regain his composure. Once again he has to remind himself this is about Harry and not him.

This is the first nightmare Harry has had that Liam knows of since he escaped and it was likely not going to be the last. He needed to learn quickly how to help. First, he needs to determine if Harry is awake or not at this point. Hard to tell in the current curled position he’s in.

Harry keeps on whimpering out the word ‘no’, voice cracking at times, and Des, Robin, Louis and Niall also crowd at the door. All of them standing helpless and unsure of what to do.

Liam finally decides that if Harry is asleep he needs to be woken because it’s not fair to leave him suffering in the nightmare and if he’s having another episode, well then, he also needs to be awoken from that as well, so to speak.

“Harry?” He says quietly, but still loud enough for the shaking man to hear him. “Harry, wake up mate. You’re ok. You’re safe.”

Harry’s response is somewhat similar to that of a wounded animal, a keen that breaks off at the end and sends shards of pain through Liam’s chest.

“Haz, come on mate, we’re all here with you,” Louis says from the end of the bed. Liam hadn’t even seen him move, but suddenly the whole crowd is there. All of them wide eyed.

“No one touch him,” Liam warns and they all nod. Even Des, who looks more spooked than anyone.

With no reaction to their words, Liam decides to move a little closer, not touching, but perhaps his proximity would shake him a little. He goes a few inches on his knees and waits. Harry doesn’t move, just whimpers out the word ‘no’ and goes quiet again. Liam moves a few more inches, now only about a foot from Harry and he can see that his eyes are open so wide they are white all the way around.

“Harry, hey, it’s Liam. It’s ok, just look at me. Come on Harry,” he says gently, leaning forward slightly, just enough that if Harry looked up or only moved his eyes he would see Liam. It takes a minute or two, but eventually the eye Liam can see turns towards him, staring at him blankly.

“Harry honey, come on. It’s ok. You’re safe here,” Anne says softly. She moves to stand on the opposite side of the bed, but Des stops her quickly.

“Don’t, don’t block him in. Best we all stay where he can see us,” he says quickly and Liam nods at him gratefully. It was probably a good idea not to make him feel caged in.

Liam turns back to Harry, keeping a gentle expression on his face and letting that one eye examine him thoroughly, though he doesn’t move at all.
It’s then that the alarm clock goes off. It fills the room with some pop song with a heavy beat and Harry jumps about five feet, sitting up and scurrying up the bed to slam his back into the headboard with a painful sounding thump. His knees go up under his chin again as he breathes hard, a harsh noise coming from his throat. Everyone else jumps as well, all backing away, Louis with his hands raised again.

Liam quickly turns around and slams his hand on the clock silencing it before turning back to Harry, who is staring at him with the same intensity he had when he’d woken up from the nap earlier.

Strangely, this is comforting, this he had dealt with before. He was back on familiar territory, no matter how strange and he quickly shuffles towards Harry and forces him to keep looking at him.

“Harry, it’s me, it’s Liam. I’m really here. You are really in my house right now. Remember the hospital? The Kit Kat?” He asks quietly and Harry’s eyes flick to the people at the end of the bed and then back to Liam. “Remember those horrible Ensure shakes you have to drink? This is all real mate. It’s ok, just take some deep breaths.”

He can see the moment the fog starts to clear and Harry starts to gulp in air as he tries to catch his breath.

“Yeah mate, remember those banana shakes? Why would your brain make those up?” Louis points out. Harry looks at him and finally starts to fully relax, eyes closing slowly and hands coming up to rub his face.

“Fuck,” he mutters into his fingers and the room collectively breathes out.

Liam shuffles right up to him, sliding an arm around his shoulders and Harry flops against him. Still shaking, but back in reality.

“It’s ok,” Liam says quietly into his hair. “Just a nightmare. You’re alright.”

Harry chuckles once, without humour. “Yes, just a simple nightmare that clearly woke the entire house,” he grumbles out, turning slightly towards the assembled mob. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s ok son, you don’t have to apologize. We’re all here because we love you and wanted to make sure you were ok,” Des says gently. “You don’t have to apologize for anything.”

Anne nods beside him, giving Harry a warm smile. “He’s right honey. None of this is your fault and we are all here for you, to help you,” she adds.

“Thank you,” Harry says quietly, rubbing his eyes.

“Look, we’re all up now so why don’t I go put the kettle on and we’ll watch some of the red carpet to see who wears the ugliest dress?” Louis offers.

“My money’s on Meryl Streep,” Niall deadpans and the tension in the room eases more.

“Sounds good,” Gemma says and they all start to shuffle out, just Anne and Des remaining.

“I think I just need a few minutes,” Harry says finally, pushing his hair back from his face. “If that’s ok.”
They both nod, but hesitate to move.

“Harry, honey,” Anne says quietly, sitting down on the bed in front of Harry with her hands on his knees. “You can ask for help. Tell us what you need at any time ok? Please don’t try to suffer alone darling. We want to help you.”

Harry looks down and nods.

“I know you do, I do, but I don’t know what I need right now. I don’t, I’m just...” he trails off, head turning to look out the window into the dark night. “I just don’t really know where my head is at or how to deal with this. So I don’t know what to say.”

“Well no matter what, you have us, alright?” Des says quietly, but firmly. “You are not alone and if you need to talk or yell or just sit quietly with someone, we are here for you.”

Harry nods again, hands fidgeting and pulling at his sleeves. “I know,” he says finally. “Thank you.”

“Ok, I’ll go make you a nice cup of tea. You just come down when you’re ready, if you want to, alright?” Anne says quietly, standing up and leaning over to kiss the top of his head. Des repeats the action before both of them finally head towards the door, eyes on Harry the entire time, waiting or maybe hoping for him to tell them to stay.

As soon as they are gone, he collapses against Liam again, arms sliding around his waist and fingers digging into his back. Liam just wraps his own arms around him, resting his cheek on the top of Harry’s head, though he presses his lips to the soft hair once. There wasn’t anything to say really. He sensed that Harry just wanted some quiet and the comfort of someone he trusted holding on to him, rubbing his shoulder and rocking him slightly. And so they sit this way for a long while, the sounds of the group making snacks and drinks downstairs coming up to them, but they don’t react to it.

Liam’s legs slowly go numb, since he is still kneeling, and his back starts to ache. But so long as Harry is holding on, he won’t move. He won’t take away what he needs right now.

It’s not until Liam’s phone vibrates that Harry finally seems to stir. He relaxes his weak hold and glances up at Liam and then over at the phone on the dresser.

“I don’t need to check it. It’s fine,” Liam says quietly, fingers trailing through Harry’s hair and brushing it off his face affectionately.

“No, it’s ok. I’m ok now. I just needed a few minutes. Thank you for that,” he says genuinely. His green eyes are sweet and open as they look up at Liam and his legs go numb for a completely different reason. “We should go down anyway. We don’t want to have all that time we spent writing that speech going to waste. Though it still might if I lose.”

Liam laughs quietly and gives Harry another squeeze.

They get up slowly. Liam takes the time to try to let the feeling return to his legs and it’s not long before they are full of roaring pins and needles. He is still wobbly though. They make quite the pair hobbling to the door. Liam grabs his phone on the way and they manage to get to the stairs. They then realize that it would be treacherous to try to walk down them.
Harry comes up with a solution immediately. Holding onto Liam’s arm and the railing, he slowly sits down and then carefully scoots down one step and then the next, holding the edges carefully. Liam laughs and sits down and starts doing the same. By the time they are halfway they are both laughing, the sound so sweet and welcome from Harry.

“What in hell?” They hear Louis say. Then he’s at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at them with an incredulous expression before he starts to laugh as well. “Ok, Harry I get, but what the hell is your problem Payne?”

“My legs fell asleep,” Liam declares hotly, still giggling.

Des comes to the bottom of the stairs as well, looking confused as to the kerfuffle, but once he sees Harry he looks alarmed.

“Son, you should be careful. Why don’t I help you if Liam can’t right now?” He says as he comes up a few stairs towards Harry.

Harry sighs loudly and nods. “Yeah this was fun, but it’s actually starting to hurt now,” he admits, stopping and waiting for Des to get to him.

Liam attempts to stand, immediately concerned at having caused Harry pain, but his footing still isn’t strong enough so he sits back down and watches as Des gets to Harry. He gently helps him stand up and supports him carefully as they make their way down. Harry stops at the bottom to wait for Liam and Louis looks up at him and smirks.

“How do you need help as well?” He asks sarcastically, before sighing dramatically. “I suppose I can come lend a hand.”

Louis reaches him and all but wrenches him up to standing. He does let Liam lean on him as they get down the stairs. Liam stretches his legs a few times and finally is free from the tingling sensations. He expects Harry to transfer over to him, but Des is already guiding him over to the couch, letting him settle on a middle cushion with Anne on his left side. Harry’s eyes don’t leave Liam and he makes it clear he wants Liam to sit in the empty space to his right. Des sighs but accepts it, glad to have been able to do at least one thing before he is turfed.

As always, Liam has no idea why Harry is so attached to him, but also isn’t willing to question it for risk of ruining it. He quickly grabs a cup of tea and sits next to Harry with his phone in his lap and almost immediately Harry is snuggled up against him, shoving Liam’s arm around his shoulders.

He hears Niall laugh, but doesn’t look at him.

His phone vibrates on his thigh and he quickly picks it up, curious as to who would be texting so early. He has one missed message from Ruth saying that she’s on her way and almost like magic there is a knock at the door as he reads it. While Louis goes and lets her in, he checks his other message. It’s from James:

Right, I’m here at the awards. It’s all a go. So I just have my phone out and ready if he wins?

Liam quickly types a one handed response.
Yes. I’ll send the message as you are walking up to the stage.

He quickly goes to the document he and Harry had created on his phone and highlights all of the text, copying it to be ready to be pasted into a text message. Then he locks his phone and puts it down.

They all greet Ruth warmly and offer her tea, then find seats about the room. A level of excitement fills the space over the prospect of having an Oscar winner in their midst. The only one not that excited is the potential winner himself. Liam can feel his tension and unease. It was clear he still wasn’t that comfortable with this entire ordeal and was nervous about revealing his current health status to the world.

All of them had mused at one point or another about how long it would take for the press to set up camp outside. No one was looking forward to it, but it was an inevitability at this point. The police had promised to do their part at keeping them from trespassing and planned to have officers present to keep calm, but it was the world they lived in. At least their plan let them handle the situation their own way.

Jimmy Kimmel is hosting the Oscars again, as he had quickly become a favorite for the Academy. His opening monologue is scathing towards the usual suspects of politicians and celebrities who had behaved badly through the year. Then they start with the normal, less popular awards. Ones that were usually for things that no one had heard of, let alone seen, but still deserved recognition because of their quality of work. After they have gone through the technical awards, makeup artists, sound engineers and the like, they start to get into more of the nitty gritty and the room gets more tense.

The first award is for best supporting actress and Anne Hathaway collects her second Oscar with a tearful speech that causes her to get played off the stage by the orchestra. Niall makes a quip about her dodgy dress and they all giggle nervously. They throw to commercial and everyone knows that the next award will be Harry’s category as it was the normal order. Usually though, the In Memoriam section was done about halfway through the show, but this year it appeared they had pushed it closer to the end. Fortuitous really.

Kimmel comes back on screen and makes a snide joke about Matt Damon before announcing the presenters for the Best Supporting Actor award, Tom Hardy and Cillian Murphy. If Liam hadn’t already been assuming Harry would get the award, the presenters are a bit of a dead giveaway.

Each nominee is announced and shown sitting in the audience attempting to look humble. All except Harry, who is last on the list. Instead the camera focuses on a screen shot of him from the movie, face muddy and hair short, looking healthy.

“And the Oscar goes to,” announces Tom, fingers quickly tearing the little sticker on the card. Liam picks up his phone, unlocks it and readies his fingers with Harry tensing beside him. “Harry Styles, for Dunkirk.”

The audience in LA, and in Liam’s living room, erupts into cheers and applause. There are several moments of cheering people on screen before the camera finally lands on James hurrying up to the stage. Anne gives Harry a side hug, telling him congratulations and it’s echoed around the room, with Harry hunching in on himself bashfully.

Liam squeezes his shoulder comfortingly while he pastes the message and hits send, watching on the telly as James glances down at his phone with a look of relief on his face as it arrives.
The audiences quiet finally as he reaches the microphone, orchestra going silent. In true James fashion he fidgets for a second, scratching his ear before he starts speaking. Liam feels the glances coming their way, everyone full of nervous energy because they haven’t heard the speech. All except Gemma, who is smiling gently.

“I know I’m not who you were expecting up here, but there was a change of plans a few days ago and I was asked by Harry’s family to come and accept should he win,” he starts, glancing down at his phone as he opens Liam’s message. “They’ve sent a message though for me to read to you all. So bear with me, it’s a small screen.”

The audience titters slightly as he holds the phone up and clears his throat.

“First of all, we would like to say thank you to the cast and crew of Dunkirk and to Christopher Nolan for giving Harry the chance to follow his dreams. It meant a lot to him to be given such trust in such an important project. Next, we’d like to thank everyone for their support, love and kindness over the last two years. It’s been a difficult journey and we are glad to have it coming to a close.”

James stops for a second, face confused and Liam smirks. “We know that the intent was to have Harry as part of the In Memoriam segment of the show this evening, but we regret to inform you that…” James stops, face filling with shock before crumpling slightly and voice becoming choked with emotion as he reads ahead a little and sees what’s coming. His eyes becoming wet, he takes a deep breath and swallows loudly, putting the phone down for a second before holding it up again. There is a lot of murmuring in the audience as he starts again, voice wobbly and thick. “We regret to inform you that your producers will have to take him out as he has come back home to us, alive.”

At this, James breaks down again and several cries are heard from the audience as he bends over sobbing twice before standing back up. “Oh my God,” he says in a harsh whisper, wiping at his eyes before he goes back to the phone. “We haven’t been able to share this incredible news due to reasons involving the investigation, but we were finally given permission a day ago. We sit tonight, with our beloved son, brother and friend amongst us watching these awards and nothing brings us greater joy than to feel and see all of the love and support for Harry coming from you all.” James sniffles loudly and even the orchestra seems to be in a state of shock, since they haven’t started playing him off. “Thank you again. All of our love, the Styles family.”

At the last second, feeling guilty after watching James’ reaction to the news, Liam sends him the selfie pic they’d sent to Louis, as proof that this wasn’t a sick joke and also so that James could feel the elation of seeing Harry’s face again like Liam had. Harry nods at him in agreement as he does so before taking the phone from Liam to shakily type a message himself.

*Thank you James. You did great. H.*

They watch as James receives it, face crumpling again.

“I wish you could see this, stupid small screen, but I’ve just got a picture and it’s him! Oh my God, it’s him,” he blurts out, voice cracking. He holds the phone up, though there is no way of seeing the screen clearly at all. “We love you Harry!”

The orchestra finally starts playing, but there is still a lot of talking and furor in the audience as James heads off stage, staring at the picture intently while Cillian and Tom hurry behind him, holding Harry’s Oscar and trying to see the picture themselves. The show cuts out quite suddenly, as though they were just throwing a commercial in hastily and Liam’s living room breathes out slowly.
Ruth is the one who breaks the silence.

“Out of curiosity, what was the plan if you didn’t win the Oscar?” She asks and everyone starts to laugh, though Anne is sniffling along with her giggles.

Liam shrugs at the same time Harry does.

“No idea. Put an advert in the paper?” Liam replies and they all laugh again.

“In all seriousness, that speech was lovely Liam and Harry, well done,” Anne adds, wiping at her eyes.

“Are you and James even now?” Niall asks Liam and there is a second where Liam considers thumping him as he feels Harry tense next to him.

“What is the issue with you and James? I thought you were friends?” He asks Liam, staring at the side of his face critically.

“It’s nothing. It’s over now like I said,” Liam replies, throwing daggers in Niall’s direction, who has the sense to look sheepish.

“James overstepped his bounds, asking questions he shouldn’t,” Louis throws in. “It’s all good now though.”

Harry is still confused, and Liam knows him well enough that it’s unlikely he’s going to drop the subject permanently. For now though, he turns back to the TV when the show comes back on. Angelina Jolie is making a rare appearance and doing the difficult task of introducing the In Memoriam segment.

Liam is entirely unsurprised to hear the first few notes of the song start playing and he makes eye contact with Louis, who doesn’t look shocked either. He is surprised however when they show footage of him playing the song from the Billboard awards. Since he hadn’t been asked to perform at the Oscars, he assumes this was some sort of deal struck with his old record company and now he can’t even pretend it’s not his song because there he is sitting at the damn piano. Harry tenses again, though it is more with interest, and he sits up a little.

They show him singing the first few lines and then cut to the montage; a mix of actors, producers, directors and other show business people the world lost in the past year going across the screen with the odd bit of sound put in when Liam isn’t singing.

He knows Harry’s only listening to the song, can tell without even looking at him and he feels himself go tense as well because Harry is no doubt absorbing the words. Dissecting them and trying to figure them out.

Harry doesn’t show up on screen until near the end, when Liam is only singing long bars of notes over a pulsing guitar and piano, the crescendo after the final chorus. It’s the perfectly dramatic moment to do their own reveal. Harry’s face comes up. It’s an old picture of him from 2011 when he was just starting out. He’s all cherubic dimples and curls and stupid baggy jeans. It’s replaced by another one from 2012 and then one from 2013, going through the years until they reach a still of him from Dunkirk. He’s smiling while holding a beer and apple on the train. His name comes up, the words Actor and Musician under it, but the words all start disappearing like smoke, the picture as well, vanishing and leaving a dark screen behind for a second. Then the selfie Liam sent
to James comes up. Liam is mostly cut out of it, though his arm and hand are visible on Harry’s shoulder and his chin pressed to Harry’s forehead. The portion of Harry’s face you can see is startling in both his beauty and the clear change that’s taken place. While his mouth isn’t visible, hidden behind his sleeve, his eyes look dark. His brows are painted marks on his pale face and the bruises under his eyes are sharp. He looks almost like a ghost. His dark hair still damp from the shower and shrouding around him, but he’s still so lovely. So strangely perfect while imperfect. Liam took the picture, has looked at it several times already, but seeing it up on the big screen in such focus and detail, it takes his breath away. And he looks at Harry’s face every damn chance he can get, but something about that picture is haunting.

The audience in the room reacts, gasping and Anne sniffles again, but it’s nothing in comparison to the one in LA. It starts with a lot of cries and gasps and quickly erupts into cheering and a standing ovation that only gets louder when the words Welcome Home Harry appear under the picture.

Part of Liam wants to be pissed at James for letting them use the picture, since he had sent it more for James’ comfort than the rest of the world, but then he realizes this is actually for the best. They had already stolen the thunder of the media by revealing the story, but now they had also fucked over the paparazzi by letting out the first picture. And it was one he and Harry approved of. He has no idea if that was James’ intent or not, but it was clever if he had been thinking that way.

There’s no question it’ll be analyzed to death, picked over and pontificated about, but it was a nice picture. It was clean, simple, and only showed a portion of Harry’s face.

“Did you give him permission to share the picture like that?” Gemma asks, looking at both of them with wide eyes. “Is that ok with you Harry?”

Harry looks over at her, less tense than he was before he was awarded the Oscar.

“Yeah it’s fine. I knew if we sent it to him he would probably show it in some way or another, on his show or whatever. And this way, the photographers that will be trying to make money off of getting the first shot of me have been screwed over and I’m definitely ok with that,” he replies, sounding the tiniest bit smug. Clearly he had thought it through more than Liam beforehand.

Gemma looks impressed, nodding and smirking.

“Clever,” Anne adds, grinning at Harry.

“Sadly, I doubt it’ll stop the bastards from showing up. I’m sure they’re on their way right now. But yeah, at least you got to control what the first picture was and how it was revealed. So, smart,” Niall agrees.

The show throws to another commercial, the audience still in a roar as they go, but the big moment for those in the house was over and the tension and energy in the room settles. Louis pulls out a surprise for Harry then, a chocolate Oscar that he’d found in a shop in London and they all have a good laugh about it. Especially when Harry bites the little statue’s head off.

The rest of the show is enjoyable enough. Dunkirk wins several awards including Best Picture and Best Director. There is another round of congrats for Harry, who declares that he only played a small part and had nothing to do with the actual making of the movie.

When it’s over, everyone gives Harry a warm hug before Liam helps him back upstairs to bed while they clean up the dishes and turn everything off.
Back in the quiet of the bedroom, Harry seems to fully relax. He snuggles under the covers after he brushes his teeth again and he waits for Liam to do his business.

He’s pressed right up to Liam’s chest the moment he’s there, breath warm and hands relaxed on his back.

“Did you write that song about me?” He murmurs after a long moment where Liam had actually thought he’d fallen asleep. He starts with the suddenness of Harry’s voice and then tenses at the question. “Thought so.” Harry replies as he feels Liam’s reaction. “It’s beautiful. I want to hear it properly.”

Liam huffs out a breath, unsure of what to say, but he was glad that Harry seemed to like the song. That was a bit of a relief, but it said so much and would probably bring up more questions that Liam didn’t know how to answer. He kind of dreaded letting Harry hear it again.

“Why were you pissed at James? Tell me the truth,” Harry murmurs a moment later, moving on to a new topic rapidly. Though Liam suspects that he’s cottoned on that the two things were related.

“He brought me on his show, sat me down for that Spill Your Guts game and asked me if the song was about you,” Liam answers, hoping that will be enough and will give away the truth without him having to fully say it.

Harry is quiet for a long time, his fingers twitching now and again. Just enough to let Liam know he’s still awake and processing.

“He shouldn’t have asked,” Harry decides.

“Nope, he shouldn't have,” Liam agrees.

A few moments later and Harry is asleep, snoring softly against Liam’s chest and he feels like that entire conversation was a dream. Just another strange, segmented train of thought from Harry and Liam has no idea if anything will come of it or not, or if anything else will be said.

He figures he’ll find out in the morning.
Chapter 9

Day 4

Liam’s house is a good distance from the road hidden behind a wall and tall trees and all of the windows are closed, but they can still be heard.

It’s a thrumming din. The kind only created by a large collection of people all talking at once. It seemed that the world had arrived outside.

“They’re pissed man. You can just tell,” Louis says by way of greeting when he comes in. Harry had only needed about five minutes to come to grips with reality this morning. A strong improvement for sure, though even he doubted it would last. Anne had already brought up his shake and some tea and toast. Now Louis was there in the bedroom. Standing at the window looking rumpled with a mug in his hand.

“Why would they be pissed?” Gemma asks, coming in with her own mug. Liam’s bedroom was rapidly becoming the meeting place for the entire house and he wasn’t entirely sure he liked that fact. “I know we sort of stole their thunder last night, but I mean it was only kept quiet cuz of the investigation.”

Louis glances at her and then at Liam and Harry who are sitting up in bed, leaning together. Harry had forgone the shake and was ripping the toast to pieces. He was clearly attempting to make a show of eating and therefore not needing the shake, but he wasn’t fooling Liam.

“Because, they knew about the police and everyone being here a few days ago and then they made the arrest, but they never made the connection. They never figured it out until last night,” Louis replies, grinning. “It’s bloody hilarious. They pretty much had the answer in front of their fucking faces and they never made the connection. Add to that the fact that there’s already a picture out before they had even written the first headline and they’re positively fuming.”

“You take entirely too much glee in screwing over the press,” Niall chimes in, sauntering in with a bagel in one hand and tea in the other.

“Well! I hate the bastards and have every right to after what happened at the airport two years ago. Do you not remember that? I coulda gone to jail for fuck’s sake,” Louis replies hotly and Niall holds his arms up in surrender.

“What happened at the airport?” Harry asks, frowning slightly.

“Just after El and I got back together, we went on a little vacation in Jamaica. It was great. Good to do something normal again, ya know? Anyway, we land at LAX and this fucking pap, he’s right in El’s face the second we come out. I pushed him off, got in his face, told him to stop taking pictures and the asshole got lippy with me. He knocked my passport outta my hands and when I bent down to get it, the fucker tripped and fell. He hit his head hard and I got arrested for battery,” Louis explains in a tirade, eyes wide with still simmering fury. “OH, and while this bullshit was going on, poor El went to ask this bitch who tried to claim she was a fan to stop filming me and the bitch and her friend attacked El! Shoved her in a corner and started hitting her. I had to tear her off poor El, told her to get out. It was a mess, but thankfully I had a good judge who realized that I was in the right and dropped all the charges against me. But it took way too long for them to charge the girl
with attacking El. So glad she got jail time.”

Harry just sits looking wide eyed at the story, stunned into silence for a minute.

“Ok, I can see why you might have a problem with the people with the cameras,” he says finally, laughing quietly.

“It’s not funny! I almost went to jail, had to get Olli to bail me out,” Louis insists, though his mouth is starting to quirk up at the corners.

“It’s kinda funny,” Harry says quietly, still giggling. “Ok, it’s not funny that you got attacked and El sure as shit didn’t deserve that. Perhaps it’s just your delivery of the story.”

“I will show you the video. It was awful,” Louis declares, grabbing Liam’s iPad.

“Ok, ok, I believe you. Trust me, I do,” Harry surrenders. Though he does take the tablet when Louis finds the video and hands it to him. “Ok, yeah that was bullshit. Was El ok?”

“Yeah, yeah, shaken up and pissed like me,” Louis says more quietly. “I got a security guard after. For both of us. Just not worth the risk.”

“One would think you would have gotten one a lot sooner. Especially after I disappeared,” Harry points out, one brow up.

No one really knows how to respond to that, but it had never occurred to Liam to get one. Then again, he didn’t leave his damn house for months at a time. So he basically would have been paying someone to sit on his front doorstep. But it never crossed his mind that something could happen to him like it had Harry. No one ever thinks that. That sense of ‘it’ll never happen to me’ can be pretty potent and make a person feel infallible.

“So the press are pissed,” Niall says finally, returning to the original topic at hand, the silence getting a little awkward. “I wonder what the fandom is like?”

“They crashed Tumblr and Twitter again,” Louis replies.

Harry tenses beside Liam and he turns to look at the window as though he’s expecting to see hordes of people just outside.

“It’s really bad isn’t it?” He whispers.

Liam isn’t sure what he really means by that. The fandom, the press or just the general level of interest and excitement now about him. But it’s clearly unsettling him. Harry starts tapping on the tablet, getting out of the video app, and quickly taps on the web browser heading straight to the news headlines. Every single one is about him. Each of them a different take on the story and some of them particularly salacious.

*Harry Styles Alive! Singer and Actor Found After Disappearing for Two Years!*

*Suspect Arrested in Harry Styles Case Didn’t Know He Was Still Alive!*

*Was Harry Used As A Sex Worker? Insider Tells All!*
Mentally, Liam starts cursing repeatedly. He knew it would be bad. He should have stopped Harry before he started searching.

Harry’s hands start to shake and he drops the tablet on the bed and leans away from it. A few whimpers come from his throat.

“Harry, hey, shhh shhh, it’s ok. Just ignore that shit ok? They are just trying to sell ads. None of it matters ok? Most of it isn’t even true,” Liam assures him. He wraps his arms around Harry, squeezing gently and rubbing his shoulder.

“But some of it is. A lot of it is,” Harry whispers. “How do they know so much? How?”

“They don’t Harry,” Louis says quickly, sitting on the bed nearby. “They’re just making shit up and just happened to get a few things right. That doesn’t mean they know anything. I mean, who the hell are these sources?” Louis declares, waving a hand vaguely at the tablet. “No one here is saying anything and we are the only ones who know other than the police. We know they aren’t talking.”

“The hospital,” Harry whispers. “Anyone from there could have said something.”

Louis opens his mouth to rebut him, but closes it a moment later. He realizes that he truly can’t because there was an actual potential. A spike of fury goes through Liam. These were people they were supposed to be able to trust and had taken an oath to protect their patients. Now it appeared at least one of them had sold the story.

“Look, we can easily just ignore it all. If they have no comment from us, then they have no confirmation either, right?” Liam says carefully. “We just won’t worry about them, or any of it. Just forget they are there and they will leave eventually.”

It was not going to be that easy. They all knew that, but he thought he’d try saying it anyway.

“Harry, it doesn’t matter. It really doesn’t, right?” Niall finally says. “All that matters are the people who are here with you right now. All those people on the internet and standing out at the gate, they don’t mean shit. Who the fuck cares what they think or are saying? Just worry about taking care of yourself, ok?”

Harry nods, but doesn’t relax at all.

Liam knows that Harry is not particularly concerned about his public image at the moment, but he also didn’t need the details of what he’s been through shoved into his face daily. His nightmares were doing more than enough damage. So Liam vows to make sure he doesn’t see the news, the Internet, or anything that could be problematic. They will just stick to Netflix and movies and forget about the rest of the world for now. It could be done. It had to be.

 Doesn’t mean he won’t keep an eye on things himself of course. He will just do so surreptitiously when Harry was napping or the like.
Liam’s hopes are raised that Harry has forgotten the media and headlines by the end of the day. He relaxes eventually as they pour through a variety of rom-coms on the telly, but they are dashed not long after they go to bed.

He wakes up in the middle of the night with a shock as Harry starts screaming full out until his voice gets hoarse. He’s lying on his back, having moved away from Liam at some point, and his arms are above his head. His fingers are clawing as though in his mind they are being held there. Liam feels sick instantly because the scars on Harry’s wrists made it clear he’d been restrained. This, coupled with his legs splayed out on the bed, and it didn’t take a genius to know what the nightmare was about.

He sits up quickly, turning the lights on and hoping they might wake Harry. They only make him stop screaming and he instead switches to a whimpering sound. His eyes are screwed closed tightly and his head thrashes back and forth periodically.

Like the last time, Liam has no idea what to do to wake him or to pull him out of it and help him.

Also like the last time, the rest of the house arrives in short order. All of them stand near the end of the bed with the same faces filled with horror as they realize what is playing out inside Harry’s mind.

“Maybe we should pour some water on him?” Louis suggests.

“No, I think that would probably be a really shitty thing to do Lou,” Niall points out, giving him a dirty look.

“What about music? Maybe turn the radio on? Or an alarm?” Gemma suggests in a whisper and Liam shakes his head.

With the voices in the room, Harry’s thrashing had slowed down as though he is on that border of waking up. Becoming aware but still trapped.

An idea comes to Liam and he figures it was far more humane than dumping water on him or blasting an alarm in his ear. So he leans forward and gently takes Harry’s hands, lowering them down to his sides and almost instantly his eyes snap open. He stares at Liam for a long moment. His face unreadable before he starts scrambling against the blankets and scurries up to press his back against the headboard, tucking his knees under his chin. Once there, he notices the rest of the crowd and squawks in shock before scrubbing his hands over his face and into his hair. He drops his face down and curses quietly.

“I mean this in the nicest way, but I really do not need everyone coming in and watching when I have a nightmare,” he mumbles out from between his knees.

“We just want to help honey,” Anne says quietly, coming around to sit in front of him. Her hands reach for him but he quickly stops her, putting his own up.

“Sorry, I just…. please I just need to…” He rambles out and she pulls her hands back. “I know you want to help. I know you all mean well, but I… just can’t… Liam knows how to wake me up. Please just let me handle this my way.”

“Of course mate, not a problem. Liam can always call for one or all of us if he needs help,” Niall
replies, cutting off any potential disagreements from Des or Louis, both of whom had opened their mouthes. To further make his point, Niall starts nudging those still standing at the end of the bed towards the door. Most of them go without resistance until only Anne is left.

“Sweetheart, we’ve told you, you don’t have to suffer alone. We are all here for you. It’s ok,” she tries to soothe him, fingers twitching still with the need to touch.

“Mum, it’s not… it’s not ok. None of what is going on with me is ok. None of what happened to me is ok and I just can’t… I can’t share it with you. I don’t even want to think about it myself…”

“Honey…” she starts again, but Liam cuts her off.

“Anne,” he says quickly, looking at her pointedly. He got what Harry was trying to say and the desire he had to keep his mother safe from the really gruesome, disgusting things that had been done to him.

She looks at Liam with a pleading expression and he nods once at her, trying to get her to understand but it’s clear she doesn’t. She does finally do what Harry wants though and gets up and leaves. She promises to be just down the hall if he needs her.

Alone again, Liam just settles against the headboard himself and waits, letting Harry do what he needs to do so long as it isn’t injurious towards himself.

He sits for a long time with his knees still up, chin resting on his arm with his face turned towards the window. They could still hear the hoard of media out there, though they were somewhat subdued during the night. They were just a distant babble of sound and the room felt almost thick with the silence between them. It was so sharp in contrast to the screaming Harry had woken Liam up with.

Liam knows why Harry doesn’t want physical comfort this time. Why he didn’t want to be touched at all. That nightmare was all about being touched against his will. In painful, intimate and violating ways. So Liam let’s Harry control his own physical being. He doesn’t touch him or lean towards him or encroach on his space in any way. He just waits. No matter how much he does want to reach out, comfort and show him kindness.

It’s about twenty minutes later when Harry finally speaks. His voice is soft in the room, but distant, his mind elsewhere.

“They left me once,” he states, then stops for another long moment. As though that was enough of a comment for Liam to be able to understand. “For three days. It was last year. I think they went on a trip or something. Just left me in the hole with no food or water or anything. Chained to the wall.”

He stops and swallows loudly, as though remembering the thirst and Liam’s stomach hurts, ice trickles through his veins. “I remember hoping that I would die. That they’d come back and find me dead. It would be over just like that and I would just die. Not by their hands, but just by plain old dehydration or whatever. I was already weak. I didn’t think I would last that long.”

He stops again and Liam isn’t sure if this story will continue or not. His body feels cold with the thought that Harry could have died that way, so quiet and alone. Buried alive in a dirt hole. He swallows hard trying not to vomit. “You kept me alive.”

Liam stops breathing. He tries to determine if he actually heard Harry say that or if he just dreamed it in his turmoil. But then Harry turns and looks at him. His face lucid, eyes haunted and body still curled into a tiny ball.
“You kept me alive because I couldn’t just give in like that or give up like that. Not without fighting.” He looks away from Liam then, unsure of how his words will impact the other man. “I kept seeing your face and how disappointed you would be in me for giving up. Not because you were being an asshole or something,” he laughs once without humor. “But because you were always the one who pushed me to be better, do more, fight for myself. You always protected me, took care of me and I couldn’t give up without fighting. I couldn’t give up the hope that I might see you again someday.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Liam hears himself saying lamely, unable to really come up with a proper response.

Harry nods and turns back to the window.

“Good,” he says a minute later.

Day 5

Neither one of them mentions the conversation the next day. In fact, Harry had just seemed to move on the second it was over. After close to an hour he had finally calmed enough to lay down again. He had pulled the covers up and faced Liam, but didn’t touch him. Instead he kept his hands neatly placed under the pillow. Liam respected the distance, knowing he had his reasons at that moment and just laid there facing him so Harry could see him if he needed to.

He wakes up in the morning with Harry pressed right up against him again, damn near using Liam as an extra blanket.

It’s the first time Harry wakes up and doesn’t need time to remember where he is. His eyes just open and he’s already lucid, present and relaxed. It makes a nice change.

Some things don’t change though. He still takes forever to finish his Ensure and continues to rip his toast into pieces rather than eating it. But Liam figures that as long as he eventually gets the vitamin drink into him, it was not a battle he needed to pick.

They start the morning off with a shower, repeating the process as they had been since Harry was still pretty wobbly on his feet. The doctor had mentioned on the phone that part of his lack of stability could be due to some muscle atrophy, a result of being forced to be cramped in a small space for so long. Just another thing for Liam’s heart to hurt about. The good news is that the bruises are fading. Many of them were self-inflicted when Harry was banging on the door to knock the lock off and were obtained in his great escape. The scars are the same though. Some pink and long faded and others recent, red and angry.

When they’ve both finished showering, Harry perched on the toilet lid while Liam takes his turn after helping Harry, they wander back out to the bedroom and find Niall and Louis sitting on the end of the bed watching a footie game. Both of them glance up and greet Harry with a nod, eyes wary about his state of mind, but he just nods back and climbs back onto the bed, pulling Liam along behind him. They nest into the pillows and Liam checks his phone. Most of the messages are just cursory check in’s from his mother and sisters asking how Harry is doing, if there is anything they can bring and insisting that Liam makes sure he’s taking care of himself as well.
There is a message he’s somewhat surprised to see though. From someone he hasn’t heard from in over a year.

*Hey Liam, just wanted to check in. I’ve heard the news obviously and I just got in to London. Any chance I could come see Harry and say hi?*

Typical Zayn, polite and perfunctory.

He turns his phone towards Harry so he can read the message himself and see the sender. Liam catches Louis watching them out of the corner of his eye, but says nothing.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Harry replies, looking at Liam as though he is expecting him to contradict him or declare that it’s a bad idea. The bad blood between Harry and Zayn is notorious in the fandom. They all think things went sour between them and that’s what caused Zayn to leave the band and Harry had never forgiven him. Truthfully, they were just two very different people and sometimes personalities just don’t work together. They were fine when they were younger because they were all just kids trying to cope in an insane situation, but as they got older and figured out who they were and what they wanted to get out of the band and their careers, that’s when they started to be at odds. Liam always found it a bit amusing that they claimed it was because they were opposites, when truthfully they were quite similar in many ways. Headstrong, dedicated, talented, laser focused and obsessed with high fashion. It was just that Zayn preferred to do it in a more edgy, mysterious sort of way, while Harry went more of a hipster, pretentious route.

None of that mattered now though. Clearly it was all water under the bridge for Harry, who was obviously willing to forgive and forget and since Zayn wanted to see him, it was a mutual feeling.

*Sure, let me know when you are on your way. Be wary of the assholes parked out front though.*

Liam puts his phone down, assuming that Zayn will get back to him whenever, but he’s surprised to have it ding just one minute later.

*Ok, on my way then. I’ll give them all the finger for you shall I?*

Harry laughs quietly reading the message and Louis fully turns to look at them.

*You’d have to genuinely smile and be friendly to them to surprise them. Let’s be honest.*

Harry laughs harder.

*Wanker.*

“What’s going on back there?” Louis asks, unable to control his curiosity any longer.

“Zayn’s on his way,” Liam replies and Louis looks surprised.

“Nice, the lads all back together again,” Niall says and they all stop and stare at him because he’s right. They haven’t all been together in the same room since 2015. It’s now 2019, four years later. It was a little heady to consider.

They sit in silence for a long while, the game still playing on the TV, but eventually it’s too much for Louis. He stands up and declares he’s going to get snacks at the very least. He brings Harry a few Kit Kats and hands them over with a slightly haunted expression. Clearly witnessing Harry’s
nightmare the night before was still affecting him, but he’s doing his best to hide it.

Harry sets them to the side and leans on Liam with his head on his shoulder while he idly watches the game, though Liam suspects his mind is elsewhere.

They know the moment Zayn arrives outside by the sudden rise in volume out on the street and the sound of a horn blaring as he maneuvers his way through the crowd to the gate. The car door slams just outside a few minutes later. There’s a knock on the door and then Gemma’s voice can be heard. She brings Zayn upstairs and knocks on the bedroom door.

He steps in quietly, black jeans and leather jacket as per usual. His eyes are wide as he looks at the four of them all piled on the bed with Niall lounging like a Roman prince across the end. His eyes find Harry and he wilts a little, but smiles just the same.

“Hey mate,” he says softly and Harry nods once, returning the smile. Zayn’s eyes flick over the way Harry and Liam are cuddled up and his brows lift slightly in surprise, but he says nothing.

“Any chance of a hug? So I know this is real?” He asks with a nervous laugh and Harry nods again a moment later.

He tiptoes across the room. Louis and Niall watch him like a pair of guard dogs as he comes over to Harry’s side of the bed, sitting down carefully and letting Harry close the distance. Liam appreciates the consideration and knows Harry will as well. With a little help from Liam he manages to lean towards Zayn, giving him a gentle hug and the moment Zayn’s arms are around Harry his eyes go wide again and meet Liam’s. Once again the loose sweaters do their job of visually disguising his wasted appearance, but once you touch him it’s quite obvious. Liam shakes his head slightly, a warning not to say anything and not to react. To his credit Zayn schools his face before Harry pulls away, just smiling gently again and letting Harry flop back into Liam’s chest and arms.

Zayn glances towards the other two still watching him intently and notices the pile of junk food on the bed, the little pile of Kit Kats right near Harry’s foot and he grins this time, picking one of them up.

“Some things never change eh? I remember you and I eating through a box of these the night we were put together as a band. You called it our get to know each other session. I got a stomachache,” he laughs and Harry joins in a moment later.

“I remember that. We stayed up all night discussing whether we needed to create a style for the band or not. You suggested leather pants if I recall,” Harry laughs, picking up one of the Kit Kat’s himself and Louis snorts from the end of the bed.

“Seriously Zayn, leather pants on me?” He asks sarcastically and Zayn feigns looking offended.

“Hey, I meant the low rider type; baggy, with trainers and snapbacks. You just don’t understand because you don’t get fashion,” he retorts, laughing again.

“Yeah, but really, an Irishman in baggy leather pants?” Niall points out. “Do you remember me back then, all wee and pasty and blond? Not a good look man.”

“You still are wee and pasty. You’re just brunette now,” Liam points out and dodges a punch to his leg.
“There was a reason we canned the idea guys. We both agreed it wouldn’t work on everyone,” Zayn replies. “We were just brainstorming.”

“And eating a lot of Kit Kats,” Harry adds, opening the one in his hand, breaking off a piece, popping it in his mouth and crunching on it.

“What’s hilarious is that of all of us, you two are the only ones who ever have worn leather pants,” Liam points out and Harry and Zayn laugh.

“They weren’t baggy. We both matured in our preferences,” Zayn points out.

“This is fact,” Harry agrees. “I only ever wore them once though cuz they were bloody uncomfortable. I was sweating in places I didn’t know I could sweat.”

“TOO MUCH INFORMATION MATE!” Louis yells and Zayn’s head flops back as he laughs harder.

“It’s so true,” he says a moment later, sitting up to take his leather jacket off as if to prove the point and reaching for a bag of crisps. “They are so uncomfortable.”

The conversation evaporates the tension in the room and they all settle in, laughing and reminiscing. Liam knows this is exactly what Harry needs. To be surrounded by people who love him, who know him best and can distract him for just a little while so he can forget, even for a short time.

By mid-afternoon they have worked their way through the snacks. Louis lies on the floor on his back moaning because he ate two big bags of crisps, on a dare from Niall of course, and Liam could swear it was 2012 again. Gemma had joined them just after lunch, stealing one of Harry’s Kit Kats jokingly and they had put on the Harry Potter series because it seemed a safe enough option.

Anne pops her head in eventually, inquiring what they want for dinner and Louis just moans again from the floor. Which is just as well since she had truly directed the question towards Harry. He shrugs as a response and this causes her to start naming off options.

“Bangers and mash? Shepherd’s Pie? A nice curry?” She lists, getting a head shake from Harry each time. “Please tell me you haven’t been snacking on all this stuff all afternoon and now won’t eat dinner?” She accuses a moment later, though it’s clear she wouldn’t be that bothered if he had been snacking because then it would mean he’s actually been eating period.

“No! That’s Louis,” he declares, the accused moaning again from the floor. “I only had a Kit Kat. I just don’t know what I feel like.”

Her face falls a little when he denies eating the snacks and becomes exasperated at the lack of progress in getting him to eat. It was a strange thing really. Harry never had much difficulty with his appetite before. He had gone a bit healthier with things as he got older, taking more care of his body, which made his current state all the more depressing. It was definitely unlike him not to eat.

“Let’s just keep it simple. I’ll come help you make some grilled cheese sandwiches,” Gemma offers and Harry nods somewhat noncommittally, happy to just end the conversation.

They return to the movies with Louis starting to snore about ten minutes later. This earns him a
pillow in the face by Niall, which gets them all laughing until Anne and Gemma return with their
sandwiches.

“Oh Harry honey I forgot to mention, the Selley’s called. They were hoping to come see you
tomorrow and I was thinking we could invite some more family, maybe make a little day out of it?
They are all excited to see you,” Anne says with a smile, handing a sandwich to Harry. Her face
falls as he visibly blanches, growing tense next to Liam, glancing at him several times, his face a
little panicked.

“Anne, it’s probably not a good…” Liam starts but Harry cuts him off.

“It’s fine, I guess. Just… I guess that would be ok,” he says quietly, face dropped down as his
fingers fiddle with the blanket. He doesn’t take the plate from his mum.

“Harry, if you aren’t comfortable with it or ready, it’s ok,” Liam says softly, squeezing his
shoulders gently. He senses that Harry is acquiescing because of family duty and because family is
important to him, always has been, but it’s also clear he’s overwhelmed with the idea of a party. He
knows it’ll be much worse when it’s happening.

“No, it’s fine. They’re family. Just not too many people yeah?” He asks Anne carefully, finally
accepting the plate with the sandwich on it. He puts it on the bed in front of him, likely to be
forgotten or torn into pieces and uneaten.

Anne smiles, happy that he’s willing and Liam senses this particular request is down to a belief that
Harry should be surrounded by family right now, not friends or Liam. It was the same accusation
Des leveled at him in the hospital.

The other three lads watch this exchange quietly, Niall chewing his sandwich thoughtfully. They
wait until Anne leaves to speak up.

“Harry, if you honestly don’t want to have a bunch of people up here tomorrow, you can say no
mate. Don’t get pressured into stuff you don’t want to do,” Zayn assures him, coming to sit on the
bed in front of him again.

“He’s right Harry. Just say no. They will understand,” Louis agrees.

Harry glances at Liam again, face still concerned but he shakes his head anyway.

“No it’s fine, I guess. She’s right. They are family and this was to be expected,” he concedes, voice
a little shaky. “It’ll only be for a few hours right?” He asks the room and they all nod, without
knowing if that’s true or not.

“Listen, if you get overwhelmed, need a break, or just want to end it you tell me, ok?” Liam says
softly but firmly, squeezing his shoulder again in emphasis. “Just tell me and I’ll bring you back
upstairs and the lads will shoo everyone out, alright?”

“Exactly. We will kick them out the second you’re done,” Louis promises, clapping his hands
together.
Harry takes a deep breath, happy to have an escape hatch and he visibly relaxes.

Liam takes the chance to pick up Harry’s plate and nudges it towards him, earning a side eyed
glance for his efforts. After a minute Harry picks up the sandwich and tears a piece off and pops it
in his mouth, chewing slowly.

He only eats two more bites, but it’s more than he had at breakfast so it’s progress. They decide to keep the evening quiet and relaxed, watching the first of the Lord of the Rings trilogy before calling it a night. Harry slumps against Liam and is already drowsy. Zayn decides to stay the night so he can help out the next day and bunks in with Louis, declaring that Niall snores too loudly. Niall responds by belching loudly in his ear and the three of them leave the bedroom giggling. Liam can only shake his head at how much they had matured over the years and also how little. He helps Harry settle down under the covers, assuming their now usual position pressed tight together, and is asleep not long after Harry starts to snore softly.

Harry jolts him awake a few hours later, body jumping and strange grunting sounds coming from his throat. He starts to thrash, fighting with the blankets, kicking and shoving like he’s trapped in a net and Liam does the only thing he can think of. He yanks the blankets down and off of Harry releasing him and the thrashing stops immediately. His eyes snap open in the moonlight and dance around the room.

Liam quickly rolls back and turns the light on, filling the room with a soft glow. He turns back to find Harry staring at him wide eyed and stunned.

“Harry?” He says carefully, trying to determine if it was another episode or not. “Harry, it’s alright. It’s me, Liam.”

Harry stares at him a moment longer before suddenly taking a big gulping breath, like he had been holding it, and he releases it with a whoosh. He scrubs his hands over his face and apologizes through his fingers.

“Sorry, I just… I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it’s fine. It’s alright. Are you ok?” Liam asks carefully and Harry drops his hands, staring up at the ceiling.

“I was back in the hole. It was actually two areas, one was bigger than the other.” He says quietly, as though this makes complete sense to Liam.

“You told the detective they carved it into the ground in the basement of the house. Did they carve two?” Liam asks, unsure if he should even be asking questions or be curious at all.

“No, just one hole in the wall. They put a grate over it. When you got inside the hole though you were in a larger area. They put a mattress in there for…” he stops and swallows. Liam says nothing, already knowing what that was for. “And then when you went further in there was a space, kind of like a tunnel at the back, about the size of a casket actually. They put another grate over that and would lock me in there if I didn’t do what they wanted or if they wanted me to be extra quiet. Or just for fun.” He takes a long deep breath. He reaches his hands up in the open space above him, fingers spreading and he leaves them hanging up there for as long as he can until they start to shake and he’s forced to drop them. “I didn’t used to be scared of small spaces.”

Liam’s throat closes for a minute. His eyes are getting wet as he fights the tears of sorrow, knowing the suffering that Harry was put through for two years. In that time Liam was in his big house with his dog, watching telly, eating what he wanted and felt safe and sound. He wrote a song, released an album, performed and travelled and spent holidays with his family. All the while Harry was
trapped in a dirt casket underground. He was terrified and alone except for two sadists who did whatever they wanted to him.

“I’m so sorry Harry. I’m so sorry,” he finally gets out, voice thick. Harry turns and looks at him, face blank and then surprised.

Seeing Liam’s upset he rolls towards him, snuggling in close but still keeping his eyes on Liam’s.

“It’s not your fault Liam. I don’t blame anyone for what happened. Except for them. None of you could have done anything to stop it. I know that now. I’m just sorry I keep telling you things. I should stop. It’s hurting you,” he admits, hand coming up to press against Liam’s collarbone. His eyes are watching his own fingers now as he looks away with shame at unloading on Liam.

“Hey, no, it’s ok,” Liam says quietly. His own hand comes up to trail through Harry’s hair, tucking it behind his ear and gently brushing it off of his temple. “You need to be able to talk about it and I want you to talk about it with me if it helps you. I’m sorry for getting upset. I just hate to think about you getting hurt, but I don’t want you to feel bad about needing to talk. You can tell me anything you want or need to, ok? I’m here to listen and help you Haz. I want to.”

Harry’s eyes come back up to Liam’s after a moment and he nods once.

“Thank you,” he adds, tucking his head in under Liam’s chin and pushing in close again. “I’m ok now. You’re here and I’m ok to sleep now.”

Liam laughs softly. He should be getting used to these strange conversations they keep having where Harry just concludes them as though they are already in the past. But considering the content of them, he’s not sure he will ever get used to hearing about what Harry went through. He will just have to get better at hiding his reactions.

Using a foot he manages to get the blankets back up and over them. Though he only pulls them up as high as their waists so Harry still has his arms free. He then leans back carefully and turns the light off.

Harry doesn’t fall asleep nearly as fast, body still tense and breath short against Liam’s chest. But he doesn’t say anything more either and when he finally does start to snore quietly, Liam is relieved. Reveling in it because it was surely to be short lived.
Chapter 10

Day 6

Liam wakes up sensing that Harry is already awake, though they are still a tangle of limbs in bed. But he can feel his tension, body rigid and fingers twitching against Liam’s chest.

He’s about to ask Harry what’s wrong when he hears noises outside. Car doors are closing and there are a lot of voices and he remembers: the party. Clever of Anne not to use that word when convincing Harry, when clearly it was what she was intending.

“Dammit,” Liam mutters, squeezing Harry gently. “I can still stop it you know. You just have to tell me. I’ll tell them all to go home and we can spend the day watching Netflix.”

Harry startles slightly when Liam speaks, but he sighs a minute later.

“No, I might as well get it over with,” he grumbles out and Liam almost laughs as Harry starts trying to sit up. He untangles himself from the blankets and Liam’s arms and with a firm push from Liam he gets vertical.

He stares out the window for a long few moments, knees up under his chin and arms wrapped around his legs. Liam lies beside him and waits, hand rubbing his lower back gently, because knows that he needs some time to think it over. Eventually he turns back to Liam and his face is sad, pleading and that familiar burst of pain shoots through his chest.

“We can come back up here though, right? If I need to?” He asks quietly, worry in his voice.

Liam sits up, hand immediately going to cup Harry’s jaw gently, thumb rubbing the thin hollow skin on his cheek.

“Of course, no question. You just tell me you’re done and I’ll bring you straight up here,” he assures the frightened man and Harry nods. He looks somewhat relieved, but still nervous as there are more car doors and someone shouting out on the drive.

There are some louder footsteps on the stairs and Harry goes tense again immediately. They are followed by Louis’ angry voice.

“No, I will take it up. No one is allowed upstairs. End of discussion. Harry will come down to see you, you are not to come up here at all. Am I clear?” He growls down at someone whose answer they don’t hear.

“We’ve got it Lou. Just take that in to Harry and let them know what’s going on. We will hold things down out here,” Zayn says from what sounds like the top of the stairs.

A few moments later, with some grumbled curse words and mumbled insults from Louis about the people downstairs, he knocks on the door, opening it a crack and peering in.

“Hey, I’ve brought your banana drink thing up,” he declares, seeing the two of them sitting up on the bed and staring at him. He steps into the room now that he knows they are awake and closes the door behind him. “They’re all here, the lot of them. Brought food and stuff. Evidently this is a
welcome home party. Pricks.”

Harry sighs loudly, shoving his hand through his hair.

“Again, Harry, we can call it off and send them all home. You do not need to do this,” Liam assures him once again, figuring that he’ll keep saying it so Harry knows it’s always an option.

“I want to, trust me, but they won’t go quietly and like I said, I might as well get it over with. Besides, I do want to see them. They are my family and I’ve missed them. It’s just a lot at once,” he sighs again and accepts the drink from Louis with shaky hands.

“Well, you just come down when you’re ready, or not at all, whatever works best for you mate,” Louis assures him, nodding at Liam before stepping out the door. They can still hear him talking more quietly with Zayn outside, but both tune it out.

Harry fiddles with the label on his Ensure. He tears slivers of the plastic film off, but does not even consider actually drinking it.

“What do you want to do Harry?” Liam asks him quietly.

Harry glances at him quickly, green eyes clear and sharp, but mouth a tight nervous line.

“I suppose I should get ready and go down,” he says with a note of finality, as though he is heading down to his own execution. He turns to set the Ensure on the side table, but Liam stops him and gives him a look to remind him of his promise to at least drink the shakes if nothing else. Harry grumbles quietly but takes a sip, swallowing loudly.

“Do you want to have a shower first?” Liam asks, thinking it might buy more time for Harry to get mentally prepared, but he shakes his head.

“No, I’ll do that later, if that’s ok?” He asks and Liam nods. “I’ll just clean up, get changed and that will have to be good enough. I don’t have the energy for more.”

“Ok,” Liam agrees and they go quiet for a while as Harry finishes the shake. When he gets to the bottom with a rattle of the last dredges going up the straw, he sets the empty bottle down with a sigh and a deep breath. He nods in Liam’s direction to indicate he’s ready.

“Right, let’s get you something to wear then, yeah?” Liam asks as he slides off the bed, leaving Harry sitting on the side. He pulls open his closet doors and quickly finds a pair of jeans that he knows are too small for him now since he had sort of let himself go a bit while Harry was missing. He grabs a long sleeved henley and another warm hoodie, knowing Harry liked things he could hide his scars with. He presents his choices to Harry one by one and the other man half nods, half shrugs and Liam decides that’s about as good as he can get in assent. He sets the clothes on the end of the bed and reaches for Harry, helping him to stand before making the trip to the bathroom. He steps out to let Harry wash his face and use the facilities, finding him some socks and pants before coming back in to the bathroom. He’s brushing his teeth, sitting on the little stool that Liam had brought upstairs for this purpose.

There is a knock at the door just as they are heading back out to the bedroom to get Harry changed and Gemma pops her head in the door.

“Hey, mum wanted to know if you were coming down soon.” She inquires apologetically. “I told
her to keep it small and quiet, but you know mum.”

“I also know the rest of our family,” Harry deadpans. “She probably wasn’t given much of a choice.” He sits down on the side of the bed with a sigh, face wincing at the aches and pains in his body and Liam quickly pours out a couple of the prescribed pain killers as well as his antibiotic and hands them over. Harry accepts them gratefully and dutifully swallows them with some water. “Tell them I’ll be down soon, I just need to get changed.”

Gemma looks unsure, but nods all the same before turning and leaving to go relay the message.

Liam hurries to help Harry get changed, not wanting him to get cold. He has to find a belt for the jeans so they won’t fall down, Harry’s sharps hips not up to the task.

Once he’s ready, he settles back against the pillow with another wince while Liam hurries to have a wee, clean himself up and brush his own teeth. He throws on some black jeans and a striped t-shirt. He also finds a cardigan and puts it on, earning one quick smirk from Harry, who had referred to Liam as grandpa the last time he had worn that type of sweater. Liam gives him a jokingly defiant look while stuffing his feet into a pair of trainers and he brings Harry’s slippers over to him.

Both ready, Liam sits down on the bed next to Harry and takes his hand, squeezing it.

“Once again, are you sure you are ok with this?” He asks carefully, wanting to give Harry every possible opportunity to change his mind if he needed to. Harry nods, closing his eyes slowly and sighing. Liam can’t help but notice that he looks a little paler than he had. A consequence of his nerves he assumes, but a pang of worry goes through him all the same. Harry musters himself though, bracing his hands on Liam’s arms to stand up and then looping them around his waist to keep his balance as they walk to the door.

Opening the bedroom door reveals the actual volume of the assembled crowd downstairs and Harry stops moving, body going tense. There is an array of voices. Some talking, some laughing and a few sound a bit heated. They are mixed in with the sounds of feet moving, utensils hitting dishes and the television playing in the background. The air is full of the scent of various foods and coffee. Despite his personal annoyance at this entire affair, Liam’s stomach gives an interested grumble. But it instantly goes tight when he glances at Harry’s face, eyes saucer wide and mouth open and trembling. Liam can feel him leaning away from the stairs and back towards the bedroom without moving his feet. One of his hands comes up shakily, pressing over his ear to try to drown some of the clatter out. Liam sees Louis moving out of the corner of his eye, hurrying down the stairs and shushing repeatedly, whispering for everyone to shut the fuck up. This earns him a few angry comments and balking, but he quickly quiets them with a few harshly whispered words that Liam doesn’t hear.

It takes entirely too long for them all to quiet down and Harry turns suddenly, crowding in against Liam and pressing his nose into his neck. His breathing is rapid and his hands flutter between them. Liam wraps his arms around Harry. Holding him tightly, but gently, he rubs his back intermittently waiting for him to calm down.

After a while he starts walking backwards, back into the bedroom, and tries tugging Harry along with him. As the noise downstairs dims, Harry starts to relax slowly, fighting Liam’s attempt to pull him away from it.

“I’m ok, I’m ok, I’m ok,” he whispers quickly, turning to look at the stairs warily. “I need to at
least try. They’re my family. I love them,” he adds, saying it as though it’s a question, something he needs to convince himself of.

“Harry, you don’t owe anyone anything, ok? You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. No matter who they are” Liam assures him, annoyed that this kind of pressure was being put on him so soon after he had just escaped from a living hell.

“No, no,” Harry shakes his head. “I know, I know that, but I think I want to. I can at least try.”

Liam sighs this time and turns to Zayn and Niall who are standing at the top of the stairs, faces concerned and unsure of what to do.

“Ok, ground rules, no one touches him, absolutely no one, without his permission. And no one is to pressure him into hugs or anything,” Liam states, the other two nodding quickly and looking more confident, their task now clear. “The volume level needs to stay low and only one person at a time can approach. No personal questions. No discussions about the investigation and absolutely no questions about where he was. Got it?” The other two nod vigorously, hurrying down the stairs to issue the rules.

“Thank you,” Harry says quietly, throwing Liam a grateful look.

“You ready?” Liam asks and Harry nods.

They resume their slow shuffle to the stairs and greet Louis coming back up them. With Liam on one side and Louis on the other, they are able to help Harry get down the stairs far easier than the last time when he had tried to work his way down on his ass.

The living room and kitchen are silent as they come down, but Liam can feel the weight of the eyes on them and can only imagine what Harry is feeling. Once they are in view, there are several loud gasps and Harry visibly shrinks. He tilts his head forward as his hair falls over his face to hide it, the quietest of whimpers coming from his throat.

Louis leads the way, heading to a big comfortable chair not far from the stairs where Zayn and Niall stand guard behind it.

Harry’s breathing becomes louder and more erratic as they head to the chair. His body trembles and he all but shoves Liam into the chair as well, curling up against him and burrowing into his chest. A pang of dread goes through Liam and one quick glance at Harry’s wide, terrified eyes confirms that there has been a break with reality and he’s forgotten where he is again. It was especially troubling that it had happened while he was wide awake and walking across the room. It was a first and potentially a dangerous precedent. The fear and nervousness had to be the cause, but it was still worrisome that it would happen at all.

“Louis, blanket,” Liam whispers and their friend quickly hurries over to the couch to grab the throw, opening it and draping it over both of them on the chair. Liam quickly pulls it up and over Harry’s head. He was shielding him from view, but also blocking his view of the room, forcing Harry to look only at him for the time being.

“Haz, look at me. It’s ok. You’re ok. This is real. You’re here with me,” he says quickly, hand on the side of Harry’s neck as his terrified green eyes dance all over his face.

“Does he not know where…” someone starts asking, but they are quickly cut off by an angry shush
Harry whimpers and tries to peek around the blanket, but Liam stops him. He can see clearly that he’s not ready yet.

“Hey, just focus on me. It’s Liam, I’m here with you. You’re alright, Haz. You’re alright. Just look at me,” he whispers and Harry dutifully does stare at him, but the fog remains and another thread of panic goes through Liam. What if this is it? What if he can’t remember and he’s lost his grip entirely. Time ticks by as Harry quietly whimpers and stares at Liam, fingers twitching and fidgeting with his sleeves while Liam continues to issues gentle platitudes, keeping his focus as best he can. He can hear the rest of the room shuffling, all of them listening and watching with wide concerned eyes. Harry’s own eyes keep darting to the side, his own senses telling him that there were people on the other side of the blanket. In all the times he’s had these episodes, Liam has never seen one go on this long and he is just starting to consider the idea of picking him up and carrying him upstairs. Hoping that maybe the familiarity of the bedroom will help bring him around and help him remember. But then the fidgeting fingers are playing with the buttons on Liam’s cardigan, examining them closely. Harry looks back up at Liam’s face again, tracing over it more slowly and Liam tries smiling at him gently. “It’s ok Haz, you’re ok. You’re here with me, and you’re safe.”

Harry lets out a shuttering breath and looks back down at the buttons, fingers playing with the top one again.

“Grandpa,” Harry whispers and Liam laughs once quietly.

“Yes, you called me that for wearing cardigans, cheeky bugger,” he whispers back and Harry huffs a laugh as well. This time when his eyes come back up to Liam’s face they are clear and lucid. He closes them slowly after a minute, the panic and episode having exhausted him. Then he seems to remember why he’s there and that they aren’t alone. He peeks around the edge of the blanket, Liam letting him this time, though he keeps it ready in case Harry starts to wobble again.

“Shit,” Harry whispers, “I’m sorry, fuck.”

Liam rubs his shoulder and shakes his head.

“You don’t have to apologize. It’s not your fault. We know you aren’t doing this on purpose,” he assures Harry.

The rest of the crowd in the room stands silently, all having gathered when Harry was coming down the stairs and now most of them had no idea what to do. Gemma moves first, going and collecting cups of tea for Harry and Liam while Harry’s cousin Matt slowly walks over to them.

“Uh hey, Harry. You ok? Not really sure what just happened there…” he says carefully, face a mirror of the confused expressions around the room. While they were all warned that there were ground rules and for good reasons because of Harry’s state of mind, evidently none of them had really absorbed the information and were still shocked at what they were seeing.

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“He’s fine. He just forgets where he is sometimes,” Liam replies, since Harry was starting to shrink back into the blanket again when being approached. Matt doesn’t seem to notice Harry’s reaction. His face is emotional though he’s trying to hide it. Liam knows they were close, like brothers, but those types of relationships and dynamics were hard for Harry to remember and connect to right now. He starts coming even closer and Niall and Zayn close in from behind protectively, but
Matt’s eyes don’t leave Harry. He crouches down in front of the chair, the movement too fast for Harry to prepare for and he jolts back. He almost crawls onto Liam’s lap, turning his face away and hugging the blanket around himself right up to his nose.

“Hey, back up a bit,” Zayn growls at him. Matt looks up in surprise and then back to Harry with wide eyes, unable to process why Harry is trying to get away from him.

Ben and Ella come up as well, though they keep a bit of distance. Their parents, Harry’s aunt and uncle join them, all of them aghast at his appearance and behavior. Liam wants so badly to shout at them to just fuck off and stop judging him because it wasn’t his fault he was like this.

“Harry honey it’s ok, it’s us. You don’t have to be afraid of us,” Dee declares before moving to crouch down beside Matt, the other three standing in a semi-circle behind them. Even Liam feels penned in by this.

Harry starts to shake and Liam tightens his hold in a show of comfort and support before turning to the crowd to tell them off.

“All of you need to back up, now. He knows who you are, he can’t help how he reacts and you are going to have to be a hell of a lot more understanding of that right now or I’ll be asking you to leave.”

“He’s right Dee, Harry needs time to adjust and get comfortable with people. We’ve all had to give him that time, so back up,” Des states from somewhere behind Liam where he can’t see him.

She throws Harry a pained look, but stands up and backs away, Matt following her with clear hurt on his face. Liam just wishes people would understand that this isn’t about them and their feelings.

“I’m sorry, I just…” Harry whispers and Liam squeezes his shoulder again.

“Shh, don’t apologize. It’s not your fault,” he says gently and Harry glances at him.

With some space in front of them again, Harry takes the chance to look around and really see who is there. From his step-brother Mike and the rest of the Twist family, to the Selley’s and some people that Liam doesn’t even recognize, but Harry does. Once he’s finished his initial inventory, Harry goes more slowly through the crowd, acknowledging each one with a quick smile and a nod. They all remain standing about the room, eyes wide as they take in his changed appearance, but the tension slowly starts to ease.

“Why doesn’t everyone find a seat, maybe have something to eat?” Gemma suggests and slowly, one by one they all sit down though still watching Harry like a zoo exhibit. Gemma quickly pops in to the kitchen again and comes back with a plate of assorted nibbles for Harry and Liam. She sets it on the arm of the chair, but Harry barely glances at it.

The silence in the room, aside from the usual shuffling noises and the odd sniffle, was getting deafening. It seemed as though everyone wanted to be here. To see Harry, to share in the joy of his being alive, but his rather bizarre arrival had stymied them all and now no one knew how to behave or even what to say. And Harry certainly wasn’t a conversation starter right now. As Liam suspected, this was a terrible idea and it was far too soon for Harry to handle this kind of gathering. People should have come individually and taken it more slowly. But here they were, all in his living room. Liam was just waiting to see who would say the wrong thing and put their foot in it first.
Louis gets up a few minutes later and turns the telly back on, putting the footie game on as a way to fill the space and to give people something to focus on. Turns out Liam wasn’t going to have to wait long for the first off-color comment though, courtesy of the game.

“You been following the footie Harry? Manchester’s been doing well,” his Uncle Mike says from the couch. His eyes are on the game as he realizes what he’s just said and he blanches, turning to Harry who is regarding him wryly.

“Not particularly. Been a little preoccupied,” he replies sarcastically.

“Right… right, sorry…” his Uncle replies, looking down sheepishly.

A knock on the door breaks the moment and Gemma hurries off to go answer it. Liam isn’t entirely sure why she seems to be the one playing hostess, but he suspects it’s because she doesn’t know what else to do.

Ruth comes in a moment later, arms laden with carrier bags and she looks at the assembled crowd with some shock.

“Oh! I didn’t know you had company. Thought I’d bring the groceries round before I headed off to work,” she exclaims, standing stock still for a moment before recovering. “Right, I’ll uh, I’ll just pop these into the kitchen and then be off.”

Within seconds of her heading into the kitchen, her back to the group and bags on the ground, Liam gets a text on his phone.

_The hell is going on?_

Harry snorts quietly. Anne and Dee both look at him, but he’s watching Liam’s phone.

_Anne thought a welcome home party with all the family was a great idea. They all brought food and everything. Isn’t it wonderful?_

Liam adds the sarcasm emoji and they hear Ruth snort quietly in the kitchen.

She quickly unpacks the bags, putting everything away as she used to do when Liam was going through his self-imposed house arrest, before coming back into the living room and up to Liam to give him a quick hug, representing both a greeting and farewell since she had to get off to work.

“Hello Harry love,” she says quietly, giving him a quick squeeze and a kiss on the cheek. This was becoming the norm when she came to the house. Liam can feel the eyes on them, some of them angry that Harry was so willing to accept affection from Liam’s sister, but not his own family. Liam has to fight the urge to give them a smug look. “Ok, I’m off then. Give me a text if you need me to bring anything else.”

With that she’s gone. Waving at everyone as she goes and giving Liam an amused wink just before she’s out of sight.

The quiet awkwardness resumes. Liam catches Louis rolling his eyes and has to pop a sausage roll in his mouth to hide his smirk.
“Harry honey, do you want something to eat? I brought some of my homemade muffins and Ella made her lasagna,” Dee offers and Harry shakes his head.

“No, thank you. I’m not hungry,” he replies politely and Des shakes his head slightly in frustration.

“You may not feel hungry honey, but you still need to try to eat. The doctor said you should still try no matter what to help build up your strength and weight,” Anne says quietly and Harry huffs loudly in annoyance.

“I’m fine mum. I just had my Ensure upstairs,” he replies tersely.

“Ok, alright. But if you want anything, you just have to ask,” she answers, voice sad and Liam feels some sympathy for her. He could understand why she wanted to push Harry to eat, just looking at him was painful and it seemed like it was an easy solution. But Harry had his reasons for his resistance, he just wasn’t sharing them.

He waits a few minutes for the room to be quiet again. Everyone is pretending to watch the game for a lack of any other ideas of what to do, but it’s obvious they are watching Harry more. Picking up another sausage roll, Liam offers it to Harry who shakes his head. Liam shrugs and pops it into his own mouth, earning a smirk from Harry. He waits another few minutes before picking up a piece of cucumber with some onion dip on it, once again offering it to Harry who declines and then eating it himself with a loud crunch and Harry snorts. It takes two crackers with cheese and a piece of broccoli with the same dip on it before Harry finally gives in. His mood is lifted by Liam’s silly manner and he snags a sausage roll himself, biting it in half and chewing on it thoughtfully while examining the other half. Liam glances at Anne and sees the gratitude on her face and he nods once. He had no idea if this little scheme would work, but he’s glad to get some progress, no matter how tiny.

Harry finishes the sausage roll before poking at a piece of cheese, picking it up and nibbling on it. He follows that with a little cherry tomato. Biting into it he squirts juice on Liam’s cheek, making him jump in surprise and then laugh. The rest of the room giggles as well, having been watching them the entire time. Liam accepts a proffered napkin from Gemma, who also deftly replaces the now empty plate with a full one.

The entire exchange and Harry relaxing has brought about a release of the tension in the room and it’s not long before conversation picks up. Everyone fills Harry in on the goings on in the family, before they all start chatting amicably about the room. Louis, Mike and Matt all end up watching the game, talking about the plays and Niall joins them after a bit. Zayn ends up talking with Gemma, discussing his recent fashion project and things are nice and calm. Liam then realizes this wasn’t so bad after all. Harry even seems to be enjoying himself. He’s watching the game and jokingly asking who all the players are since the teams have changed so much in two years. He eats a few more sausage rolls and a mini cupcake and Liam is pretty sure it’s the most he’s eaten since he escaped. Maybe even in two years.

With his mood better and his attitude calmer, Dee takes the chance to ask for a cuddle and he acquiesces, giving her a hug. She sheds a few tears at just how frail he feels, but she quickly swipes them away and declares that they will do everything they can to help him get better.

Others follow her, asking for hugs and the chance to really greet him and welcome him back and he repeats the process for each of them.

It’s late in the afternoon when they’ve all finally had their chance and Liam can see the exhaustion
on Harry’s face. His body is slumping against Liam’s and he’s about to ask Harry if he wants to go up for a nap when Des suddenly jumps out of his chair and starts yelling.

“THEY GOT HIM! FINALLY!”

There are a few sounds of surprise around the room. Harry jumps with his eyes going wide before he huddles into Liam who quickly wraps his arms around him.

Des doesn’t explain his comment, but quickly everyone is looking at the telly and there is a lot of talking all at once.

“It’s about time!”

“What took them so long?”

“Look Harry, it’s all over now. They got him!”

Harry looks at them with a mixture of confusion and fear, not happy with the noise or the implications of what they were saying.

Liam glances at the TV and sees it: a breaking news banner on the bottom of the screen announcing that Brian has been apprehended. He’s relieved and happy for all of three seconds before Harry starts panicking.

“I want to go upstairs. I need to go upstairs. Now, please Liam. I need to go upstairs,” Harry says quickly, face and voice pleading with Liam and he doesn’t even hesitate. He helps Harry stand quickly and starts the shuffle to the stairs.

“Wait, where are you going? Don’t you want to see this?” Matt asks quickly and the whole room turns towards them. Liam throws him a dirty look. This was one of the rules, not to discuss the investigation or what had happened to Harry. They couldn’t be held responsible for the banner coming up on the TV, but their behavior after was clearly causing Harry a lot of distress and none of them seemed to be able to understand that.

“Harry needs a break,” Liam states evenly before quickly picking the injured man up and heading toward the stairs. Matt starts following before several others do as well, asking if Harry is ok or if there is anything they can do to help. They start crowding in before Liam even takes a step. Louis, Niall and Zayn hurry in, pushing them all back.

“Hey, you know the rules. No one upstairs. Harry needs a break. Stay here!” Louis says loudly trying not to yell, but needing to get his point across.

Harry hangs on with a death grip, whimpering in Liam’s ear and he hurries to get them into the safe, comforting quiet of the bedroom. He kicks the door closed with his foot and heads towards the bed.

Harry twists slightly in his arms, his breathing erratic and he starts motioning towards the bathroom with one hand.

“No, bathroom, gonna be sick,” he declares before lurching slightly and his hand clamps over his mouth.
Liam doesn’t need to be told twice. He all but sprints into the bathroom with Harry and carefully but quickly gets him down on his knees in front of the toilet before he lets loose, emptying his stomach rapidly. Liam pulls his hair back and holds it, rubbing his back gently and tries to calmly remind Harry to breathe.

Harry coughs harshly, his whole body shuddering with it and Liam tries to pull back more errant strands of hair from his face. That’s when he notices it, the burning heat emanating from Harry’s head. Forgetting the hair he quickly presses his palm to Harry’s forehead and knows that his temperature is high, worryingly so.

“How long have you had this fever? How long have you not been feeling well?” He asks carefully and waits while Harry dry heaves into the toilet before he gets an answer.

“I just… felt shitty all day… but just started feeling sick,” he answers brokenly, coughing and voice rough.

“Oh no, is he ok?” Gemma asks from the door and Liam seizes upon her.

“Get me the thermometer. It’s in the top drawer… no the other one, the one that goes in your ear,” he tells her, and she quickly obeys. She hands the appliance over and Liam waits through another violent sounding dry heave before he gently hangs on to Harry and presses the tip into his ear. Gemma takes over holding his hair and stares at Liam with worried eyes as they wait for it to beep. “Shit, 102.2. That’s high. Haz, we gotta call the doctor, you might have to go to the hospital.”

This earns him a groan from the toilet but he doesn’t balk, just sits up slightly and flops against Liam. Gemma flushes the toilet and hurries to the sink to dampen a wash cloth. She wipes Harry’s mouth with it before getting a clean one soaked with cold water to put against his forehead. Liam pulls his phone out of his pocket and dials the doctor.

“Dr. Mercer speaking,” she answers after only one ring and Liam barely lets her finish talking.

“Hi, Liam calling about Harry. He’s really sick and has a fever of a hundred and two. What do we do?”

“How long has he had the fever?” She asks quickly, sounding serious.

“I don’t know. He says he’s been feeling shitty all day, but only just started throwing up. I just noticed he felt hot,” he answers, worry pulsing in his chest as Harry starts to shiver against him.

“Is he in any pain?”

“I don’t know,” he replies before looking down at Harry, who was slumped against him, shaking and whimpering quietly. “Harry, does anything hurt? Are you in any pain?” Harry doesn’t answer, just curls in on himself more and a streak of panic goes through Liam. “Shit, I think he’s lost the plot again. That’s twice today. He forgets where he is and starts to panic. He was wincing a lot this morning, but took some pain killers and said he would be fine. He didn’t say what was hurting.”

“Oh, he needs to come in, now. Do you want me to send an ambulance or can you bring him?” She asks, sounding more breathless as though she is now moving rapidly somewhere.

With the mass of people outside coupled with the group downstairs, he didn’t particularly want to add to Harry’s clearly increasing panic with an ambulance. It would also take more time than just
getting in the car and driving themselves.

“We will drive there,” he tells the doctor before turning to Gemma. “Go tell Louis to get my car, bring it to the back and be ready. He can drive us.” She nods and takes off at full speed, yelling Louis’ name as soon as she’s clear of the bathroom.

Harry’s whimpering starts to form into words then. Liam struggles to understand what he’s saying, hoping it might help in figuring out what’s wrong.

“No no no no no… please don’t… please… I’ll be good, I promise….” He breaks off with another whimper and ice goes through Liam’s veins. His throat is thick with pain as he listens to Harry beg the demons not to hurt him.

“Liam? You still there? I need you to take his temperature again. We need to monitor it. Has his mental state changed? Has he come back to normal?” The doctor asks, peppering him rapidly with questions.

“No, no he’s not back, he’s way worse. He has no idea where he is… what do I do?” He asks, lost and scared. He’s so unsure of what to do and feels completely useless as Harry curls up in the fetal position in front of him on the floor, shivering and still begging for mercy.

“Take his temperature now!” She yells in his ear and he jumps, scrambling to find the thermometer and obediently sticking it back in Harry’s ear, waiting for the beep.

“Fuck… shit… he’s at 104.2, fuck fuck fuck,” he tells her, voice panicked before he starts yelling himself. “What do I do? Is he gonna die?”

“Liam, calm down. Get a cloth with cold water on it and put it on the back of his neck. Try to get him to drink some water if you can, but just keep cold cloths on his head and neck and hurry to get him here!”

“Harry! Oh my God, what is going on?” Anne shrieks behind Liam. She hurries around him to kneel on the floor in front of Harry, hands reaching to comfort him, trying to find out what’s wrong with her child.

“He’s really sick. We need cloths soaked in cold water,” Liam tells her mechanically, already reaching for the one Gemma had before and putting it on the back of Harry’s neck. He winces when Harry jumps as though he’s being attacked. “We’ve got to get him to the hospital. Has Louis got the car ready?”

More voices come into the room. Des, Niall, Zayn, Dee and others come in all asking what’s wrong with what they can do to help.

“GET THE CAR OUTSIDE FOR FUCK’S SAKE!” Liam hollers, unable to control himself any longer and they all jump. Harry starts screaming and a wave of painful guilt washes over Liam immediately. “Shh, Harry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, it’s ok, you’re gonna be ok.”

Harry takes no notice of his words, or anyone really and just continues to yell hoarsely. He bucks and jumps any time someone touches him, even Liam.

“Louis is ready. Car is outside,” Gemma starts yelling before she’s even reached the top of the stairs. Liam shoves his phone at Niall, telling him to stay on with the doctor so he can carry Harry
down and out.

The problem is that Harry is fighting him now, lashing out and pushing him away while begging and pleading again to be spared just this once.

“Please please, I’ve been good, I’ve been good, don’t do this, please don’t do this, I can’t take any more…” he cries out, trying to curl up again and Liam feels the hot tears snaking down his cheeks. He knows Harry is hallucinating, that he has no idea what is real and isn’t right now, but it’s still painful to hear it and witness it. Liam can’t help but wonder how many times he begged and pleaded and was denied, was used against his will. After two years, the number would be astronomical and it makes him feel sick.

After several failed attempts at getting a hold of him, Des even coming in to try, Liam just bites his lip, swallows hard at the emotion in his throat and wraps his arms around Harry. He tries not to hurt him, but holds on to the struggling man tightly. Harry fights for just a little longer before submitting, whimpering and crying in Liam’s arms as though he’s been forced into defeat and knows his attempts to fight back are fruitless. It doesn’t stop him from continuing to plead in Liam’s ear though. The whole way through the house, down the stairs and out the door he begs, pleads, cries and tries to bargain with Liam.

“I’ll do what you want, just don’t hurt me, please don’t hurt me,” he whispers and Liam has to swallow to keep from vomiting himself.

Gemma is ghostly white as she holds the car door open. In fact everyone is. They have all heard what Harry is saying, all are affected by it, but none of them know what to do or say.

Louis takes one look at Liam’s face and his eyes widen before they land on Harry as he lays him across the back seat where he immediately scrambles to crawl into the foothold, curling into a ball and wincing the entire time. Liam could kick himself for not pushing him on the pain earlier in the day as this could have been avoided.

He quickly slides in and sits beside Harry, staying close but trying to touch him less. Anne jumps in the back as well and Liam notices the bottle of cold water and wet cloths in her hands. She immediately gets one on the back of Harry’s neck, earning her a whimper and then she drapes one across the top of his head. Her face is serious and business like. She knew what to do when Liam didn’t and he’s grateful for that. Her eyes belie the pain and horror at hearing Harry’s words though, but she’s clearly far better at focusing on the most pertinent thing at the moment.

“We’re gonna follow behind,” Des says into the back door before closing it. Gemma jumps in front with Louis and they start moving.

The reporters all shout questions through the windows and Louis lays on the horn, making Harry jump.

It feels like it takes forever to get through them all but then they are speeding down the road, far faster than the limit, but no one says anything. Liam checks Harry’s forehead and tries to figure out
if he’s any worse, cursing himself for not bringing the thermometer.

It’s a long drive back into London, feeling longer considering the situation, but no one says anything aside from Harry, who periodically starts begging again. Each time he does Liam and Anne’s eyes meet. Both of them sharing in the pain that hearing him causes, but neither says anything. They just keep rewetting the cloths, changing them out and soaking the carpet as well as Harry’s clothes, making him shiver more.

When they finally do pull up at the hospital there are more reporters outside. Word had spread and they’d clearly just made an assumption about the hospital and were right. Louis lays on the horn again and pulls right into the ambulance bay, hoping it will provide some cover.

Dr. Mercer opens the door before the car is even in park and a team of doctors and nurses shove Liam out of the way and quickly yank Harry from the car. They get him onto a stretcher and rush him inside. Harry starts screaming again, weakly trying to fight them and Liam scrambles out of the car to follow him with an unseen force pulling him along, unable to let him go.

He doesn’t get far though. The medical staff push him back as soon as they get to an exam room, forcing him to stand outside. That’s how he knows this time is way worse than the last time they were in the hospital. This time it’s an emergency.

They stand in a line outside the room. All of them stare at the door with matching haunted expressions as Harry continues to yell. He grows quieter as he weakens until he stops and Liam isn’t sure if he just passed out or if they sedated him. He refuses to consider any other possibilities but those two.

The rest of the group arrives shortly after and a nurse decides that there are just too many of them crowding up the hallway and ushers them to a waiting room where they sit, or stand, or pace or all three for two hours.

When the door finally opens and the doctor comes in they all stand up and crowd in close to her, hands wringing all over the place.

“Ok, he’s stable now. He has a pretty massive infection, which explains the fever and the pain. We have sedated him and have him on strong IV antibiotics along with fluids and the fever is coming down,” she tells them and there is a collective sigh of relief around the room.

“He’s been on antibiotics though? He’s been taking them. How did he still get an infection?” Des asks. His voice is just a tiny bit accusatory, as though the doctor was negligent and caused this.

“He was on broad spectrum antibiotics. They don’t always work on certain types of infections. It also depends on the location of the infection. That tends to determine what types of bacteria are in the area and causing the problem. Harry’s is unfortunately related to the wounds he suffered as a result of the sexual assault and it requires more specialized treatment,” she replies quietly and Liam feels sick again. He realizes every time he’d seen Harry wince all day was when he was sitting down. No wonder he hadn’t wanted to talk about the pain and where it was.

“He’s going to be alright though, right?” Anne asks.

“Yes, like I said, he’s stable. There is no abscess and we are fighting the infection aggressively, but he’s going to have to stay with us for a few days until I see significant improvement,” Dr. Mercer replies gently.
“Can we see him?” Liam asks, finally finding his voice. He felt very strongly that Harry shouldn’t be alone, even while unconscious. Maybe even especially while unconscious.

“Of course, though we prefer only a few people at a time. The rest of you can stay here,” she answers and Liam senses immediately that he’s about to be shut out. He can see it in Des’ face despite the fact that Harry had been making it clear he wanted Liam around right from the beginning.

“Right, well immediate family for now. Friends and extended, you guys can hang out here and we will come let you know when he’s awake,” Des says quickly before anyone else can say anything. He heads towards the door, motioning for Gemma and Anne to come with him.

“Liam should come too Dad,” Gemma says quietly, not moving yet. “Harry will want him there.”

Des narrows his eyes at her and throws Liam a dirty look.

“Or maybe that was the infection talking and he had no idea what he was doing. But for now it should just be his family around him,” he grumbles back and Anne gives Liam an apologetic look.

“Dad…” Gemma starts but Liam cuts her off.

“Gemma, it’s fine. Just let us know when he’s awake, yeah?” He asks tiredly, knowing it was a battle he wasn’t going to win. Not right now. He would just have to wait until Harry woke up and asked for him. If he asked for him that is.

Des looks smug at this and he heads out the door. He follows the doctor with Anne right behind him and Gemma gives Liam one more sad look before following as well. At least he knows that if Harry does wake up and starts demanding to see Liam, she will come get him. No matter what Des says.

He slumps down in a chair and presses his hands to his face, feeling the ache forming behind his eyes. He can still hear Harry crying and pleading in his ears. A sound he will not soon forget. He doesn’t think anyone will.
Chapter 11

Day 7

It feels like days that they sit in the uncomfortable plastic chairs, but it’s actually only a few hours. Gemma or Anne pop their heads in now and again, letting them know that Harry is still unconscious and promising they will let them know as soon as he wakes up. There are several offers to go fetch tea made by Dee. Sometimes people take her up on it, sometimes they don’t.

Liam just sits quietly, Louis on one side of him, Zayn on the other and none of them say a word.

Several hours after they arrive, as a result of the stir crazy silence in the room, Harry’s uncle Mike flips the television on and the droning sounds of a newscaster fill the air.

“Police are tightlipped on the cause of the fight, but are collecting closed circuit camera footage and are asking for any witnesses to come forward,” says an overly made up reporter standing in front of a seedy looking bar in London. A crowd of people are standing on the rain soaked street behind her as the scene changes and the audience is taken back to the newsroom where the lead anchor’s orange face fills the screen. “Thank you Alison. Now returning to our top story, pop singer and actor Harry Styles has reportedly taken a turn for the worse and was rushed to hospital this afternoon. We go to Ian Miller who is just outside the hospital for an update.”

Liam’s blood starts to boil. It was so invasive and so inconsiderate of what Harry was going through.

“That’s right Alistair. I’m here outside of West Middlesex University Hospital where Harry was hurried in just a few hours ago in serious condition. Officials are not saying much about what brought him here, but he was reportedly heard crying as he was carried inside.” The screen cuts to footage from earlier of Liam’s car speeding into the ambulance bay and the small crowd of doctors who had descended upon the back door hauling a small bundled person out and placing him on a stretcher. You don’t see his face, for which Liam is grateful, but it’s still painful to watch knowing that Harry was not in control of his own mind at that moment. His whimpered cries muffled, but still there in the background noise of the video. Liam himself is seen hurrying in with Harry, his face clear and stricken on camera. “We do know that just an hour or two prior to Harry arriving here police made an arrest in his case, apprehending the second of the two individuals believed to be responsible for his disappearance two years ago and the subsequent torture and sexual abuse that occurred during that time.”

“Turn it off,” Liam growls out suddenly. He couldn't listen to a second more of this jackass talking about what Harry went through as though it was nothing, just an event.

“Let’s see what they say about the arrest. Aren’t you happy they got the bastard?” Mike replies, looking confused by Liam’s demand.

“Police have not yet released the name of the suspect, but he is believed to be Brian Campbell, owner of the row house in Hounslow where Harry was kept prisoner in the basement. We expect to hear the full list of charges to be read out at his first hearing in court in the coming days,” Ian continues to drone on. Liam stands suddenly and his chair squeaks on the floor. He stalks out of the room, suddenly feeling like there isn’t enough air in there. The lads barely get the chance to react before he’s gone, but they seem to think better of following him.
He storms down halls aimlessly. He’s hoping to happen upon Harry’s room, feeling that long familiar urge to be close to him and the new urge to comfort him and to take care of him. He gets lost in the maze, but keeps walking. A pent up energy keeps his legs going and the nurses and orderlies look at him curiously as he passes, but no one stops him.

He’s about to round another corner when he hears a familiar voice and stops dead, eavesdropping unabashedly since it was his name he had heard spoken.

“What is your issue with Liam? He’s been so good to us, to Harry, and clearly Harry wants him around. I don’t understand why you are trying to separate them dad?” Gemma asks in a harsh whisper.

“I don’t have an issue with Liam. I have an issue with anyone who might try to take advantage of Harry right now, in his mental state. We both know he’s not exactly with it Gem. Half the time he has no idea where he is or what he’s doing and I’m worried that his attachment to Liam isn’t normal or natural,” Des replies and Liam frowns.

“What do you mean not normal or natural? Because Liam’s a guy and so is Harry? Do you have a problem with that? You’re being ridiculous! Think about what Harry went through. He feels safe with Liam, clearly, and there is nothing wrong with that. It’s not sexual dad. Why are you trying to make it that way?” Gemma replies, sounding entirely offended by her father’s opinion.

“Gemma, I’m not trying to make it sexual. I wouldn’t have a problem with it were this a normal situation where Harry hadn’t spent two years locked in a dungeon being raped constantly,” he stops when his words choke off, having difficulty even saying them. “But he did go through that and I do not want to see him being taken advantage of, or for someone to use his confused state and need for affection to their own ends. Not that I think Liam is doing that, but I just think Harry is looking for that comfort and attention from the wrong person. We are his family. We should be who he is looking towards and with Liam around, he’s not going to.”

“What, and you think just cutting off contact with Liam and dragging Harry up to Cheshire is going to make him warm right up to you? He’s going to be very upset and it will not help him at all!” Gemma states incredulously, voice rising a few octaves. Liam’s blood runs cold at the accusation. Were they really thinking of just taking Harry away from him?

“Des is right Gemma. I’m concerned too that Harry is desperately looking for comfort and affection from another man so fast after he escaped from two men who did horrid things to him. I think he’s confused and he doesn’t really know what he wants or what he is doing. Liam isn’t helping by being so touchy with Harry and giving in to him. It’s just making it worse and I have to wonder what Liam is looking to get out of this,” Anne chimes in. Liam wasn’t even aware she was there, but her words cut like a knife. He was doing no such thing, was he? He honestly thinks he’s doing what’s best and what’s right for Harry because it’s what Harry wants and that’s all that matters.

“Liam is not like that and you know it!” Gemma retorts and Liam is glad at least someone is defending him. “And we don’t know why Harry wants Liam around, he’s never said. And I might point out that Liam hasn’t done a single thing that Harry hasn’t wanted him to. He’s doing his best to make Harry feel safe and comfortable. He’s taking care of him and like I said, it’s clearly what Harry wants. If you try to keep Liam from Harry I’m worried you are the ones who are going to be doing more damage.”
“It just doesn’t make sense Gemma. Why is he so clingy with Liam? They were just mates as far as I knew and they actually seemed to grow apart when the band went on break. Now look at them. It’s strange and I’m worried it’s messing with Harry’s mind. That’s why I want to get them apart. So Harry can think for himself,” Des replies, still unconvinced. “Besides, you’ve seen the rumors and the talk online. There are already people who think they are in a relationship and that is not the kind of shit that Harry needs swirling around him right now.”

“And there it is! The real issue you have with the two of them, what people are saying. God, you are so worried about the fucking public image you aren’t even thinking about your own son or what he needs and wants and feels right now. Apparently only Liam and I are,” Gemma spits out before she can be heard storming away. It’s quiet for a few seconds before Des and Anne start talking again.

“Do you think she’s right?” Anne asks, voice unsure.

“No. We are his parents and we have to do what’s best for Harry. Taking him away from Liam, taking him home, is the right thing to do. I don’t want whatever is going on between him and Liam to go any further,” Des growls out and Liam decides he’s had about enough.

“What exactly is it you think is going to happen Des?” He asks as he comes around the corner into view, leaning nonchalantly against the wall with his arms crossed on his chest. His eyes are full of fury. It was a struggle not to yell.

The two of them jump at his sudden appearance and Des glares openly at him.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me Liam? Because I’ve seen the way you look at him, the way you touch him, and I know how you pined after him for the last two years. You wrote that song about him. So why don’t you tell me what it is exactly you want from my son because I will not have you using his confused mental state for your own ends,” Des growls out, taking a few steps towards Liam. An orderly nearby looks up from his clipboard with an alarmed expression.

Liam can’t even speak for a few moments. Partly because he’s so angry he can’t form words and partly because he has no idea how to answer. Honestly, he doesn’t know how to address the accusations since for the most part, they were true.

“Nothing. I want nothing from him,” he replies finally, shaking his head slowly. His anger dissipates because it’s the truth. “I just want to help him, that’s it. Like I said before, I will leave him alone if he asks me to. I’ll go if he asks me to. But he hasn’t. He chose to come to my house, chose to turn to me and I don’t know why. I’m not sure he knows, but I can assure you that I mean nothing untoward or sexual towards him. None of this is my doing Des. I’m just trying to do my best to help him.”

Des deflates slightly at his words, but he still looks suspicious and Liam suspects this conversation isn’t over permanently. Before he can say anything more Harry’s voice cries out from the room behind Anne, sounding plaintive and frightened.

“Liam?”

Liam doesn’t even hesitate or think. His legs just move the second he hears it and he tries to step around Des, but a firm hand on his chest stops him.

“No, let his mother go to him. You may not want anything from him, but you are not being
completely honest about how you feel about him and we both know it,” he whispers harshly, tilting his head at Anne telling her to go in the room and she does quickly. Liam can hear her trying to comfort Harry by telling him that everything is ok and that’s she’s there.

“Shh Harry honey, it’s alright. What do you need sweetheart? Mum’s here, it’s alright now,” she coos and Liam can hear Harry whimpering and becoming more panicked. He must have just woken up.

“Des, he doesn’t know where he is. You’re scaring him now. Let me go help him,” Liam pleads, but the hand remains. “Des, this isn’t helping him,” Liam says more loudly, hoping that Harry hears him. It’s a devious maneuver that earns him a stern glare.

“Liam? Liam where are you?” Harry starts calling and there are some thrashing sounds.

“Harry! Stop! Stay in bed honey, you’re hurt and you can’t walk just yet!” Anne cries out as there is more thrashing followed by the sounds of someone hitting the floor. There’s a groan of pain and Harry’s pleading voice saying Liam’s name again.

Liam shoves against the hand, pushing Des as hard as he can before ducking under his arm and hurrying through the door.

Harry is on the floor on his knees and slumped to the side slightly. His face is a grimace of pain, but his eyes are trained on the door and they widen the second Liam comes in, hand coming up to reach for him. Liam doesn’t even acknowledge Anne kneeling beside him. He just lands on his own knees in front of Harry and pulls him in against his chest gently. Harry’s arms go around his waist immediately gripping as hard as he can and his nose presses right in under Liam’s collar bone. His breathing is fast and soft whimpers are coming from his throat.

“Hey hey, shhh, it’s ok. I’m here now. Just take it easy, you’re ok,” Liam says quietly, trying to get Harry to calm down. He knew he needed to get him back up into the bed quickly, but he couldn’t while he was still panicking.

“Where were you? Why weren’t you here? They told me you left. Why would you leave?” Harry starts asking from the front of his shirt. He sounds almost like a child, scared but petulant. Liam makes eye contact with Anne, giving her an accusatory look.

“I just stepped out to talk to Louis. I wasn’t gone long. It’s ok now, I’m back,” Liam replies, lying smoothly. He wants to drop both Des and Anne in it, though he knows that won’t do any good. At the end of the day, he has no interest in coming between Harry and his family. “Look, we need to get you back up on the bed, ok? Your mum is right.”

He feels Harry nod against his chest and release his grip, turning his head to look up at the bed with a daunted expression. Liam doesn’t hesitate, just gets back on his own feet in a crouch and picks Harry up, lifting him and placing him gently on the thin hospital mattress. The heart monitor is losing its mind, beeping and blinking since Harry knocked all of the leads off in his tumble, and his IV has also been pulled free leaving a trickle of blood on his hand.

He winces as he straightens his legs and Liam gives him a reprimanding look. “Haz, you know you can’t walk very well on your own. What in hell were you doing?” He asks carefully, examining Harry’s knees since he clearly landed on them. They are red, ferociously so, and it’s clear he will have some serious bruises. What’s more concerning is that he might have fractured or broken something.
“I’ll have you know I walked all the way from Hounslow to the bus depot. Then from the bus to your house,” Harry retorts, one brow up.

“I’m gonna assume adrenaline had a lot to do with that and you weren’t fighting this infection then either,” Liam replies, raising his own eyebrow.

“What’s going on in here?” The doctor asks as she hurries in, two nurses hot on her heels. She all but knocks Liam out of the way trying to get to Harry.

“He tried to get up and go to the door and fell.” Anne replies, sounding a touch sheepish.

The doctor looks at her alarmed and then back at Harry.

“What in hell would you do that for Harry? I thought you and I understood each other,” she reprimands him. She quickly presses a gauze to his hand while one of the nurses untangles the wires to the heart monitor and starts reattaching them.

“Sorry,” Harry mutters, looking down and away from her.

“Right, well, let’s have a look then. How did you land when you fell? Does anything hurt?” She asks with a sigh. Her eyes scan over him and the other nurse takes over treating Harry’s hand, putting a bandage in place when the bleeding has stopped.

The doctor notes the redness of his knees and starts prodding them. He hisses and jumps.

“Right,” she replies to his noises, throwing him another accusatory look. “I don’t think you’ve done major damage, but I’m going to get these x-rayed anyway. Just to be sure. Anywhere else hurt?”

Harry looks sheepish, but after a moment he indicates towards his right wrist.

She quickly examines and bends it, watching his reactions.

“We might as well x-ray this as well, just to be sure, but I think you’ve just sprained it.” She releases his arm and nods at one of the nurses who unlocks the wheels on Harry’s bed. She swiftly unplugs the wires and silences the heart monitor to take him down to x-ray. “Now, do me a favor and ask for help when you want to stand from now on, alright?”

Harry nods and she relaxes as they start to wheel him from the room. He reaches out for Liam immediately, pulling him along as they go and they meet Des in the hall. He looks at Liam and Harry’s interlocked hands with suspicion and dislike before glaring at Liam again. Liam ignores him, focusing on Harry only for the time being.

One day he will probably have to admit the truth of his feelings for Harry and what had happened between them those years ago, but not now.

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Nothing is broken, thank God, but Harry does have some magnificent bruises on his knees the next morning. Most of the crowd had come to see him after his trip to the x-ray and had wished him well and gone home. Even the rest of the guys. The three of them promise to come back to the
house, but head home to pack up some clothes for an extended stay. They also plan a trip to Harry’s house to get some things for him. His own clothes and stuff that might make him feel more comfortable.

They keep him in the hospital for three days. Waiting to make sure the antibiotics have done their job thoroughly before letting him out again with a fresh bottle to make sure it doesn’t reoccur. The doctor gives him a stern talking to about eating and reminds all of them of the calorie chart she provided them with. They all meekly promise to take more care to follow it.

Des tries one more attempt at convincing everyone to take Harry home to Holmes Chapel and Gemma shuts it down. She declares his idea foolish and ridiculous when Liam’s house was better situated for Harry’s safety and provided cover from the media. Not to mention it was closer to his doctor, the hospital and the courts for when all that started up. He begrudgingly accepts her reasons, but Liam knows he’s not going to drop it. Harry watches the argument with wide eyes cuddled up to Liam on the bed, but says nothing.

The media outside doesn’t let up and follows them back to Liam’s place. A crowd of fans take up residence as well, creating quite the spectacle on the quiet road that Liam is sure his neighbors are already tired of.

Over the coming days it gets worse, way way worse. Niall is damn near trampled when he goes out to get a coffee one morning and Louis is actually hit in the face by a camera trying to get his picture as he puts petrol in his car. This shift causes both of them to hire extra security and to avoid being seen in public. This means they end up spending all of their time at Liam’s, since it seemed to be the Fort Knox of the operation. Zayn heads back to LA for a short trip for work, giving him his own reprieve.

Liam checks the news and Twitter daily when Harry is napping. Fury courses through him as they come up with more and more salacious stories. Their accounts of what happened to Harry are so graphic they make Liam’s stomach turn. What’s worse is that despite how bad these stories were, detailed accounts of how Harry was raped or beaten, he senses that the media is no where close to how horrific it had actually been.

Eight days after he leaves the hospital, the police return for a full formal statement. A detailed account of everything that happened over the two years Harry was held captive. He decides to do it alone. Not wanting Liam or his family to hear all of the sordid details.

He does his best. He’s curled up on the bed, body shaking and shivering while his thin fingers twist and untwist the cuffs of his borrowed sweater repeatedly as Liam steps out.

The moment the police leave he starts vomiting and doesn’t stop until he passes out. There are several long minutes of terror that they will have to take him back to the hospital again and find a way out through the insanity out front, but he comes around, groggy and still terrified. Anne calls the doctor, asking what they should do. Ruth is dispatched for fluids and medication. Harry sleeps burrowed into Liam’s for the rest of the day.

His nightmares are severe that night and never seem to end. His screams are painful to hear and after the fourth one he just breaks down and sobs into Liam’s chest for a long time. He cries for all of the times he couldn’t and for all of the pain and sorrow and horror. Liam holds him tightly, letting him get it out. His own tears trickle down his cheeks as he listens to Harry. He’s glad no one else comes in the room. All of them are still obeying Harry’s request to not have an audience at times like this. He knows this is more of a private affair, this show of emotion, since Harry had
been trying so hard to hide his feelings from his family. Liam knows at some point they are going to have to consider getting Harry some professional help. A therapist he can talk to who can help him and give him the tools to help him cope and work through all of the mess in his head. He doesn’t know how Harry will feel about that idea. He had turned to Liam so much already, talking to him and letting him in more than anyone else, but he knows they had barely just scratched the surface. Liam isn’t sure he would be able to help Harry as much as he would like to.

Pictures of the inside of the house and the hole Harry was held in are released the next day. The media found a way to get ahold of them and Liam hides it from Harry. He instructs the rest of the house to do the same under threats of brutal punishment. He tucks the duvet around Harry along with his arms and they don’t move except to go to the bathroom. They watch movies, most of them complete crap or nonsense, but nothing with any potential triggers that could upset Harry.

When Harry falls asleep, as he inevitably does, Liam checks the internet and has to shut his phone off because it’s so bad. With the release of the pictures and the police now actively associating with the press on the case, a lot had come out. The judge assigned to the case had also refused a publication ban for the time being, for reasons that Liam can’t quite understand.

The first court appearance of the suspects is a madhouse. The formal reading of the charges gives the reporters even more fodder and there is an explosion of discussion about whether the suspects will plead guilty or there will be a full trial and if Harry publicly testify.

Armed with the facts, the media had descended on the story like wolves, with detailed accounts of where Harry was kept, what abuse he suffered and his actual physical condition now. Reading the rumors and fake news accounts before when they were just making shit up or speculating had been tough enough, but now Liam was seeing the truth and the reality of what Harry had suffered with for two years. He was right that it was way worse than anything they had dreamt up before.

His own house feels like a prison now, to everyone. No one can leave without being hounded and photographed or having inappropriate and upsetting questions shouted at them by reporters who attempt to look sympathetic. Louis and Des especially do not handle it well, pacing about like caged animals. Louis really hates that he can’t even pop back to LA to see Freddie because the trip to the airport alone would be enough to give him a panic attack. He manages with face timing every day, doing the same with Eleanor since she had managed to find some solace with family.

Harry just looks spooked most of the time. As though he is reliving the feeling of being trapped and it breaks Liam’s heart. It’s not that Harry wants to leave, he really doesn’t, but it’s the fact that he can’t. This house was supposed to be a comforting place for him. It was supposed to provide safety and protection and surround him with love. It’s hard to truly feel that when you can hear the voices of hundreds of people just outside the gates at all hours.

They appeal to Detective Warner several times. They beg her to get them to leave or to do something, but so long as they remain on public property they can’t be forced to leave unless they break the law. The media in Britain is savvy. They know exactly how to toe the line and get away with it. And having them leave wasn’t going to stop them from writing disgusting stories with endless pictures of Gary and Brian and of the house Harry was kept in.

Help comes from an ally they didn’t realize they really had. Sure he had helped for the Oscars and it was clear he cared a great deal about Harry, but no one expected him to use his own TV show to do something like this. They don’t even know about it until a few hours after the broadcast. James texts Liam to apologize for getting carried away and hopes that they weren’t upset with him.
Confused, he pulls up the video on his tablet and is stunned by James using his monologue at the beginning of his show for a very serious purpose.

“Listen, I know you all watched the Oscars a bit ago, and even if you didn’t, I’m sure you’ve heard the big news. As you know, I got the incredible job of telling the world that my dear friend, someone who I admire so much, respect greatly and believe to be one of the kindest, most amazing people in the world, Mr. Harry Styles, had been found alive and is home safe again after having been missing for two years.” He waits while the audience applauds and cheers, clapping his hands together a few times as well. “This was an amazing, brilliant, emotional and joyful moment of profound relief, for me at least, and I am so happy, so so happy for him and his family. We don’t have to mourn him anymore. We can celebrate having him back in our lives and bucking the odds, right?” He stops again, face turning more serious and the audience murmurs. “I’ve been riding on a high of happiness ever since. At least until I started looking at the news and saw what was happening. I think you all know what I’m referring to.” The audience assents. “So you can imagine just how pissed I am with how the media, many of them considered respectful outfits prior to this, have been treating Harry and those close to him since then and especially in the past week. Writing and publishing and producing vile, disgusting, salacious pieces of what they consider news with little regard to how they might affect his family or Harry himself.” His jaw visibly tightens as he takes a deep breath. There’s fury on his face and the audience is dead silent now. “I’m disgusted that human beings would do this to another innocent human being, a victim, just to get clicks on their websites or to increase their viewership or sell papers. It’s horrifying. They’ve effectively trapped him again. He can’t leave the house, experience life again, even just go for a walk in the garden.” His voice thickens with emotion now and he clears his throat, taking another deep breath. “So this is me asking you, all of you, the media, his fans, people everywhere, to please just fuck off and leave him alone. He does not need or deserve this bullshit. Show him some kindness, respect and love by letting him find some peace and happiness with the people he loves. And leave them alone as well. It’s not necessary to vividly describe every detail or to stalk friends who are just trying to go about their lives as well. It’s not ok and it’s not what we as humanity should be letting happen.”

When he finally stops, the audience erupts into cheers again giving him a standing ovation and they let it play out for a few minutes. They show a few faces in the crowd with tears on their cheeks before they go to commercial, dividing this moment from the rest of the show which was likely to be a return to the usual James Corden hijinks.

The room is silent for a few minutes while they process what James did, Harry just stares at the now black tablet on the bed, looking a little overwhelmed.

“Um, the hashtag ‘Leave Harry Alone’ is trending on Twitter right now,” Niall says a few minutes later while looking at his phone. “Looks like there are several petitions demanding the press leave and stop publishing. There is even one to have the Sun shut down entirely.”

“I’ll sign that one,” Louis mutters, also scrolling on his phone now.

“That was kind of him,” Harry says softly, still looking at the screen on the tablet.

“Let’s see if it works,” Liam adds. “Only time will tell.”

He quickly texts as much to James, saying that Harry appreciates it, but that they would have to wait to see if it has any impact.

*Just let me know if there is anything else I can do.*
Chapter 12

Day 16

They don’t have to wait long. By morning the crowd outside the gate has significantly depleted with only a few hard core holdouts still sitting there. All of them from less than reputable news sites, but by the afternoon they have cleared out as well.

There is a lift to the tension in the house and Anne cooks a celebratory dinner for them all. When the media hasn’t returned by the next morning, Harry decides that he would like to go outside. Liam is absolutely not going to deny him the opportunity, but feels strongly they should wait until it stops raining first. The last thing that needed to happen was Harry coming down with pneumonia on top of everything else. Harry begrudgingly agrees and watches the window all day, his face still hopeful that the weather would clear, but it doesn’t. Not that day or the next. It frustrates Liam. It annoy’s him that mother nature wouldn’t cooperate to give Harry something he clearly wanted so badly. But they lived in one of the rainiest countries in the world and those persistent grey clouds refuse to let up for three days after the media has finally vacated the road.

Then one morning they wake and the sun is streaming in the window, alighting the carpet, bed and dust particles and Harry is positively exuberant. He’s practically vibrating as he drinks his Ensure.

“Ok it’s sunny out there, but it’s still chilly. So you bundle up alright?” Anne says as she starts pulling clothes out for him. Since Louis had retrieved most of Harry’s wardrobe from his house in London, there were now suitcases and piles all over the bedroom that needed to be sorted through and put away somewhere. Though neither one of them had been overly inclined to do it.

Harry had been letting his mum help him more and more each day. Liam isn’t sure if Gemma had a word with one or both of them or what, but it seemed that he had let go of his hurt feelings regarding his funeral and was letting her back in. It was still Liam he turned to most of the time for comfort however.

Anne piles some underpants, socks, a long sleeved shirt and track pants on the end of the bed, adding his well worn Randy’s Donuts sweatshirt on top.

After they have both showered, still a two person effort for Harry though he was becoming a little more stable on his feet, they get dressed and head downstairs where Anne is waiting with a long scarf, wool coat and hat for Harry. He doesn’t complain and just dutifully puts them on, eyes still on the back door and the sunlit patio. Des had gone out and cleaned and dried off Liam’s two seat swing, a gift from Nicola when he had first moved in. He had laughed at the time, it was such an odd thing for someone like him to own, but he was glad for it now.

A few throw pillows and a warm blanket had been added and once Harry’s feet are securely wrapped in some warm boots, Liam all kitted out in warm clothes too, they step outside. Harry’s face is immediately turned up to the sun, the softest of smiles on his face and his eyes closed. He looks so blissful that Liam can’t help but laugh.

“Shut up Liam. I’ve missed the sun,” Harry laughs out himself, taking a long deep breath of the cool, crisp air.

Liam’s laugh dies off. He can’t even imagine not seeing the sun for two years, or feeling it’s
warmth.

“I know Harry. I know you have. Let’s go sit, yeah?” He asks and Harry glances at him, green eyes almost glowing in the brightness and Liam’s heart flutters slightly. He nods and holds onto Liam tightly as they cross the patio. They settle on the swing, Harry with his legs pulled up and tucked under the blanket resting easily against Liam, while his own feet gently get some momentum going so they are swinging lightly.

They sit quietly for a long time, enjoying the relaxing sounds of nature around them and slowly but surely the rest of the household creeps out and joins them on chairs or atop of the stone walls. Anne and Gemma bring out mugs of hot chocolate and hand them out and everyone enjoys the opportunity to just be outside again, untroubled and without a photographer in their face.

Despite the cool breeze, they spend the day outside. The patio table is cleared off and board games are brought out. Robin cleans off the barbecue and gets it lit and they enjoy hamburgers and hotdogs. Louis then gets the fire pit going so they can have s’mores. The best part of it all is how light Harry is. His tension is gone, he smiles easier and it is such a relief, even for a short period of time, because it was bound to be interrupted at some point.

Harry wakes Liam with another nightmare that night. His legs and arms kicking out with broken cries and screams coming from his throat, at times sounding as though he is choking on them. Liam turns the lights on, pulls the blankets back and tries to talk Harry around. It’s not until he finally grabs his shoulders to stop his thrashing and shakes him while saying his name loudly that he finally wakes. He stares up at Liam with sunken, haunted eyes, his mouth open and panting. His body is frozen as he’s held in place and it takes Liam far too long to realize that he needs to let go because what he’s doing is not good.

The second his hands leave Harry he’s thrashing and pushing away. He huddles up in the top corner of the bed and stares at Liam, shaking so hard it looks like he’s vibrating.

“Haz, it’s ok, it’s just me. It’s Liam, it’s ok. Come back to me. Remember where you are,” Liam pleads and Harry shrinks away at the sound of his voice. Liam’s heart drops into his stomach. This was exactly what he never wanted, for Harry to be scared of him. “Harry, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hold on to you. I just didn’t want you to hurt yourself. I needed to help you wake up.”

Liam moves slightly, shuffling to kneel and Harry winces away from him, pulling tighter into a ball.

“Harry, please, don’t be scared of me. It’s ok, it’s me Liam. I’m not going to hurt you. You’re safe,” he says with a broken voice, heart breaking. Harry turns his face away at his words, bracing as though he’s expecting to get hit and Liam’s chin drops down, despair washing over him.

He realizes that this time he might need help because right now, he was the enemy. He quickly runs through his options and settles on the most obvious one.

“Harry, I’ll be right back. I’m going to go get Gemma, ok?” He asks the frightened man, who winces again when he speaks, still not looking at him.

Nodding to himself, Liam quietly and carefully backs away and off the bed. He can feel Harry watching him carefully, still bracing for attack but he doesn’t look back or say anything more, scared he will make it worse. Once in the hall, he hurries to Gemma’s room and opens the door. He’s expecting to have to wake her, but instead he finds her sitting up in bed. She jumps in surprise
when he comes in.

“Liam?” She whispers harshly. “The hell are you doing? Where’s Harry? I heard him having a nightmare. Shouldn’t you be with him?” She pelts him with questions, sitting forward with alarm on her face.

“Gem, I need your help. He doesn’t recognize me. I think I scared him. I didn’t mean to, but I didn’t want him to hurt himself. I had to stop him, but I think I scared him. He won’t even look at me,” he whimpers, words breaking with emotion.

She frowns at him in confusion, but quickly stands up. She leads him out the door and back to his bedroom where Harry has now moved to sitting in the corner of the room. He is curled up in a ball and watching the door with terrified eyes.

“Harry?” Gemma says softly, approaching him slowly. “Harry, hey it’s me. It’s ok.”

He pulls in on himself and tries to get away from her as she gets closer. Liam hurries to his cellphone and gets the doctor’s number ready, once again worried that this was it and they would have to medicate him.

“What’s going on in here? Is everything alright?” Anne asks from the door with Robin and Des on her tail. Liam sees the other three lads standing in the hall looking concerned. Evidently they had all woken with Harry’s nightmare and when they heard Liam leave the room, they all got up.

“Stay back,” Gemma says quickly, putting up a hand to stop anyone from advancing. Her eyes are still on Harry as she slowly moves towards him on her knees. “Harry, come on, look at me, listen to my voice. You’re alright. You’re safe now. You aren’t in that house anymore. You’re here safe with us.”

The room holds it’s breath collectively as she continues to talk to him, still inching forward until she’s right in front of him. He sits frozen, petrified and barely breathing.

“Come on Harry, listen to my voice. Just listen if you can’t see,” she says quietly, one hand now reaching forward to gently lie on top of Harry’s arm. Harry jumps when he feels it. His eyes dart down to her hand and back up to her face and he draws in a jagged breath, face crumpling. Gemma takes it a step further and takes his hand. She squeezes it gently and leans in closer, forcing him to look at her face and to see her as she keeps talking, filling his ears with her voice.

“Come on Harry, just focus. Please just listen and focus on me. It’s ok. This is real. I promise you it’s real.”

“Gem… Gemma…” he finally whispers out. Confusion now contorts his face as he starts to come around to properly see reality and not whatever his brain wanted him to see.

“Yeah honey it’s me, it’s really me. You’re here with me at Liam’s house, it’s ok,” she replies, hand still squeezing Harry’s.

His eyes blink several times as he comes through the fog, darting around the room and seeing the others there before they land on Liam. He’s still standing by the dresser with his cell phone in his hand.

“Liam,” he says quietly, body relaxing more. “Liam,” he says again. His hand reaches for him and Liam puts the phone down. He cautiously walks around towards him, scared to move too quickly. He gently takes Harry’s hand when he reaches him. He kneels next to Gemma and Harry fully
relaxes, wilting as his emotional turmoil eases. He releases both of their hands and drops his face into his own, scrubbing at it in frustration. “Fuck… why does this keep happening? Why won’t it stop? I’ve been here long enough for this to have stopped,” he grumbles and Liam moves to sit next to him, gently draping an arm around his shoulders and Harry leans into him.

“Because it’s going to take a while Harry,” Gemma replies, rubbing his knee. “You went through a lot. It’s not going to go away overnight, as much I know you wish it would. Maybe…” she glances at Liam, eyes unsure. “Maybe it’s time we talk about finding you a therapist. Someone who can help you start healing?”

Harry tenses at her suggestion, moving his hands enough to frown at her.

“I don’t particularly like having you all know about it, what makes you think I will want to talk to some stranger about it?” He replies hotly and Liam sighs. He had already expected this would be Harry’s response to the suggestion.

“Because we aren’t trained in how to help you Harry. We could find someone you feel comfortable with and you might find it easier to talk to someone who isn’t related or close to you,” Anne replies, coming nearer as well and perching on the side of the bed nearest them.

He glances at her and his mouth tightens into a line.

“You don’t have to decide tonight Harry, but if someone could help you with this,” Gemma waves her hand in front of him, indicating his current position in the room. “Then maybe you can consider it. We don’t mean it to hurt you, I promise.”

He nods after a moment.

“I know, I’ll think about it,” he relents, taking a deep breath and sighing. “I’m sorry if I woke everyone again.”

“It’s fine Haz. We know you aren’t doing it intentionally,” Liam tells him quietly, rubbing his shoulder.

“Do you want a cup of tea or something? To help you relax?” Gemma asks and he shakes his head.

“No, I’m ok. You should all get back to bed. Get some sleep.”

“You need sleep too honey,” Anne points out gently and he rolls his eyes slightly.

“I know mum, I’m going to try. I just need a few minutes to let my head clear, but I’m ok. I promise,” he answers before starting to pull himself up from the floor using the windowsill. Liam immediately starts helping him, standing up himself and looping an arm around Harry’s waist to help him walk over to the bed.

Anne and Gemma each give him a warm, tight hug before they go, Harry says thank you to Gemma for her help and she responds with a big wet kiss on his cheek that makes him laugh softly.

When they’ve all cleared out again, the room still dimly lit with the one lamp, the two of them sit on the bed in silence. Harry pulls his knees under his chin, eyes towards the window and Liam sits a few feet away, leaning against the headboard with his eyes on Harry.
Liam already senses what is coming. It was sort of a habit now for Harry. When he had a nightmare he would tell Liam something afterwards, as though purging himself of a memory.

“They were weirdly obsessed with my past and my exes.” He starts suddenly and Liam braces himself. “They always wanted to know my sexual history, who I’d slept with, what I’d done and whether I had been with a guy before them or not. I told them repeatedly I hadn’t. They loved that, that they were my first. I never told them about us.”

Liam swallows hard. Fury and nausea fight a war in his stomach initially, but then it flips at Harry’s last comment.

“You didn’t want them to know about us?” He asks carefully trying to get more definition out of Harry, a deep desire to know and to hear him say it.

“No, I didn’t. I never said your name. I didn’t want them to use you against me,” Harry replies evenly. His voice was empty of emotion as was usually the case during these late night confessional. It was such a strange thing, that Harry would tell him these deeply personal or upsetting and painful things in such a clinical manner, while Liam would be falling to pieces beside him.

“Why would they use me against you?” He asks, still digging. He knows he shouldn’t be because it didn’t matter right now in the grand scheme of things, but somehow he had to know.

Harry turns his head finally and looks at Liam. His face is blank and eyes droopy as he fights his exhaustion, but still clear enough that Liam can see some uncertainty there, likely matching his own. He’s quiet for a long time and Liam holds his breath, terrified but also full of anticipation.

“I want to hear the song. Can I hear it?” He says finally and Liam is stunned for a few moments. His mouth opens and closes a few times as he tries to catch up with Harry in the conversation. He knew there was a direct connection between his question and Harry wanting to hear the song, but with the words unspoken he was scared to follow the pathway.

“I… guess…” he draws out slowly, but not moving. His mind was trying to come up with reasons or excuses or ways to get Harry to change his mind. “You’re tired though. Maybe tomorrow…” he starts and is cut off quickly.

“No, I’m fine. I want to hear it,” Harry states clearly. He looks at Liam with pleading anticipation and Liam breaks.

Scratching at his head for a minute, he tries to remember where he left his ear buds. He gets up to retrieve his phone, figuring he can find a YouTube lyrics edit of the song. He scrounges in a drawer for a moment and finds the well tangled headphones before returning to the bed.

“When I was writing the song, I didn’t think about you. Now I know I have to play it for you. I hope it’s not too late. I think it’s been a while.”

Liam heavily considers leaving the room and going to sit in the bathroom or something, but he stops himself knowing it would look weird and also that he needs to man up. He reminds himself that he did write the song for Harry, with the hope that Harry would hear it and now he was going to. Liam just hadn’t considered that moment would be done in his bedroom in the middle of the...
night with just the two of them there and after Harry had admitted he had kept their secret to avoid it being used to hurt him.

He keeps his eyes carefully trained on his bare toes however, avoiding looking at Harry to see his reaction or to see his sweet face. He watches Harry’s hand move as he presses play on the video in his peripheral vision and his heart starts to pound in his chest, palms getting sweaty.

He can just hear the song, the silence in the room so deep that the tinny sound of the song reaches his ears even though Harry doesn’t have the volume up very loud.

Harry doesn’t move. He just sits listening, though Liam knows full well that Harry is staring at him. His eyes are boring holes into the side of Liam’s head, but he keeps his own eyes on his toes and forgets to blink for long spans.

When it ends, the silence returns and Harry fidgets with the phone a second. He pulls the ear buds out one at a time and sets it all down on the bed quietly. Liam remains tense and rigid waiting for Harry to tell him that the kiss was a mistake or that he doesn’t feel the same as Liam or that he doesn’t like the song.

Then he feels fingers on his arm, hands tugging and moving him as Harry crawls in. He curls up against Liam’s chest with his face buried in his neck, body quivering softly. From what, Liam isn’t sure.

“Thank you,” he whispers quietly against Liam’s clavicle. Harry’s breath is warm on his skin and sends shivers down his spine. Something breaks in Liam. Some control he had lets go and he wraps his arms around Harry as tight as he can without hurting him. He buries his own face into Harry’s hair, pressing soft kisses to his crown, temple and forehead when Harry moves.

Harry leans into the affection, pressing in closer, hand knotting in the front of Liam’s shirt as he whimpers quietly. Liam’s throat gets tight. One tear snakes it’s way down his cheek and he knows for once it’s not completely from sorrow, but also a strange joy.

Harry is alive.

Neither one of them moves. They leave the lamp on with the blankets still piled at the end of the bed, forgotten. The rest of the house sleeps while they cling on to each other, refusing to let go as the minutes and hours pass by.

The sun starts to rise as it always does. Birds chirp and call to each other outside and Harry finally starts to relax. The shaking slows down and Liam assumes he’s finally falling asleep, though he knows he won’t be able to himself.

He waits until Harry is fully relaxed with his hand splayed on his chest instead of gripping his shirt, before he opens his mouth to repeat the thing he said the first night Harry was there, done under the cover of the other man’s slumber so he wouldn’t hear it.

“I love you,” he whispers so quietly he barely hears it himself, but then Harry’s hand tightens again. A breathy sound comes from his lips and Liam realizes he’s still awake. He’d heard him. Liam’s heart thumps painfully in his chest.

He stops breathing for a moment. Fear and regret course through Liam until he hears Harry draw in a breath again, mouth forming a reply. Then his heart flips again.
“I love you too.”
Chapter 13

Day 20

Turns out that while they were waiting out the bad weather, things had been moving along with the courts in London and there is a knock on the door early in the morning.

Mr. Martin Peel, the crown prosecutor in Harry’s case, is a short, middle aged man with a thin build and a thick pile of white hair on his head. He has a kind smile and gentle eyes and he greets Harry with a soft voice. His eyes clearly assessing him.

“I’m just here to answer any questions you might have and to give you an idea of what possible directions there could be in the case,” he tells Harry, smiling frequently to ease any tension. “Now, both suspects have been formally charged based on the evidence you gave to the police and the next time we are in court they will make their pleas. Depending on what they do, we will either be setting a date for the trial to begin or a date for sentencing.”

“They have to plead guilty. How could they not?” Des demands incredulously. “Haven’t they already put Harry through enough without making him go through a trial?”

Harry frowns and his jaw shakes as he looks at his father and then at Liam for reassurance. They are all piled in the living room, Harry and Liam on the same big chair they sat in for the party. Liam tightens his arm around Harry’s shoulders as a show of support.

“That is up to them to decide. We won’t know until the next court date what they plan to do and we will make our own plan at that time. I do have to warn you, there is a good chance they will try to plead not guilty in the hopes they can either set up a plea bargain or because they have reason to believe they will not be punished to the fullest extent of the law.”

“What does that mean? Why wouldn’t they be?” Gemma demands, voice rising several octaves.

“The most heinous charge they are facing is for the sexual assault, something that can be difficult to prove. Particularly if they think they can make a case that Harry was a willing participant…”

“HE WASN’T! How the hell could they even think they would get away with saying that?” Gemma yells and Des nods furiously beside her.

“Please understand that I am trying to give you the worst case scenario here. I’m trying to prepare you for these possibilities because it is something that almost always comes up in rape cases. This is the charge they are going to try to fight the hardest because it carries the heftiest punishment of life in prison.” He turns back to Harry, having been forced to give Gemma his attention while she yelled. “Please understand that I am on your side and I will fight anything they come at us with because I do not think they have a leg to stand on. I do need to let you know of what the options are, just in case.”

“Options? What options?” Liam asks, rubbing Harry’s shoulder as he starts to shake.

“Ok, obviously there are two directions we could start from. First, they plead guilty. That is without doubt the most preferable as we would proceed straight to sentencing where they will likely be given full sentences for their crimes. In that case Harry, you would still have to provide
evidence to the court, but it could be done in a recorded video and it would be just your account without anyone questioning you. It’s a victim impact statement and it would help the judge to decide on what their sentences will be. In that case, I will be asking for concurrent sentences so that even if they are given the option of parole after a set amount of time, they will be kept behind bars to continue serving the rest of their sentences for each charge,” he stops and nods, smiling at Harry again. “Clearly that is our preferable outcome, but like I said, I suspect they are leaning towards pleading not guilty in which case we go to trial. If that happens, I fully intend to file a motion to declare you a vulnerable witness. This means you would not have to testify in live court. Instead, it could be done via video link during the trial where both myself and the defense can ask questions, but you are in a separate, safe, secure room, with people you choose to have with you for support at your side. The other option is to have your testimony pre-recorded with questions submitted ahead of time, but that does carry the risk of the defense requesting more questions be submitted and it can be more taxing for you. Now that being said, if they do plead not guilty we have the option of offering them a plea bargain. This means we would agree to a lesser sentence or lesser charges they could then accept. Once again, this would circumvent a trial and also a sentencing hearing as the sentence would be laid out in the plea bargain. They would accept it as a whole or not at all. Obviously, the downside to that is they aren’t receiving full sentences and I would very likely be unable to get them to agree to concurrent sentences. Also, parole would be a given.” He stops and takes a deep breath, knotting his hands in front of him and leaning forward slightly. “I know that for a lot of you a plea bargain is not to be considered, I can see it on your faces, but,” he turns to Harry. “It would be the least difficult for you. I know you have been through a lot and I do not want to put you through any more suffering if you do not think you can handle it. I will leave the decision up to you if it comes to it Harry because you ultimately are the one who would have to deal with it. I caution you to think it through thoroughly because once it’s done there is no going back.”

Harry nods and looks down at his hands, fingers pulling at his sleeves and Liam’s heart hurts for him. It was so much to take in and consider. So much agony that he could potentially be put through when he should be focusing on healing right now.

“Ok, I think we’ve about covered it for the time being. I will leave you to talk it over and think it through. The hearing is on Friday, but none of you have to attend if you don’t want to. I will be back afterwards to start discussing the next steps based on the result and we will go from there,” Mr. Peel says, rising from his seat and collecting his briefcase. “Have you got any questions for me before I go?” He asks Harry, smiling kindly again. Harry shakes his head. “Right, well it was a pleasure to meet you and I will be in touch soon.”

Des walks him to the door talking quietly and Harry puts his head down on Liam’s shoulder, fingers still fiddling with his cuffs.

“You ok?” Liam asks him quietly and Harry shrugs slightly.

“Tired, confused, not really sure what to think I guess,” he whispers and Liam squeezes his shoulder.

“I know that was a lot to take in, but like he said, you can take your time in deciding and there isn’t much we can do until after Friday anyway,” he says gently. Even his head was spinning with all of the information they just got and he’s honestly not sure what he would do in Harry’s position right now. “Why don’t we go up for a nap?”

Harry yawns at the suggestion
“I’ll take that as a yes,” Liam laughs.

Back snuggled under the covers, facing each other and a tangle of limbs, they lie quiet for a long time. Both are exhausted, but neither sleeping.

“What would you do?” Harry asks after a while. His voice slow and deep, a sign he was fighting sleep.

“Sleep, that’s what I would do. That’s what we should be doing,” Liam replies, idly rubbing Harry’s back to try to get him to settle.

“No, not right now, I mean about the trial. Would you let them do a plea to avoid having to participate or would you go through with the whole thing?” Harry asks him, voice now quivering slightly with nerves and worry.

“Haz, you don’t have to decide right now,” Liam replies gently, pressing a soft kiss to Harry’s forehead. “Just get some rest. Worry about it later.”

“I know I don’t have to decide right now,” Harry retorts. “But I’m asking what you would do. Just give me your honest opinion.”

Liam sighs. He didn’t want to do that. He didn’t want to risk altering Harry’s choice by influencing it. It wasn’t his choice to make and it would be unfair of him to accidentally put pressure on him.

“Harry, I honestly don’t know right now. I suppose I would wait until Friday to really decide because worrying about it might be moot anyway. They could just plead guilty and it will no longer be an issue,” he finally replies, hoping Harry will accept that. He should have known better.

“Cop out,” comes the short reply, but he does stop asking. He takes a deep breath and settles in closer. A few minutes later he starts to snore softly and Liam releases his own tension, letting sleep wash over him as well.

For once, he’s the first one to wake. The sun setting outside gives the room a purplish tinge. The house is quiet, though he can hear the telly on downstairs. Harry is still curled up against him, breathing deep and nose whistling slightly.

A warmth settles in his chest. There was still such a long, painful road to go, but he never would have foreseen this a year ago. To actually feel some happiness and hope, after being a despondent shell. Now, his life felt weirdly complete. He had Harry back, in his arms. They loved each other, well, were at least admitting that fact and the bastards who hurt him were behind bars.

If Liam had chosen to be honest with Harry, the more he had thought about it the more he thinks he would go through with the trial and fight to have the bastards locked away for good. But he also understood that he wasn’t in Harry’s shoes and he didn’t face the prospect of sitting in a room with strangers talking about every degrading, disgusting thing that was done to him in the span of two years.

He reminisces on their confessions. Those hours spent holding each other and finally feeling like it was ok to do so, knowing their feelings were mutual. The memory makes him reflexively hold Harry tighter, nose nuzzling at his temple, earning him a soft sigh. Harry’s fingers twitch on his back.
“Liam?” He slurs drowsily and regret washes over Liam. He hadn’t meant to wake him. He was sleeping so peacefully.

“Yeah, sorry,” he whispers, hand rubbing gentle circles on Harry’s back. “I didn’t mean to wake you babe. Go back to sleep.”

“Why are you awake?” Harry slurs out. His eyes are still closed, his body limp and relaxed.

“Dunno, I just woke up. But you can go back to sleep hon, it’s ok,” Liam says quietly, hands still trying to soothe the slight man.

Harry makes a quiet noncommittal noise and Liam thinks he’s falling back asleep, but then there’s a knock on the door and they both jump.

“Harry?” Anne says on the other side of the door before she opens it a crack and pokes her head in. “Are you awake? I’ve made tea.”

“I’m awake now,” Harry grumbles out, only loud enough for Liam to hear before he speaks directly to her. “Ok, we will be down in a few minutes.”

“Ok honey,” she replies, sounding weirdly anticipatory, but she’s gone before either of them can say any more.

“I suppose we should get up and eat and be awake for a little bit so we sleep tonight,” Liam offers and Harry gives him a look, flicking his eyebrows up once and rolling his eyes. “Come on Harry, you need to eat.”

Harry sighs in annoyance, but acquiesces. Letting Liam help him stand up, they each take turns in the bathroom before they head downstairs.

Everyone is sitting around the table when they get to the kitchen and Liam senses that they have been summoned for more than just a meal. Harry looks at him sideways, clearly suspicious as well, but they make their way to their seats and sit down, looking around the table cautiously.

Harry starts to poke at his shepherd’s pie, mixing the potatoes in with the meat, but not eating it. His eyes still watch everyone else carefully, brows knitted together in a frown.

“Listen, we were thinking, since the media has buggered off and with you being on the mend Harry, that now’s the time we should get you on home. Back to Holmes Chapel,” Des starts, hands folded neatly in front of him on the table. Harry drops his fork, mouth opening in surprise.

“London isn’t far if you need to come down for any court appearances or whatnot, but it might be easier on you to be far away from the city and the area. Back on familiar territory with your family.”

“No!” Harry states sharply, eyes wide with fury and shock.

“Harry, please just listen…” Anne starts.

“NO” Harry yells this time, cutting her off. “I’m staying here! This is where I want to be!”

“I told you he wouldn’t want to go,” Gemma adds in, giving her father a look.
“Gemma, stay out of this. We are trying to do what’s best for Harry,” Des replies tersely.

“Then shut up and listen to me!” Harry spits. “Stop trying to tell me where to go, what to feel and who I should want to be around. I spent two fucking years locked in a hole being controlled and I’m done with that! Done!”

He stands suddenly, wobbling immediately and falling into Liam who quickly stands to help him. It’s not quite the dramatic storming off that Harry was probably wanting, what with their slow hobbling pace, but they make it to the stairs eventually with both Des and Anne following them.

“Harry stop, wait, please just listen,” Anne pleads.

“Harry, we are not controlling you. We are trying to help you. We know it’s hard, but we think this is what’s best for you right now,” Des adds.

“You have no idea what’s best for me right now. No idea. So just drop it and leave me alone,” Harry retorts, determinately making his way up the stairs clinging on to Liam.

They make it to the bedroom in record time and Harry makes the effort to slam the door behind them, storming over to the bed and flopping down in a strop, wincing after a moment and more carefully sitting up and leaning against the pillows.

“I don’t get why they are so insistent on me going back to Holmes Chapel? What the hell difference does it make to them where I am right now? They are with me, that’s all that should matter,” he grumbles out.

Liam debates on what and how much to tell him while sitting down on the bed in front of him and squeezing his knee gently. He finally decides on honesty, since that seemed to be their policy now after their confessions last night.

“They want to get you away from me. They think I’m coming between you and them and that your attachment to me isn’t healthy,” he says softly and Harry’s eyes widen in surprise, mouth dropping open.

“Seriously?” He squawks out and Liam nods.

“Your dad and I had an argument when you were in the hospital. That’s what he told me.”

Harry growls and runs a hand through his hair in exasperation.

“Harry, in fairness, they don’t know about us. They don’t know what happened or how we feel about each other. So this must look pretty strange to them and I think believing that you are confused has been the only explanation they could come up with,” Liam says gently, somehow still trying to make sure that Harry didn’t think badly of his parents. Harry nods a moment later, looking down into his lap and picking at his fingernail. They were starting to grow, but still broke easily because of being weak from malnutrition.

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“Yeah, I get that, but I’m not sure how much to tell them. Will they even listen to me or just think I’m still confused?” He questions, sighing again and leaning back against the pillows.

“I don’t know, I can’t tell you that. But if you don’t want to go back to Holmes Chapel, then saying ‘no’ should be good enough for them. You should have the freedom to decide where you want to
be for yourself right now and not be forced to give an explanation. You don’t owe anyone anything.”

Harry turns and looks at him, head cocked to the side slightly and a soft smile on his lips.

“Thank you,” he says quietly. “I’m not sure I’ve actually said that in all this time, but thank you. For taking care of me, for being there for me and supporting me through this. You don’t know what it’s meant to me.”

Liam’s cheeks heat slightly from the praise, but he smiles and nods.

They’re quiet for a few minutes and Harry’s eyes travel over to the window, as they normally did when he was considering things.

“Do you think they would stop thinking I was confused and unhealthy attached to you if I actually got a therapist? If I was getting help and getting better it might make them realize what you and I have is not related to what happened to me,” he asks carefully, eyes sliding back over to Liam’s face.

“I dunno Haz, but I do think you should want to get help. Talk to someone for yourself, to help yourself, not because you are trying to get your parents off your back,” Liam replies.

Harry nods and bites his lip. His eyes go back to the window and he is silent for a few minutes longer.

“I get why I should talk to someone, but it just makes me nervous,” he says quietly, hands curling up inside his cuffs. “Like, I know I don’t want to keep repeating what happened last night. The nightmares and not knowing where I am, seeing their faces everywhere, hearing something or smelling something that reminds me of them, it’s awful. It’s like I’m in two places and I can’t control my thoughts. My memories, they just invade me suddenly and I hate it. But talking to someone… that means I’m going to have to dredge it up even more. To relive it even more and I honestly don’t know if I can do it or if I’m strong enough,” he admits sadly. Liam quickly moves to sit next to him, pulling him in against his chest and squeezing him gently.

“Harry, if the last two weeks has taught me anything, you are one of the strongest people I know. You survived. You got away. You saved yourself and each day I see you getting even stronger,” he assures Harry, hands rubbing his shoulders and running through his hair. “Talking to someone will just help with that. It will help you purge and maybe start putting it behind you. It’ll help you learn how to cope and move forward.”

Harry takes a deep breath and sniffs, hands snaking around Liam’s waist.

“Ok…” he starts. “Ok, I guess all I can do is try, right?”

“Exactly,” Liam agrees. “And no pressure, yeah? You don’t have to just pick one doctor. You can meet with a few, see if you find someone you feel comfortable with.”

Harry sighs again relenting and relief washes over Liam. As much as he’d like to think he was the cure for all of Harry’s ills and would be the one to bring him back to health in all ways, he knew that that was a bullshit idea and it was right to encourage him to seek professional help.

He retrieves his iPad and they start looking up doctors. Harry grumbles slightly at Liam getting
started right away, but Liam reminds him that just looking at doctors wasn’t going to hurt him and it might shut Anne and Des up. Though Liam still thinks they should just accept Harry’s answer and shut up anyway.

After an hour they’ve made a list of three doctors that Harry hasn’t completely declared creepy, weird, too old, too young, too religious or too hippie-like. One works with Dr. Mercer at the hospital Harry was at and Liam decides to call her and get her opinion on the man. He is a specialist in trauma and while he is a man, Harry doesn’t seem too bothered by that fact.

Dr. Mercer gives him a glowing review, promising to set up an appointment the next day. Not ten minutes later, he calls Liam himself to offer to come to see Harry rather than making Harry come into the hospital. Harry’s relief is palpable at this suggestion and it’s all done and dusted.

With that task over, Liam once again suggests eating something and gets an exasperated look from Harry, who has flopped back down on the pillows, eyes on the telly and yet another episode of Bake Off. Neither one of them particularly wants to leave the room to retrieve food, fearing another run in and so Liam texts Louis and asks him to bring something up.

Niall and Zayn follow him in, bearing plates of left over shepherd’s pie and bowls of ice cream and Harry actually appears interested for the first time. He picks at the pie, but does manage to eat half of it before he starts on the ice cream. He swirls it into a soupy mess, but eats it just the same.

They pop on another movie and watch it in the dark room, all of them lounging about the furniture. The conversation is kept light and away from the showdown at dinner until just before they leave for bed.

“Look, we didn’t know they were gonna do that at dinner or I would have warned you, just saying,” Louis says as he starts towards the door. “Sorry all the same. It’s not right of them to push you or make demands on you right now.”

Harry gives him a small smile and nods.

“I know. I didn’t think any of you had anything to do with it. Would appreciate your help tomorrow though,” he asks carefully and all three of them stop and nod, agreeing without even knowing what was being asked. “I’m meeting with a therapist tomorrow. He’s coming here. He suggested a house call actually. It would be great if you guys could keep them all away. I don’t want them trying to poke their noses in, even if they are being well meaning. I don’t know if I’m gonna like this doctor yet, so it’s just a trial.”

Louis nods and the other two give him quick smiles.

“Course mate, no problem,” Niall agrees. “Good luck, yeah?”

“Thanks,” Harry replies. “Have a good night.”

They all wish him the same and slip out.

“Right, you, sleep?” Liam asks ineloquently and Harry laughs, but nods.

They take their turns washing up and brushing their teeth and settle in under the covers. Harry groans slightly at having eaten so much, but he falls asleep quickly nonetheless.
He wakes a few hours later, hands crawling all over Liam’s face and shoulders, his panicked voice right in front of him.

“Liam?… Liam? This is you right? You’re here, I’m not dreaming this? You’re here, I’m with you?” Harry rambles out. His voice is frightened and his hands are frantic as they run over Liam’s eyes and cheeks, touching his lips, chin and ears, like a blind person recognizing a face.

“Haz… Haz, hey, stop, it’s ok, I’m here, I’m here,” Liam answers, coming to full consciousness rapidly. His body rolls quickly to flick the light and then back to Harry, whose eyes are wide and terrified, face sallow and the hands return immediately. “Harry, hey, listen to me, look at me, just look at me. It’s ok, I’m here.” Liam says firmly, quickly getting ahold of Harry’s hands and stilling them, forcing his eyes to focus instead.

Harry’s jagged breaths fill the room for a moment before he seems to finally believe his own eyes and ears. He surges forward and pulls Liam into a tight hug, face pressed into his shoulder and body shaking. Liam returns it, though more gently, and rubs his back, whispering soothing words into his ear.

“Shhhh… it’s ok Haz. It’s ok. I’m here.”

It was a nice change from the screaming, but it was still painful. Liam heard the desperation in Harry’s voice and the fear. It takes close to an hour before he finally fully calms down. His body is still quivering slightly when his grip starts to loosen.

There is no confessional tonight and no rehashed memory. Liam suspects that’s because the memory is one that is too awful and too painful to share. That’s what hurts the most.
Chapter 14

Day 21

The doctor arrives right at 10 a.m. on the dot and Louis makes sure he’s the one who answers the door. He greets the man and quickly shows him upstairs to Liam’s home office where Harry had decided he would meet with him. He had declared it would be too weird to talk to him in the bedroom, but he still wanted privacy and the office seemed to fit perfectly. It even had the right furniture. Liam never used the room to be honest. It just looked good on the real estate listing.

Dr. Howard is a kind, gentle man despite his large stature. He’s tall, broad in the shoulders, has a mop of wavy chestnut colored hair on his head and thick lips. His smile is very warm though and welcoming. Coupled with his jeans and plaid shirt, he’s the opposite of intimidating.

Harry’s family is completely stunned by his arrival, having been told nothing of it, and aren’t pleased when they are informed they are to remain downstairs the entire time. They get over it quickly though, in favor of being happy that he is seeking help. Liam has no doubt that Harry’s parents think that with some therapy whatever is making Harry so attached to him will be taken away, but he’s not worried.

They are in the office for over an hour and Liam sits in the bedroom with the door open listening for them to emerge. He’s ready to be a comfort to Harry, a listening ear, or to just ask him how it went.

When they finally do come out, Harry seems ok. He quickly reaches for Liam to help him walk, but he doesn’t appear frightened or apprehensive of the doctor. He’s just tired and washed out.

The doctor doesn’t say anything about what happened and gives no clues despite Des prodding him. He leaves with a kind smile for Harry and a promise to see him on Thursday.

“So you are going to talk with him again?” Anne asks the second he’s out the door. “It must have gone well. How do you feel? Did he help at all?”

“Mother, calm down. It was only the first session,” Gemma points out with a slight eye roll.

Harry sighs and turns towards the stairs, tugging Liam along with him.

“I’m tired. I’m going up for a nap,” he says, in no way answering his mother’s questions or even acknowledging them.

“Oh, ok. Well let me know if you want me to make you something to eat,” Anne replies, sounding put out. Harry nods once.

Once back in the bedroom, Harry curls up on the bed and pulls the covers along with Liam’s arm over himself. Liam debates on asking questions himself as Harry was making it pretty clear he didn’t really want to talk about it, but he also wanted to know if this doctor was going to work or if he needed to set up appointments with the others.

“I can hear you thinking,” Harry grumbles out a few minutes later. “I know you want to know, so fine, he’s really nice. He actually didn’t ask me a lot today. It was more of a get to know you thing.
It still wasn’t easy because I know it’s only going to get harder, but… I guess I will stick with him for now. I think he could help,” he admits, voice going softer near the end and Liam releases the breath he was holding.

“Ok, good. I’m glad to hear that, but you know you can stop if you need to or we can find a different doctor if you don’t think he’s working out for you any longer.” Always giving him an out seemed to be how Liam operated.

“I know, and thanks,” Harry replies drowsily, nestling in more and closing his eyes.

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The doctor is there for over two hours on Thursday and Harry emerges looking far more destroyed than he had the first time. His eyes are red and his hands are shaking. He surges into Liam’s arms the second he sees him and burrows into his chest. The doctor quietly says goodbye, promising to be back on Saturday unless Harry told him otherwise.

It’s a long day afterwards. Between the doctor’s visit, where clearly they had started getting into heavy topics that cause Harry to have a pretty violent nightmare during his afternoon nap, and the anticipation of the court appearance the next day, everyone is on edge.

Friday morning Des decides he’s going into London to the court to watch it happen. He probably assumes he can stare the bastards down and force them to plead guilty, but it doesn’t work. Both Brian and Gary plead not guilty and a whole new series of events are set in motion.

Monday morning, a court appointed victim advocate arrives to assess Harry to give advice to the crown on his ability to handle the trial. Sandy is a nice, though abrupt, older woman who seems to make her determination fairly quickly, but she does take the time to answer questions. Harry takes the opportunity to find out about what he might expect if he testifies.

“I’m sure Mr. Peel did explain that it could be done a few different ways, but I can go over them again if you wish,” she replies and Harry nods. Liam got the sense that he was preparing himself to fight, to not accept plea bargaining as a way out and he’s proud and worried at the same time.

“First, would be the normal method in court in front of the jury and everyone, which I’m not recommending in your case. It can be very taxing emotionally and could lead you to having trouble answering questions properly. Not to mention the lasting effect it could have on you. The second method is similar, in the courtroom in front of the jury, judge, crown prosecutor, defense counsel and assembled court officials, but no audience. Again, I wouldn’t recommend you consider this either. It’s just as difficult for the same reasons. The third option is still doing it live, but in a separate room via video link. This could be with or without the audience in the courtroom, but you wouldn’t be in there and you could choose an individual to sit with you during, for support only of course. I often recommend a person bring their therapist or doctor in with them as they are trained to help in these situations, but it would be up to you. The final option is pre-recording it with questions being submitted by both the crown and by the defense that you will have to answer. It is done in much the same setting with a support person there with you, but if the defense or crown decide they have more questions, it would mean you would have to come in again. Maybe even three or more times.” She stops and lets him digest this information and Harry looks out the back door as he considers it.

“I’m getting the impression you think I should take door number three. Do it live, but by video,” he says a moment later, turning his attention back on her. She nods, looking kind and sympathetic.
“Yes, I think it would be the best way for you as all questions could be asked at one time and then it would be done for you. I am available to you at all times to help, to answer your questions and support you through this. I promise you I am on your side and would never pressure you into doing anything I didn’t think you could do or would hurt you in any way,” she says gently, finally appearing to be more of what Liam would expect from a victim advocate. “I do know this is hard, very very hard, but from what I’ve seen so far speaking with you now, I think you can do it. You clearly have a very good support system around you and that is what is most important.”

Harry nods and looks down, hands balling into his cuffs again. Liam remembers a time when he would trace the scars on his own hand when he got nervous or upset. Harry evidently coped by playing with his cuffs.

“What about the plea bargain? Will Mr. Peel be considering that?” He asks carefully and she shakes her head noncommittally, shrugging slightly.

“I’m not sure. That is something he will look at in the coming days as he reviews the evidence the defense plans to present. He will try to determine what kind of case they have, what their chance of success is and make a determination at that point. But I know Mr. Peel, if you say you want to go with a plea bargain because you want to avoid the trial, then he will likely do as you ask unless there is some legal impediment. I know his choice would always be to follow the letter of the law and prosecute the accused to the fullest extent, but he also has a duty to you, the victim, to take care of you,” she replies, watching him carefully. “Harry, please do think long and hard before you consider that option though. I completely understand why you think it would be an easy way out, but it has lasting ramifications and you might find yourself regretting the decision down the road.”

Harry nods and closes his eyes slowly, absorbing her advice.

“When will we hear from Peel again?” Des asks, chomping at the bit to get things underway. He had been a bear when he came home after court on Friday. Spewing hate, cursing, swearing and threatening to go blow the jail sky high just to kill the two bastards. Robin had stepped in and taken him outside for a walk to blow off steam, but he was clearly still not over it. Liam understood. If given the chance, he would probably take out the assholes too. Des was just protective over his son and trying to make up for whatever inadequacy he felt for not having protected him two years ago when they had abducted him.

“He will be in touch in the next few days I’m sure. The trial starts next Monday, so he will be wanting to get things in place. If you choose to testify, he will come and sit with you to go through a bit of a practice run so you are prepared and know what to expect,” she tells Harry and he bites his lip, brows knitting together.

“Do I have to do the practice? I don’t really know that I want to do it twice. Even if once is just practicing,” he asks her nervously.

“Of course not. Though we will still go over it with you to give you an idea of what kinds of questions you can expect and what will be required,” Sandy answers gently. Harry nods, relaxing only the tiniest bit. “Ok, do you have any more questions for me? Anything you need?”

Harry shakes his head and she smiles gently, reaching into her bag and producing a card.

“This is my direct number. Please do not hesitate to call me if you do come up with any questions or just needs to talk things over,” she passes the card across to Harry, who looks at it for a moment and then back up at her. “I will be in touch as soon as I’ve gone over things with Mr. Peel and we
will be back to talk things over with you. You can let us know then what you’ve decided to do.”

With that she smiles, understanding that Harry would now need time to think and to absorb all of the information and decide what he felt most comfortable doing. Dr. Howard was due again later in the day. He was keeping up a schedule of coming every other day for at least two weeks to really let Harry get through some things. Liam hopes he will talk to the doctor about the trial options as well.

When she’s gone, Harry takes a nap cuddled up against Liam who spends the time on his phone. He scrolls through a variety of websites outlining each step of the trial process, the potential sentences that could be given for each charge and tries to determine what possible defense they might be coming up with.

Most of it just serves to confuse him though. There seems to be so many things to consider and directions this could go that his head is spinning by the time he drops his phone on the bed, rubbing a hand across his face in frustration. There was a genuine fear that had started to take bloom in his chest that the bastards might get away with it. He knows that it’s unlikely, really, but it doesn’t stop a small sense of worry taking hold.

What if they get out of jail? What then? He will have to move away with Harry? Find a new home and start over? He would do it, no question. He would go to the ends of the earth for Harry, but would Harry ever be able to feel safe again?

After his session with Dr. Howard, Harry refuses dinner and retreats back to bed, looking destroyed again. Liam worries that the doctor is pushing him too hard and making him move too quickly.

“It’s not that Liam,” Harry answers quietly when Liam expresses that concern out loud. “It’s just that I’ve never properly talked about it like this. We’ve only just started really going over everything I feel now and felt then and it’s just overwhelming at times. I do think he really is trying to help me.”

“Did you mention the trial to him and you testifying, if you choose to? What did he say?” Liam asks carefully, trying not to assume which direction Harry was going to go.

“Yes. He said he can come when Mr. Peel is here going over the questions,” Harry answers, voice ragged and tired.

“Ok, good,” Liam replies gently before tentatively asking the main question regarding the trial. “Have you decided what you are going to do? About the trial I mean?”

Harry takes a deep breath and sighs, fingers playing with his bottom lip and knees up to his chin again.

“Yeah, I’m gonna let the trial go ahead. I’ll testify by video, but live. Though I don’t want the audience there. I don’t want mum and dad and Gemma to hear it because according to Dr. Howard, it could get graphic. The defense might ask really difficult questions to try to get me to slip up or something and I don’t want them to hear it,” he answers, eyes carefully coming up to meet Liam’s.

“Um, but I was hoping you could be the one who sits with me during it, you know. The advocate said I could have someone there supporting me and I want it to be you… if you’re ok with it of course. I mean, if you don’t think you could handle hearing it, I would understand…” he starts rambling, hands fidgeting with nerves and Liam quickly reaches out to take them.
“Of course Harry. If you want and need me there, I’ll be there, no question. It’s about you, not me,” Liam answers firmly, though his stomach is doing flips at potentially hearing some very upsetting things. It was hard enough when Harry did the midnight confessionals, but this was going to be ten times worse. He would have to put on the performance of his life in keeping himself calm and collected on the outside so as not to distract Harry.

Harry breathes out loudly in relief, giving Liam a tiny smile.

“Thank you,” he says gratefully. “I know they recommended I have Dr. Howard there, but I would just feel better with you.”

Liam nods, squeezing his hands and returning the smile.

The two of them sit a while in silence. Liam turns to pull Harry into his arms, pressing soft kisses to his forehead and temple. As always, Harry leans into them sighing gently.

For once, Harry doesn’t have a nightmare. He doesn’t wake up screaming or lost, but he does hold on just a bit tighter and Liam can’t help but return it. Both of them aware of the turmoil ahead.

**Day 30**

Mr. Peel returns on Thursday, warning them a day in advance when he calls to get Harry’s answer. He’s quite pleased that he is going through with the trial. He proclaims that the case is strong against Gary and Brian and that he would like to see them prosecuted to the fullest extent.

Dr. Howard arrives first, sitting with Harry in the office for a few minutes prepping him and gauging his current status. Harry had decided to do the run through in the office to avoid anyone in the house hearing anything. While he wasn’t doing a full practice, Mr. Peel did want him to answer some questions in order to consider what he would say and how he would say it. He also knew that they would be going over the defense’s angle. This was the bigger concern because they were more likely to push Harry on very difficult information.

Harry had sat down with Des, Robin, Anne and Gemma and explained that he was going to have them leave the courtroom when he testified and that Liam would be with him during it. There is some balking from Des and Anne, both of whom declare that he should have his doctor with him instead, as was recommended by the advocate. But Harry makes it clear that this is his choice and that’s the end of it. When Dr. Howard backs him up, giving his personal opinion that Harry is choosing the person who he feels will be best at keeping him calm and focused, they are forced to accept it. It doesn’t stop Des from giving Liam a severe look though. Once again annoyed that he seemed to be coming between Harry and his family.

When at last Dr. Howard, Harry, Mr. Peel and Liam are sitting in the office, the gravity of it all really settles over Liam. He finds himself sitting very tensely, frightened to hear what Harry will say.

“Right, as I said on the phone yesterday, we have a strong case and I am feeling confident in the jury we have chosen. I do have to warn you though that the defense does plan to attack your character and attempt to use your history against you,” he starts and Harry frowns.

“My history? What history?” He asks, confused.
“Harry, you are a public personality and your romantic history has a common knowledge aspect to it. It’s been all over the covers of magazines, discussed on the internet and they do intend to bring up some of your previous relationships as proof that you are, shall we say, more adventurous in your tastes,” Mr. Peel replies and a spike of fury goes through Liam. So much of Harry’s so called history was PR bullshit, not real and only for publicity, and it had created a reputation around Harry very early on that had plagued him for years, despite it not being true. It had hurt Harry a great deal to constantly be referred to as a lothario and love rat, implying that he was very promiscuous and without a conscious when it came to using women for his own purposes. He had hoped once the band went on break and he started a new chapter in his life with his solo career, that he could start to alter public opinion about him to prove it wrong. But then his new manager had instead gone ahead and kept it going with another PR relationship. Harry had texted Liam his frustrations so many times that Liam had lost count.

“But none of that shit is true!” Harry blurts out, looking entirely offended. “So much of that was just rumors and bullshit. None of it would connect to what they did to me anyway.”

“That’s the problem Harry. Whether it was rumors or not, we can’t prove it’s not true any more than they can prove it was. But it plants a seed and paints a picture of your character that we will need to fight against,” Mr. Peel replies calmly, fully expecting Harry’s reaction. “They will try to show you as being sexually adventurous, open-minded and possibly even looking for an arrangement to satisfy a new desire you had developed or to play out one you have always had. To that end, I don’t know how they will play it, but the point is they will try to make it seem like you chose to go to the two accused to play out a fantasy and were consenting the entire time.”

“But they held me captive!” Harry all but yells. “How the hell do they plan to defend that?”

“My guess is they will say you got tired of the publicity, the fame and notoriety. You wanted a break from it and it was part of the arrangement,” Mr. Peel replies. “Look, it’s far-fetched, all of it really, because we certainly have enough physical evidence between the state of your body when you were found and from the place where you were held to show that you weren’t there of your own volition, but as I said before, their biggest concern is going to be the sexual assault charges. They carry the biggest sentences, so they will want to put as much on you as possible in that regard. Even if it means letting it slip that they took it too far and ended up holding you captive unintentionally.”

“Jesus,” Harry breathes out, hand going through his hair. Liam can see he’s regretting his decision to go through with this.

“Harry, you need to remember through all of this that you are the one who is in the right. You are the victim and all you need to do is tell the truth. That’s what really matters and the jury will be able to see that,” Dr. Howard chimes in, voice soft and gentle. “Let Mr. Peel deal with the defense’s accusations and storytelling. You just tell the truth.”

Harry sighs loudly through his nose, shaking his head slightly. He’s clearly frustrated and they had only just begun.

“Now, as for my questions during your testimony, I will start by asking you about how they abducted you, what happened, what you remember and I will then move on to what happened after. I don’t plan to get too graphic or to make you go over every single thing or detail, but I will need to ask you about particular things. Things that will undoubtedly be difficult for you and I need you to be prepared for that,” Mr. Peel says carefully, pulling out a pad of legal paper that has notes all over it. “I think we should go over some of them. Just so you can try to answer now to give you the
chance to know what you will say and what to expect.”

Harry frowns and goes tense, but nods a moment later.

“Ok, we don’t need to go over the initial ones right now. I think you can give an account of the abduction itself yes?” Mr. Peel asks and Harry nods. “Right, well then, could you tell us what happened when you arrived at the house? What you saw and what they said to you?”

Harry’s hands ball up and disappear into his cuffs, body shrinking visibly as he tries to make himself smaller and Liam’s heart breaks. Before he even thinks about it, he reaches forward and wraps his own hand around Harry’s cuff covered one, squeezing gently. Harry startles slightly at the action, but a moment later his hand emerges and joins with Liam’s. Shaking, but holding on tightly.

“Um, I was unconscious when I arrived. I didn’t see anything before, but when I woke up I was in a dirt hole in the ground. It was dark, really dark, and it smelled really bad. Just dingy and like something rotten,” he explains, stopping to take a deep breath. “I, um, I tried to see where I was, but I couldn’t even sit up. It was a small space and I could only feel dirt around me. I yelled for help, but they didn’t come for a long time and I started to panic. I tried to dig, but just got a lot of dirt in my mouth and eyes. I kicked with my feet and that was when I found the opening. It had a metal grate over it, with like, iron bars in a criss cross pattern and it was locked. I couldn’t open it no matter how many times I kicked it.”

“How long do you think you were in the hole before you saw them?”

“I don’t know… I don’t know how long I was out before I woke up. A couple of hours I guess. I couldn’t see outside. Couldn’t see if the sun was up or not,” Harry answers shakily.

“Ok, when the two accused did show up, did they say anything? Do anything?” Mr. Peel asks and Harry’s hand tightens almost painfully.

“Um… they uh… they didn’t really say anything at first, not that I could hear, but I heard them laughing. I begged them to let me out and they laughed harder. I heard a metal door being opened and I thought they were releasing me, but that’s when I realized I was just in a smaller hole inside of a bigger one. They just walked into the bigger space and locked the door behind themselves and stood there staring at me. I was so scared. I didn’t know what they wanted…” his voice breaks off and his fingers flex again, resuming their tight hold.

“Did they say anything to you?”

“They asked me what they should do with me first,” Harry replies quietly.

“Did you answer them?”

“I asked them to let me go. I begged them to let me go.”

“What happened next?” Mr. Peel presses and Liam feels a strong urge to punch the man.

Harry swallows loudly, one single tear trickling down his cheek and Liam’s own throat tightens.

“Um… they uh…” he stops and sniffs loudly, wiping the tear away with his sleeve. “They uh… opened the gate on the hole I was in, they were laughing again… and uh… they grabbed my ankles
and pulled me out. They pushed me until I landed face down on a mattress on the floor. I tried to get up, I did, I tried to run and get away, but they just shoved me down, both of them sitting on me, holding me down as they pulled my clothes off… still laughing. The whole time they were laughing.” He stops and sobs once, face crumpling and Liam matches it, despite his best efforts to control it. The other two remain silent. Though the doctor does lean forward, preparing to step in if he thinks he needs to, but Mr. Peel just waits while he tries to get control of himself.

“Harry, I know this is hard, I do, but this part establishes that you were not a consenting participant and it sets up the start of what would be your life for two years. You will need to tell us everything that happened the first time you met them,” Mr. Peel presses gently after a few minutes of Harry sniffling and shaking.

“I know! Fuck… just give me a minute,” Harry grumbles out. He wipes his face with his sleeve again and Liam surreptitiously does the same.

“Harry, you need to remember you aren’t there. You’re here and you’re safe. Find something that keeps you grounded like we have been doing in therapy. Find something that you know is proof that you are safe and here,” Dr. Howard suggests. “We’ve been using your Brit Awards Liam, sorry,” the doctor laughs softly and Liam shrugs.

“It’s fine. So long as it helps,” he replies, rubbing small circles on Harry’s hand with his thumb.

“Yes, but could I take something like that in with me when I testify?” Harry asks and Mr. Peel shakes his head.

“Not likely, but you are taking a person in with you. Perhaps Liam can be that person who makes you feel safe,” he suggests carefully and the doctor nods.

“Exactly, use Liam. Look at Liam. Squeeze his hand and focus on him. Use him to keep you in that present moment so you can separate your memories and what you are saying from where you are at that moment,” Dr. Howard agrees. Harry carefully lifts his chin and tries to meet Liam’s eyes, but looks away a second later.

“I don’t know that I can look at him when I’m talking about…” he trails off, shrinking in on himself again. Liam tries to come up with a solution and spots one peeking out of his own sleeve.

“Here, I’ve an idea,” he says while releasing Harry’s hand and peeling his sweater off, leaving him in only his t-shirt. “My tattoos. Look at them, follow the lines of them, which ever one you want.”

Harry throws him a grateful look and takes a deep breath, pulling Liam’s right hand forward. He studies the elaborate eagle covering the back of it. One finger traces the outlines carefully and his brows furrow when he notices the pink scars.

“What the hell did you do to your hand?” He asks suddenly. All thoughts of the tattoo are forgotten as he looks at the scars, twisting his hand around to see all of them. Liam flushes slightly, feeling ashamed.

“I punched a mirror. It’s a long story. Just look at the tattoo,” he replies with a grumble and Harry throws him a look.

“Add that to the list of long stories you need to tell me,” Harry deadpans. He then takes a deep breath and resumes looking at the tattoo. His fingers and eyes begin trailing a little further up to the
scull and roses.

“Harry, can you continue now do you think?” Mr. Peel asks.

Harry’s lips tighten, but he nods after a moment, the finger tracing the lines shaking more.

“Um… they held me down, pulled my clothes off, still laughing and then… um…” he stops and
swallows loudly, his finger falling off its path. “They each took a turn… ra… raping me… while
the other one held me down… It happened a few times. I didn’t count. I just kept begging them to
stop,” his voice breaks, one tear breaking loose again and he determinately focuses on Liam’s
tattoos. The hand holding Liam’stightens and Liam swallows loudly, the urge to vomit very high.

“Were you injured in this assault?”

“Yes, I was bleeding when they were done, um… I had burns on my skin from them pulling my
clothes off so roughly and bruises from where they held me down,” Harry answers, finger now
tracing the lettering in the banner above the scull and roses.

“What did they do next?”

“They put heavy metal handcuffs on my wrists that chained me to the wall and a metal collar on
my neck that was also attached to the wall. They left me face down on the mattress, locked the
gate on the hole and went upstairs. I could hear them walking around, talking and laughing,” Harry
answers, voice soft and slightly deadened.

“How often were you locked up in the restraints?”

“Most of the time if I wasn’t locked in the smaller hole or locked in the bathroom because of the
rain.”

“The scars on your neck and wrists, are they from the metal restraints?”

“Yes. I tried to get out of them. I tried to use them to hurt myself, thinking that maybe they’d be
forced to take me to a hospital or something. Sometimes they would cut me while they were…
um… while they were hurting me…”

“Hurting you? You mean raping you?”

“Um yeah, um… they would be rough and the restraints only had so much chain and the metal
would cut me.”

“Ok, you’re doing well Harry. Again, I know this is hard, but this is somewhat how the
questioning will go. We will need you to be detailed for the most part. We need to hear what
injuries you sustained and I will present evidence showing your scars including your arm, your
finger and your wasted appearance. I will also show what the lack of sunshine did to you, but if you
can give the jury details on how you sustained these injuries and let them know that it was painful
and against your will, that’s what they need to know. It is the truth. No one would willingly be hurt
the way you were for any reason,” Mr. Peel says. Harry nods, looking slightly unsure, but
understanding what he was getting at. “Now, from this point on I will be asking questions about
the frequency with which they assaulted you and what it was like living in the hole. I also want to
go over what they told you of the outside world because it was only touched on in the evidence you
gave the police. You knew about the funeral? How did that happen? Did they tell you about it?”
“Yeah, they did. They would come and sit and read news articles to me. They would tell me about the search for me, laughing because the police weren’t even getting close. When the search was called off, when the police decided that I was likely dead, they celebrated. They said they were going to get off scot free and would never be caught,” Harry answers, sighing angrily. “They showed me pictures from the funeral. Told me my family never loved me and were happy to be rid of me and that I should be grateful they took me in. It hurt, a lot. It hurt more than anything to know that people had given up. That my own family had given up and stopped looking for me. I thought I would be trapped there forever. I sort of always assumed at some point they would just kill me.”

“Did they ever threaten to kill you? Tell you they would?”

“No, they made an effort to keep me alive for the most part. They forced me to eat and treated my wounds when they were really bad.”

“Why do you think that is? Did they ever tell you they cared about you?”

“No, never directly. They just raped me. They used me like a toy and did the bare minimum to make sure I didn’t die.”

Liam remembers the first confessional, about the time Harry was left alone and hoped he would die. He couldn’t even imagine how awful it would be to want to die, but be forced to keep living. But Harry didn’t give up. He couldn’t do it because of Liam. He had told Liam that he kept him alive.

“Did they ever give you any indication of an end game?”

“No, never. I think they fully intended to just keep me and to keep doing what they were doing.”

“Did they ever tell you why they abducted you?”

“They told me they chose me because I was the ultimate prize, the ultimate crime. To take and keep someone famous, so well-known and recognizable without getting caught. They were really into the idea that they had power over me. That they had taken whatever power they seemed to think I had because I was famous and erased it by taking control over me. They owned me. That’s what they kept telling me.”

“Ok good, this is good. Let’s move on to…”

“No, sorry,” Harry cuts off the prosecutor, eyes closing slowly and body wilting. “I’m sorry. I just can’t do more now. I know I have to do all of it at the trial and you’ve given me an idea of what to expect, but I need to stop right now. I feel sick… I just want to go lie down,” he says softly and Liam leans forward immediately to let Harry lean on him.

“Harry, again, I know this is hard, but you won’t be able to just stop at the trial. Doing some of these difficult parts now will help you be ready then,” Mr. Peel presses, but Dr. Howard stops him.

“He’s aware and he and I will discuss it when he’s feeling better. You must understand he’s still healing as well and he needs to listen to his own body and mind right now,” the doctor says gently. “Why don’t you and I talk and go over the questions? Then I can work more with Harry on them tomorrow and we will let him go rest now.”
Mr. Peel doesn’t look particularly pleased, but he softens when he looks at Harry’s pale, slightly greenish face.

“Alright, that works for me. Just call me if you have any questions Harry. We are probably going to have you come in to testify by Wednesday at the latest.”

Harry nods and accepts Liam’s help standing. They quietly hobble down the hall to the bedroom, Liam closing the door behind them. He turns back to Harry to ask him if he wants some water and finds him standing with his hand on his forehead and face crumpling as tears drip down his cheeks. Liam’s heart breaks. He closes the small distance quickly and collects Harry in his arms, holding him tightly and running his fingers through his hair.

“Do you want to change your mind? You still can. You can tell him to come up with a plea bargain and avoid all this,” Liam suggests quietly and Harry sinks against him, crying harder. Unsure of what else to do, he carefully bends and picks Harry up. He carries him over to the bed, sits down and leans back against the headboard. He lets Harry settle in his lap where he presses his face in against Liam’s neck and continues to sob brokenly. His entire body jolts with each one and it’s a long while before he calms. The sobbing quiets and his body goes limp from exhaustion.

When he sniffs loudly under Liam’s chin, he reaches for the tissue box and hands Harry a few. He gets a wet muttered ‘thank you’ in reply before he blows his nose.

“Are you ok? Do you want to change your decision?” Liam asks quietly. He figures that if Harry does, there was no time like the present to tell Peel while he was in the house.

He feels Harry shake his head before he actually speaks.

“No. No I have to do this. I knew it would be hard, but not this hard,” he admits, voice wet and thick still. “I’m scared of what the defense is going to ask though,” he whispers a few moments later.

“They will be lascivious and disgusting, but what you need to remember is that they are full of shit. Just like those people who would write rumors about you on the Internet. Remember how we used to laugh at them and how outrageous they were? Think of it the same way. It’s all bullshit and lies. Just answer honestly, give them some attitude if you have to, and know that I don’t believe a word they say. No one does,” Liam assures him. He hadn’t meant to give a deep pep talk, but realizes afterward that he really means it and he hopes it helps.

“Yeah true. It’s still gonna suck though,” Harry laughs softly, sitting up slightly to look Liam in the eye. “Thank you though. For being there for me. And I’m sorry you have to hear it. I didn’t think of that part when I picked you. You should know that if you don’t think you can do it, you can just say so. I’ll ask Dr. Howard instead.” Harry tries to sound reassuring, like he wouldn’t be at all bothered if Liam said no and backed out, but the quiver in his voice gives him away. Liam immediately shakes his head, remembering as always that it was about Harry and not him. For Harry and not him that he was doing this.

“No, Haz, no. If you want me there, I’m there. Whatever you need, ok?”

Harry relaxes and nods, wiping under his eyes again with his sleeve. He looks weirdly adorable while doing so and Liam has the sudden, totally inappropriate desire to kiss him. Guilt storms over him immediately. This was absolutely not the time to be having these types of thoughts. Not after
what he had just heard Harry talking about.

Harry looks at him strangely a moment later, brows furrowing slightly.

“What?”

Liam shakes his head to clear it, deciding to mentally chastise himself later, and instead pulls Harry forward and kisses his forehead gently. He then lets him resettle on his shoulder.

“Do you want anything? Some water?” Liam asks, deftly trying to move them along to keep Harry from asking more questions.

Harry sighs on his shoulder. His breath warm against Liam’s wet neck, courtesy of Harry’s crying, and his fingers start tracing Liam’s tattoos again.

“No, I’m ok now. Sorry about that break down there. I just really didn’t want to do in front of the crown prosecutor,” he admits and Liam squeezes his shoulder.

“I think he would completely understand Harry. Despite his demeanor sometimes, I do think he’s got your best interests in mind and wants to help you. You never have to apologize to me for something like that. Like I said, I’m here to help you, in whatever way you need. I’m not going anywhere.” He presses another kiss to the top of Harry’s head, earning him another soft sigh.

“Thank you,” Harry replies, voice soft and exhausted.

“Nap?” Liam asks, already knowing the answer. Harry nods, immediately starting to stretch out and settling further down on the pillows. Liam follows, letting Harry curl onto his chest like he normally did and a few minutes later he starts to snore quietly.

Liam trails his fingers through Harry’s hair gently. He lets the curls unravel and then bounce back to shape, carefully avoiding thinking about what he almost did a few minutes ago.
One Month

Late the next Monday, Harry receives official word that he will be expected to appear at the courthouse to begin testifying on Wednesday morning, day three of the trial. He was the prosecution’s star witness and would be taking the stand last after the police detective, his doctor and a few other witnesses. He spends the days in between barely eating, not that he ate much to begin with, and having nightmares. It was becoming the norm for him to wake up and start begging for Liam with hands reaching for him. Liam has flashbacks to his own nightmare when Harry was still missing.

Everyone rallies around to support him, even from afar as Zayn heads to the airport to go to LA for meetings.

The media starts to slowly creep back in, camping out in front of the court and going over the details extensively each day. While it is known that Harry will testify, they have no idea when and none of them want to miss it when he arrives.

His advocate, Sandy, arrives at the crack of dawn Wednesday, fully intending to be at his side as much as possible. It is arranged that she will also be able to be in the room with him during his testimony. She will be required to sit off to the side however, while Liam will be near, close enough that Harry can touch his tattoos.

They shower and dress quietly the morning of. Harry is swimming in his black suit, the same one he wore to the Another Man release party, and his hands fidget constantly with the buttons.

The ride in the car is quiet and solemn. Everyone knows that Harry doesn’t want to talk about it.

Mr. Peel had arranged for a police presence outside the courthouse for when they arrived in order to hold the media back and create a space for Harry to pass through. Though this does nothing to stop them from all taking thousands of pictures and screaming questions at him. Harry tucks himself in against Liam, while Gemma, Des, Robin and Anne immediately close in around him to try to shield him from view as much as possible. Harry is in full panic mode by the time they get inside.

“Vultures,” Des spits as Harry grips onto Liam, face pressed into his shoulder and his breathing rapid. Liam just gently shushes him and rubs his back, motioning for Sandy to find a private place for them to wait until it begins.

She leads them quickly to the room where the testimony will take place. It’s a small white box with grey carpeting, three chairs and a video camera set up on a tripod. It’s cold, clinical and even Liam feels uncomfortable.

Harry hugs each of his family members, all of them wishing him good luck before going to find seats for the opening portion of the day. It had already been decided that the audience would be asked to leave while he testified, including them, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t watch the opening remarks and the swearing in of the officials.

Harry stares at his chair uneasily, fingers playing with his cuffs again and Liam forces his attention
“Are you ok? Are you certain about this?” Liam asks him. As always, he wanted Harry to have every opportunity to change his mind, to back out if he needed to, but Harry nods a moment later with a sigh, tucking his hair behind his ear nervously.

“Yeah, I’m about as ok as I’m gonna be,” he glances back at the chair again. “I just want it to be over.”

“I can understand that,” Liam agrees, gently rubbing his shoulder.

“Right, have a seat. The bailiff will be in soon. He will have you put your hand on the bible and swear the oath. He will then step back out and it will be just the three of us in the room as promised,” Sandy says as she comes in, moving to take her own seat near the back of the room. “Just a reminder Liam, you are not to say anything. Your purpose here is to support Harry only. You cannot pass him any messages or say anything to him or anyone in the courtroom. Failure to follow these instructions could have you removed.”

Liam nods understanding the gravity of his role, what could happen if he is forced to leave and what it would do to Harry.

Harry turns and looks at the video camera, red light blinking as it awaits its time to be used.

“It’s weird. I don’t know why, but I sort of forgot that I wouldn’t be able to see them. They can see me, but I can’t see them,” he says carefully, starting to walk slowly over to his chair with Liam following.

“Isn’t that better though?”

Harry glances at him quickly and nods.

“Yes, the microphone is in the centre of the room. So I’m afraid you will hear everything. Is that ok?”

Harry turns back to the camera, mouth moving slightly as he considers it.

“Yeah… I guess,” he answers unsurely.

The door opens and a man in a smart outfit steps in, bible in his hand and Harry’s breathing picks up speed audibly in the room.

“We will need you to take your seat now. They are about to start with your testimony and we need you on video taking the oath,” the man tells him in a gruff voice.

Harry’s jaw shakes slightly, eyes widening, but he does as he’s told. Liam hurries to take his jacket off, dropping it on the floor behind his chair and quickly rolls his sleeves up to reveal as much of his tattoos as possible. He sits down and makes sure he’s within Harry’s reach and a crackling noise fills the room. The crown prosecutor’s voice follows it, sounding loud in the small space.
“We have visual. Harry can you hear us?” He asks, sounding disembodied with no visual of their own to see him.

Harry’s eyes move around wildly for a second. They go from the camera to Liam to the bailiff and back again, with panic quickly coming over his face. Liam immediately reaches forward and takes his hand, squeezing it and trying to reassure him. Harry looks down at it and then back up at Liam’s eyes.

“I don’t think he can hear us. Can someone check the audio please?” Mr. Peel orders and Harry turns back to the camera.

“No, no… I can hear you. I was just getting used to it,” Harry says quietly, swallowing loudly.

“Oh! Sorry! Alright then, there you are,” Mr. Peel says sounding surprised, but pleased. “Now, first Harry, we need you to take the bible into your hand and read the oath. This is for you to swear that you will not perjure yourself before this court.”

The bailiff hands Harry the bible and a cue card with a printed copy of the oath glued onto it. It’s dog eared and well used. Liam notices that the bible is as well.

Harry takes a deep shaky breath and holds up the card, saying the words quickly.

“I swear by God that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

The bailiff holds out his hand as soon as he’s done, taking the two items from Harry and then quickly disappears through the door again.

“Right, let’s begin then,” Mr. Peel starts and Harry’s hand tightens in Liam’s. “Harry, can you tell us what happened the night of December 31, 2016?”

Harry’s bottom lip quivers slightly as he struggles to start speaking. Liam can hear the remaining people in the courtroom shuffling, clearing their throats, papers moving and the odd cough.

“Um…” Harry starts, eyes glancing at Liam before he turns back to staring at the camera. His brows are knitted together slightly at how strange it was to be speaking to an inanimate object. “I… it was New Years Eve. I was going to a party to meet up with some friends. I had called a car company to come get me, since I planned on having a few drinks and couldn’t drive myself and…” He stops and shuffles in his seat slightly, looking uncomfortable.

“And then what Harry? Did you make it to your party?” Mr. Peel presses and someone in the courtroom sneezes.

“Um… no, I didn’t. The uh… the driver said he was going to take a short cut and I was playing on my cell phone, not really paying attention, not like I should have been, and I didn’t really notice that we had left London until probably twenty minutes later. I looked out the window and didn’t recognize where I was at all.”

“Did you ask the driver where you were?”

“Yeah… yes, I did. He said he was taking me to a party. Then I felt this weird pain in my neck, a stinging feeling. I felt really dizzy suddenly, and sick. Then I passed out I guess.”
“Would you describe the stinging sensation as a needle prick?” Mr. Peel asks.

“Objection, leading the witness,” a voice comes in suddenly. It’s male and very macho and Harry jumps at it, eyes widening.


“Thank you, Your Honour,” Mr. Peel says carefully. “Harry, would you describe the stinging sensation as a needle prick?”

Harry’s mouth quivers for a minute. His eyes are still wide at all of the voices suddenly and the rapid fire comments, but he collects himself a moment later, taking another deep breath.

“Um, yes. I would say that it was like that,” he agrees carefully, seeming to be on edge now at the defense lawyer possibly yelling out again.

“Did you recognize where you were before this happened?”

“No, no I didn’t.”

“What happened when you woke up?”

“Um…” he starts, eyes traveling down to Liam’s arm, finger starting to trace the inked patterns on his skin. Liam shoves his sleeve up further to reveal more. “I woke up and it was dark, really dark, and it smelled rotten and damp. I felt around me and all I could feel was dirt. It was a small space. I couldn’t sit up or see anything. So I started calling out for someone, asking for help.”

“Did someone answer you?”

“No, not for a long while. I um… I started trying to dig in the dirt to try to find a way out. I kicked with my feet and there was this metal grate there. It took me a little bit to figure out it was the opening, but I couldn’t get it open. I got a lot of dirt in my eyes and my mouth. It was really hard to breathe.”

His hands start to shake worse, but he persists in tracing the tattoos despite it.

“How did you feel during this?”

Harry’s brows flicker in annoyance and confusion.

“Terrified, of course. I was trapped in a dirt hole and I couldn’t get out. I didn’t know where I was or if anyone would come get me. I thought I was going to die, buried alive,” he replies with a shaky voice.

“How long before someone did come to you?”

“I don’t… I don’t know. I couldn’t tell the time. I couldn’t see anything to even know if it was day or not. It felt like forever though.”

“What happened when someone did come?”

Harry swallows loudly and Liam does the same. Hearing it a second time was no easier.
“They uh… turned a light on. It was a hanging light, like the kind construction workers use. They laughed at me and asked me what they should do with me now that they had me. I begged them to let me go,” he whispers, voice cracking. “I begged them.”

A single tear trickles out of his eye and he furiously wipes it away, sniffling once. As if by magic, Sandy appears and hands him a tissue box. Her face kind and sympathetic.

“What did they do when you begged them to be let go?”

“Laughed. They just laughed at me. They opened the grate over the end of the hole I was in and pulled me out by my ankles. They shoved me over to a mattress on the floor and made me lie on it face down. There were two of them. I tried fighting them, but they were stronger than me.”

“And then what happened Harry?” Mr. Peel asks gently. He was making more of an effort to sound kind and sympathetic, but Liam wasn’t sure if it was for Harry or the jury.

“Um…” Harry starts, fighting the tears that were threatening. His mouth shakes as he tries to keep his face from crumpling with the emotion but his wobbling voice gives it away. “They um… they held me down. They knelt on my back and legs and shoved me around, pulling my clothes off. Ripping them off. They were still laughing.” He stops again and swallows loudly. Mr. Peel starts to ask him what next, but Harry cuts him off by spitting it out to get it over with. “They raped me, both of them, several times… I begged them to stop so many times. I begged them and fought and they just kept… they just kept laughing.”

The courtroom is eerily quiet over the speaker, no one even daring to cough and the prosecutor waits a minute before continuing. Liam assumes it’s so the jury can really take in the anguish on Harry’s face. To see his pain and know that he was not a consenting participant. He was already trying to derail the defense.

“Did they say anything to you while they raped you? Did they tell you why?”

Harry shakes his head.

“We need a reply Mr. Styles, audible please,” the judge states.

“Um, sorry, no. They said nothing to me. They just laughed and told each other what to do to keep me still. And they cheered each other on.” He swallows loudly again, grimacing slightly.

“Were you injured during this?”

Harry nods and then remembers to speak.

“Yes, I was bleeding from…” he stops and waves his hand, the words difficult. “And um… I had bruises from being held down and burns on my skin from the way they ripped my clothes off.”

“Did they make any effort to treat your wounds?”

“No. Not that time, no.”

“What did they do next?”

“They put these thick metal cuffs around my wrists. They were attached to the wall with chains and...
they also put one around my neck. I couldn’t sit up or stand up. I could barely move with them on and they just left me there, locked in.”

“Did they leave the light on? Can you describe your surroundings for us please?”

“Yes, they did. I was in a big hole. Like they had dug it out of the ground, but there was a large metal grate over one side. I could see into a house, but I couldn’t see any windows. I figured out that it was a basement. They had dug the hole right into the wall of the basement through the foundation. Opposite the bigger grate was a smaller one. It covered the entrance to the hole I was in when I first woke up.”

“Did you see their faces at all during this first interaction?”

“Yes. They didn’t try to hide them from me at all.”

“Did you find that strange?”

“I assumed it was because they were going to kill me, so they weren’t worried I would identify them.”

“Did they tell you they would kill you?”

“No… never.”

“Did you recognize them at all? Had you met them before that first time they sexually assaulted you?”

“Objection, leading,” the defense lawyer barks out and Harry jumps.

“Sustained. Reword your question please council.”

“Apologies,” Mr. Peel says a minute later. “Harry, did you recognize the two men? Had you ever met them before?”

Liam can’t quite see what the issue was with the way the question was asked the first time. He suspects the defense lawyer is just finding weird things to pick at to interrupt the flow and to rattle Harry. Sadly, it worked for a few moments each time.

“Um… no, sorry, no. I had never seen them before, ever, and I am good at recognizing faces.”

“Did they ever give you a reason why they did this? Why you?”

Harry shakes his head slightly, hair sliding forward and he quickly tucks it behind his ears again.

“No, not really. They just said they wanted to have me, they wanted someone recognizable. They said my fame made me powerful but that they were the ones who took that power from me. It was so strange.”

“So they wanted someone famous and they chose you?”

“Yes. It would seem they did.”
It seemed so simplistic. Two drunks, guys who evidently felt the only way to gain power was to take it from someone else just randomly decided to grab Harry out of all of the potential victims. This realization makes Liam feel hollow. He felt like he needed a real reason, something to make sense of this because then he could come to terms with it but if it was just a random choice, Harry’s bad luck, no sense at all, then it left no space for closure.

“How long were you held in that hole Harry?”

“Over two years… except when it was raining."

“What happened when it was raining?”

“They would lock me in a tiny bathroom that was in the basement… It was cold and there were no windows.”

“Were you allowed to leave at any time?”

“No, never. I was always locked in. Either shackled to the wall, locked in the hole or locked in the bathroom.”

“How long did you go without seeing outside? Without seeing the sun?” Mr. Peel asks more softly, becoming sympathetic again. He was once again pulling the heart strings of the jury.

Harry’s chin wobbles again, eyes going down to his and Liam’s hands locked together on his knee.

“Um… seven hundred and seventy-eight days,” he answers softly. There is an audible gasp from somewhere in the courtroom, followed by the judge hushing the person.

“You weren’t allowed to go outside or see the sun in over two years?”

Harry shakes his head.

“No.”

“What was it like living in the hole?”

Harry’s eyes glance up at the camera and back down, finger going back to Liam’s tattoos.

“Um… horrible… Just sameness, but I… I never knew what was going to happen. Like, what they were going to do next or what they planned to do with me eventually…”

“Did they take care of you in any way?”

“Well… not… they forced me to eat. Um… if I was hurt badly, they would do what was necessary to make sure it didn’t kill me. But no, I wouldn’t say they took care of me.”

“What injuries did you sustain over the two years?”

“A lot of cuts and bruises mostly. And burns. They um… they hated my mermaid tattoo and one of them decided to ruin it one night. He’d been drinking, he brought a knife in and slit right through it.”
Liam’s hand shakes. He’d seen that scar so many times, but hadn’t really heard how it had happened until now. He feels a surge of fury that he struggles to control for a moment, making Harry glance at him in surprise.

“Can you identify who cut your tattoo Harry?”

“Yes… Gary did. He was the one who did it… Brian wrapped up my arm a few hours later because it wouldn't stop bleeding. It got infected.” He stops for a moment, looking down at Liam’s tattoos and a pang of sorrow washes over him. “Gary cut me a lot. I don’t know why. He would just come and sit beside me, talking nonsense and would cut my arm, or my back or just anywhere he could reach… my private areas… he told me he liked watching my blood run down my skin.”

“What kind of nonsense would he talk about?”

“Just about the weather or about a movie he'd seen or just ridiculous things like that. All while cutting me.”

“What other injuries did you sustain?”

“I lost count at how many times my fingers or toes got broken… I don’t know… the metal cuffs and the collar were always cutting me… and I… I bled a lot… after they…”

“After they raped you?”

“Objection, leading.”

“Sustained. Reword please Mr. Peel.”

Harry’s face crumples slightly through the exchange, returning to the hardest subject for him to discuss. Somehow talking about having his fingers broken or his arm slashed open was easy for him, clinical, but talking about the sexual abuse was pulling him back over the emotional ledge again. Liam takes his hand and gently guides him to start tracing the tattoos again. He wanted so badly to tell them all to shut up, to stop asking and to just leave Harry alone. He wanted to pull him into his arms and comfort him, but he couldn’t. So he offers his tattoos. His arm full of them. All neat and pristine and lacking scars.

“After they what Harry?”

A small sob escapes and Harry sniffles loudly, cursing quietly.

“God… fuck… sorry, um…” he apologizes, knowing that cursing was frowned upon in these settings. “Um… after they raped me. I always bled. They were never careful.”

“How often did that happen?” Mr. Peel asks in his sympathetic tone again.

Harry looks up at the camera with watery eyes, lips trembling slightly.

“Everyday… Almost every single day both of them would… all day, at various times. I don’t… I don’t remember how many times, but it was almost every day. Just whenever they wanted to.”

“Did you ask them to stop?”

“Yes! Every time! I begged them to stop… to just stop,” he pulls in a raspy, wheezy breath, throat
still tight from fighting the tears. “I never wanted it. Never.”

“Did they ever treat any of your injuries?”

“Not really. They would wrap up my cuts if they were too deep and wouldn’t stop bleeding, but… God… um… the damage they did raping me… they just left that. They wouldn’t let it heal. They did give me antibiotics a few times, when things got infected.”

“They gave you medication?”

“Yes. When the cut on my tattoo got infected and a few other times… when… when I got infected.”

“Infections due to the near constant sexual assault?”

“Yes.”

“Did they ever tell you where they got these medications from? Did they talk about taking you to a hospital?”

“No, never. They just put the pills in my mouth and forced me to swallow them.”

“Were there attacks that were worse than the others?”

Harry shakes his head slowly, brows knitting together and eyes off to the distance.

“I don’t know that there was ever a time it was easy… As time went on they got more violent I guess. They would throw me around, slam me into the walls and push my body into strange positions to try different sexual positions… I passed out a lot when they were done.”

They hear Mr. Peel sigh loudly and a trickle of dread goes through Liam.

“Harry, I apologize for this question, but I do have to ask you to outline the different types of sexual acts you were forced to perform.”

Harry rears up and back in his seat in shock. His mouth drops open and a strange choked off noise comes from his throat.

“What?” He finally gets out, voice shaking and eyes filling again.

“Please answer the question Mr. Styles,” the judge drones out and Liam would happily throw something at her were he able.

Harry turns to him, face full of panic and breathing rapid. He stares at Liam for help, to protect him and take him away from this. Liam opens his mouth to say something, anything that might comfort Harry, but he gets an angry noise and head shake from Sandy. With no other choice Liam squeezes his hand, trying to convey as much as possible in that simple movement and Harry’s eyes travel back to the camera, tears trickling down his cheeks.

“Oh my God…” he whispers out, free hand coming up and landing over his mouth. Liam wonders for a second if he’s about to be sick, but then he moves it, scrubbing his fingers through his hair as his face crumples again. He sobs a few times as his body curls in on itself.
Someone might as well be sending spears through Liam’s heart it hurts so much. He feels so useless, so unable to make any of this easier for Harry, but there was no way to make it easier. What he had been through was that horrific. You couldn’t sugar coat it or hand wave it away. That was why Mr. Peel asked the question, because it was one thing to say he was raped, but hearing the ways in which it happened would surely bring the jury to his side and rattle the Defense’s chances at having the sexual assault charges dropped or lessened.

“Mr. Styles,” the judge starts and Harry cuts her off.

“Um… I don’t really know how… they um…” he struggles, mouth moving as he tries to come up with words to explain. Liam’s own stomach turns sour as he realizes what he’s about to hear.

“Shit… they raped me, anally… a lot… Usually without any concern for me. No preparation or protection… They liked it when I bled,” he stops and closes his eyes. He swallows loudly, shaking his head once before continuing. His voice breaking and shaky. “Um… I was forced to perform oral sex on them and to touch them… It was horrible… and they wouldn’t stop, just… They just did what they wanted and forced me to do what they wanted… They didn’t seem to care that I was a person… A lot of the time it was both of them at the same time.”

Liam hears a few sniffles from the courtroom. Anger pulses through him that it took Harry talking about the worst, most disgusting things to get someone to actually feel that much emotion for him and that his pain and anguish before wasn’t enough.

“They would both rape you at the same time?”

Liam’s jaw clenches.

“Yes,” Harry answers in a small voice. “The more I bled, the happier they were.”

“Other than the cuffs and the collar, did they use anything else on you?”

Harry nods, face crumpling slightly again.

“They would put things into me all the time… Sex toys like plugs that were huge or dildos to make me bleed more or just random shit they found like a brush or a pipe. Anything just to see if they could.”

“They inserted a pipe into your body?”

“Yes,” Harry replies, swallowing hard. “A metal pipe. It was way too big around and I passed out from the pain.”

Liam swallows hard, feeling bile in the back of his throat.

“Did it happen only once?”

Harry shakes his head.

“No.”

“Did they ever explain why they were doing this?”
“No…” he shakes his head sadly. “No, they just laughed.”

“At any time, did you give consent?” Mr. Peel asks, a touch of finality in his voice, bringing out a major conclusion in one of his arguments.

Harry turns and looks at the camera with a fierce expression despite his wet cheeks and the snot under his nose. He tries his best to convey with his face just how much his next words were the truth.

“NO! NO! Never! I told them to stop so many times. I begged them to stop, begged them to let me go and they wouldn’t,” he stops and shakes his head sadly. “They would just laugh… every single time. They would just laugh.”

“At any time were you aroused by what they were doing to you?”

Harry’s mouth turns down in disgust, his voice sounding like a gag when he responds.

“No.” He swallows hard. “No, absolutely not.”

“Ok, thank you Harry. Let’s move on,” Mr. Peel starts, quickly turning the conversation while Harry was still reeling from what they had just been talking about. “What did they tell you about your family? The search to find you?”

Harry hastily wipes under his nose with a tissue. Tears are still falling down his cheeks and he appears almost dizzy at the change in topic.

“They would bring me magazines and show me stuff on the internet. They would taunt me about how no one was ever going to find me and that my family didn’t want me back anyway.”

“Was there any indication that they might let you go at some point?”

“No, never. They celebrated when my funeral was announced,” he spits out angrily. “As far as they were concerned it meant it was all over and that I was theirs forever.”

“Did you think you were stuck there forever?”

Harry looks down at his hands, finger tracing across the eagle on Liam’s own again.

“Yes,” he answers in a small voice. “It was hard not to give up hope after that.”

“But you did get free. How did you do that?”

He sniffls loudly glancing up at the camera, clearly glad for a more positive turn in the discussion.

“It was raining. Like I said, when it rained they locked me in the bathroom because the hole would flood sometimes. It wasn’t like they had done anything to weatherproof it. They had locked me in the bathroom as usual and they left. I don’t know where they went, but they were gone and it was the first time I’d been left in the bathroom without them in the house. So I thought I’d try breaking the door down or something.” He stops and takes a deep breath, sitting up a little more. “But when I started shoving on it, the lock fell off… quite literally fell off. Like it hadn’t been latched properly or something and I just walked out,” he finishes with a humorless laugh, as though he can
barely believe it himself.

“How do you think they left it like that on purpose?”

Harry shakes his head.

“No, they’d been drinking. They… they uh… did what they wanted to me and then I guess decided to go out and just tossed me in the bathroom. I heard one of them moving the lock, but I don’t think he intentionally left it open. It was a pretty old lock.”

Liam tries not to dwell on the fact that Harry was raped just a few hours before he showed up at his house. It didn’t bear thinking about, but still it lodged in the back of his head.

“And then you found some safety?”

Harry nods.

“Yes, I did.”

“Thank goodness you did. It’s good to see you again Harry,” Mr. Peel finishes off before addressing the judge. “Nothing further.”

“Thank you Mr. Peel. Court will recess for 15 minutes,” the judge says before her gavel comes down loudly over the speaker.

The sound goes quiet and the camera goes back to waiting mode. Sandy then stands up.

“Would either of you like some water? A snack?”

“Where’s the bathroom?” Harry asks quickly, barely letting her finish as he starts to stand.

“Oh! Just down the hall, I can show you.”

Harry barrels towards the door with Liam struggling to keep up and Sandy quickly leads them to the door, waiting outside as Harry hurries over to the sink, not able to make it any further before he vomits loudly.

“It’s ok Haz, it’s ok,” Liam says quietly, holding his hair and rubbing his back. He glances around the room and makes sure it is empty, glad that they seemed to have it to themselves before returning his attention to Harry. He turns the tap on to wash the mess away.

Seconds later Harry starts to cry, hands over his face.

“Oh my God… oh my God,” he whimpers out through his fingers. Liam doesn’t hesitate to pull him up and against his chest. He cradles him and pulls his fingers through his hair while the other man sobs against him, knees buckling slightly.

“Shhhhh, it’s ok, it’s ok, you’re ok. It’s done, it’s over. You did amazing honey,” Liam soothes, forgetting entirely that he still had to do the cross examination.

Harry sniffls and sobs once more, leaning weakly against Liam and a trickle of worry goes through him.
“Harry, are you ok? What’s going on?”

Harry sniffs again and tries to stand up straighter, wobbling dangerously.

“I’m just really dizzy,” he says quietly, eyes closing as he takes a few deep breathes.

Liam holds on to him gently, ready to pick him up and carry him if he had to.

“You ok? Do you want me to tell Sandy you are too sick to continue?” Clearly this was taking a massive toll on him. If Harry needed to go home to rest, then so be it.

Harry shakes his head, breathing out as he tries to calm his swirling head, his breath sour.

“No… no I just want to get it over with,” he whispers. He shakes his head slightly as though testing it before opening his eyes and looking around. “I think I’m ok now. I’m just gonna rinse my mouth.”

“Ok,” Liam says uneasily. He’s not certain that Harry is ok at all, but there is a knock on the door that stops him saying more.

“Harry? Liam? Are you alright in there? We need to get back. We only have five more minutes left in the break,” Sandy asks through the door.

“I’ll tell her we need a few more minutes, that you aren’t feeling well. The judge will surely understand,” Liam says. He turns to go towards the door while Harry leans on the sink, but he reaches up and stops him.

“No, I’m fine, honestly. Just let me rinse my mouth and we will go,” Harry insists, voice wobbly despite his determination.

“Harry…” Liam starts.

“No, Liam. I want to be done today. I can’t come back and do this again, I can’t,” he says brokenly, voice thickening again with emotion and Liam breaks.

“Ok… ok, it’s fine. If that’s what you want.”

Harry nods and turns on the cold water again. He scoops some up and puts it in his mouth, swishing it around and spitting it out. He repeats it a few times, splashing some across his face to wash away the tears before he decides he's done. He stands back up again and wobbles, drying off with some paper towels handed over by Liam. He looks awful. His face is ashen, eyes dull, and he is beyond exhausted. Liam prays the defense counselor only has a few questions.

Sandy’s face is full of worry when they emerge and it gets worse when she takes in Harry’s destroyed appearance.

“Harry, are you unable to continue today?” She asks, voice full of concern as her hand lands on his arm.

Harry shakes his head slowly, taking a deep breath before starting the walk back to the room with determination. Sandy catches up and quickly helps support him with Liam.
“If at any time you need to stop, you just tell me. We have protocols in place for these situations, alright?” She asks him while eyeing him nervously, clearly not happy with his physical state.

“I’ll be fine. I want to get this over with and really I’m just tired more than anything.”

Neither Liam nor Sandy believe him, but they don’t say anything further.

They all retake their seats and Harry droops with his eyes closed. He takes deep breaths, trying to find the energy and strength he knew he was going to need. Liam sits next to him rubbing his shoulder, heart pounding with worry in his chest.

The camera blinks back to life, the speaker turns back on and it’s soon followed by the Judge’s gavel as she calls the court back to order and both of them jump at the noise.

“Mr. Ryan, your witness.”

There is the sound of a chair scraping on the floor, footsteps echoing and then someone clears their throat before speaking. Liam finds it a tad odd that they weren’t introduced to the defense counselor prior to the trial, but he figures there was either a reason for that or it was just the way things were done. Harry takes the time to blow his nose once more and wipes under his eyes. His shoulders belie how tense he is, fearful of what this man was about to ask him. Fear gives him more energy though and he stares at the camera apprehensively.

“Hello Harry. Allow me to introduce myself. Though I know you can’t see me, my name is Walter Ryan and I am the defense council in the case,” the counselor speaks smoothly. If Liam didn’t already hate him, that would have sealed it.

“Uh… hi,” Harry replies, unsure.

“Harry, you are a bona fide rock star, yes?”

Harry’s mouth opens and closes a few times, clearly he’s not sure where this is going and is stunned at how the questioning is opening in the first place.

“I… don’t know about that.”

“Well, you’ve toured the world, put out five albums with your band, and enjoyed all the perks of being a rock star. You know, the sex, drugs and rock and roll, right?”

Harry tenses more.

“I was only 17 when we started, so not really.”

“Oh… but isn’t that the age you started dating a woman in her thirties?”

Harry visibly fights the urge to roll his eyes. “That was nothing.”

“Nothing? I wonder how Caroline Flack would feel about that? What about all of the other women you’ve dated in the five years the band was together? I did a quick tally and I found at least 19 different ladies that you have been rumored to have shared your affections with publicly. I have also read that the number of women you’ve slept with is well over one hundred, is that correct?”
“NO! They are just rumors! There are a lot of lies about me out there!” Harry spits out, fury crossing his face.

“So you didn’t have sex with all of these women you have reportedly dated?”

“NO! Absolutely not! It’s just rumors.”

“Just rumors? Alright. What about the rumors of the men you have dated?”

“Lies!”

“Just lies? Then why not deny them outright publicly? Because you are telling us right now that none of the rumors are true, but you have never addressed them either. Is that because you were hiding something?”

“NO! I just never saw the point in saying anything because people would twist my words anyway.”

“So you just let it go.”

“Objection! Relevance of this questioning?” Mr. Peel interjects and Liam wonders why he’s let it go on this long anyway.

“I promise I’ll get there Your Honour. I just need to establish a pattern exists.”

“I’ll let you proceed for now Mr. Ryan, but get to it quickly please.”

“Right. Harry, did you have a sexual relationship with Nick Grimshaw?”

“Objection! Relevance Your Honour?” Mr. Peel hollers out at the same time Harry answers.

“What? No!” Harry rears back, shocked and upset. His hands start to shake in Liam’s.

“Overruled, but watch yourself Mr. Ryan.”

“Of course Your Honour. Let me rephrase. Have you had a romantic relationship with another man?”

“No! I said no! It’s just lies and rumors!”

“What about any of the other members of your band?”

Liam’s blood runs cold. He senses the question is really about Louis, but he doesn’t like the direction anyway.

“No!” Harry growls out angrily, frustrated at being pecked over this.

They hear the counselor walking, humming once.

“What about your fans? Groupies I believe they are called?”

“That is irrelevant.”
“I think the court will decide that Harry, but did you not admit on an American television show to having ‘hooked up’ with a fan?”

Harry bites his bottom lip and sighs angrily. Clearly furious at having his past used against him. Especially when he couldn’t very well deny it when he had actually said so on Ellen.

“Yes, but it wasn’t like that though.”

“Like what? A meaningless encounter? Just sex? Or like you said earlier, nothing?”

Harry shakes his head slowly and his chin drops down sadly.

“Would you describe yourself as a sexual person Harry?”

Harry jolts and his head snaps up in shock and confusion.

“Wha… what? I don’t understand?”

“Let me introduce Exhibit 1A of the defense. It is an assortment of pictures Harry. From your performances and photoshoots. The sorts of things you are used to I’m sure,” the lawyer says with a faux soothing voice. The sounds of a clicker come across the speaker, indicating he has them up as a slide show. “Now, these first few pictures I’m showing are from a variety of performances going back several years and they all show you grabbing your crotch Harry. Now I would say there is a sexual connotation to that action, wouldn’t you?”

“I…” Harry shakes his head again. “I was performing? I didn’t mean anything by it. I just like to put on a good show and have a persona I use on stage.”

“So this is just something you do on stage?”

“Yes!”

“What age range do you think the audience was at those shows Harry?”

Harry’s mouth opens and closes again a few times, eyes flicking to Liam and back.

“I… I don’t know.”

“Hedge a guess.”

“Fu… Uh, I…” He gestures with his hand and sighs quickly. “I guess like, 14 and up? I really don’t know.”

“Try anywhere from the tender age of 8 and upwards Harry. But even knowing there were teenagers, children who were only 14 in your audience, you thought it perfectly acceptable to perform a sexual act on stage in front of them?”

“It wasn’t a sexual act! Jesus Christ! A lot of performers do that!”

“So you were just copying someone?”
“NO! I was going with the show. I didn’t even think about it honestly.”

“Ok.” The lawyer confirms. “So this was just a stage thing then.”

“Yes!”

“Moving on to the pictures you did for a full photoshoot for Another Man magazine. This was after
the band split up, correct?”

Harry frowns, confused again.

“Um, yes.”

“In those pictures you appear to be wearing a leather collar, is that correct?”

Harry’s eyes close slowly, catching on immediately and he rubs his forehead.

“Yes, I am.”

“Who supplied that collar for the photoshoot Harry?”

“Fleet Ilya.”

“I’m just going to show the jury a few shots from the website of Fleet Ilya, in case they are not
aware. This a shop that deals almost exclusively in leather bondage and BDSM wear for those who
have that sexual proclivity.” They listen as there are several clicks and a few shocked gasps. “Now
you say Fleet Ilya supplied it, but that’s because you purchased the collar from them, correct?”

“Yes.”

“So really, you supplied the collar. A collar that you, of your own free will, had purchased for your
own personal purposes, but then chose to use in the photoshoot.”

“I just… I liked the collar. I thought it looked cool. I bought it with the shoot in mind,” Harry
admits in defeat and Liam squeezes his hand.

“You didn’t intend to use it for its intended sexual purpose?”

“I don’t know,” Harry replies honestly, shaking his head.

“I’ll ask you again Mr. Styles, are you a sexual person? As in overtly sexual and adventurous in
that regard?”

Harry sighs the word fuck and scratches his head.

“I was, I suppose. Back then.”

“But not now?”

“No, not after what those bastards did to me.”

“Is there a chance Harry that what, and I’m using your words here, those bastards did to you was a
pre-arranged set up for you to satisfy a sexual kink that you wanted hidden from the public?"

Harry rears back up again, eyes fiery as he glares at the camera.

“No! Absolutely not!” He growls, a voice he only uses when he’s beyond angry. Liam has only heard it a handful of times in all the years he’s known Harry.

“Are you sure? We’ve already established that collars are a kink of yours. You bought one, so it’s not a far stretch to add cuffs as well.”

“NO! I am telling you no! I did not make an arrangement with them. I had never met them before the night they kidnapped me… and raped me…” Tears brim up in his eyes again. This time from anger and frustration.

There is a smug sounding snort, followed by a sigh.

“Where did you go when you left my clients’ house a few weeks ago?”

Harry’s head shakes at the sudden change in topic.

“Um… a bus. I found a bus.”

“Ok, and where did you go on that bus?”

“To the airport, Heathrow. That’s how I figured out where I was.”

“Ok, you figured out where you were. Where did you go next?”

“I… got on another bus… I went to Surrey.”

“Surrey? Why Surrey? Where did you end up?”

“Um… Liam’s house.”

“Liam Payne, your former bandmate.”

“Yes.”

“Harry, can you tell me why exactly you chose to go to Liam’s house, instead of say, your mother’s house?”

“I… got to the airport, knew I was close to his house and went there. I wasn’t really thinking. And my mum’s up in Cheshire, much further away.”

“You were just as close to London as you were Surrey. Do you not know anyone in London?”

“Of course I do, but like I said, I wasn’t really thinking. I was scared. I thought they might be chasing me.”

“Your sister, Gemma, she lives in London right?”

“Yes.”
“Why not go to her? She’s your family. It would make the most sense.”

“Again, I was not thinking. I was confused and scared and it was the first time I had been outside in over two years. I didn’t know what to do.”

“What about a police station?”

“I didn’t know where one was,” Harry shrugs.

“You didn’t think to ask someone? The bus driver perhaps?”

“No, I honestly didn’t,” he replies, shaking his head.

“So let me get this straight, you go from a house that you describe as a place of torture and run straight into the arms of another man?”

“It was not like that at all and you know it.”

“I’m afraid I don’t Harry,” he replies with a fake confused voice. “Because if we look at this picture here, this was taken just after you went to Liam’s house. It appears to be you, draped all over that very man. You are lying on his chest it appears and you are quite cuddled in.”

Harry frowns, looking confused.

“Sorry, you can’t see it, I forgot. It’s the picture you used to gain sympathy at the Oscars.”

“Objection!”

“Sustained. Mr. Ryan, watch yourself.”

“Apologies. It’s the picture you sent to James Corden that was displayed at the Oscars. Now, it appears that you are extremely cozy with Mr. Payne in this picture, is that correct?”

Harry sighs and rolls his eyes openly.

“I was exhausted and cold. We needed to be close together to take the picture because originally we were both in it.”

“Right, and I do have the original picture here and if we zoom back, yes we can see Mr. Payne quite clearly. But if we look in the background, who is that sitting behind you? Are you on a bed in this picture?”

Harry sighs again, sounding aggravated.

“Yes, we were. I was about to have a nap and that is my sister Gemma behind me.”

“Your sister?”

“Yes.”

“She’s right there, and yet you are seeking comfort from another man rather than your own
family?”

Harry grits his teeth, his jaw moving visibly.

“Liam and I were taking a picture together to send to friends, as proof that I was still alive because I wanted to.”

“You wanted to.”

“Yes, because I had been missing for over two fucking years and kinda wanted to tell my close friends to let them know I was ok.”

“While draped all over another man? You sought affection from another man despite claiming to have suffered two years of horrific sexual abuse by two men.”

“Liam is my best mate,” Harry growls out. “He’s not just another man. I’ve known him for years. It’s actually not that weird.”

“Who is that sitting with you right now Harry?”

Liam’s eyes slide over to the camera, now suddenly concerned about just how much the court could see of him and their interactions throughout.

“It’s Liam,” Harry replies, eyes sliding over to Liam nervously and then back.

“Liam is there with you right now. He’s holding your hand, touching you and comforting you.”

“Yes.”

“Were you given a choice as to who you would like to have with you during your testimony?”

Harry nods, brows coming together. “Yes.”

“You chose Liam.”

Harry lets out a long, deep, aggravated sigh.

“Yes, I chose Liam. I feel safe and protected with Liam. He doesn’t judge me. He’s my best friend and I knew he would help me.”

“Fair enough, but once again, you chose another man. An unrelated man over your own family. Is it because they judge you? They don’t help you?”

“No… No, not at all. But I didn’t really want my mum hearing everything that happened to me, or my sister,” he turns towards Liam. “I feel bad that Liam has had to hear it all and sit through this, but it’s because he is my mate that he’s doing this.”

“What about one of your other mates? Louis? Niall? A childhood friend?”

Harry shakes his head, looking unsure.

“I don’t know. I just know that Liam makes me feel safe.”
“Harry, be honest right now, what is the nature of your relationship with Liam?”

“We are best friends, mates, who care about each other. It’s not sick and twisted like you are trying to make it,” Harry growls out.

“Maybe, but for those of us on the other side, it looks pretty strange and suspicious.”

“Objection! He’s interjecting his own judgments now.”

“Sustained. Mr. Ryan, you will keep your own opinions out of your questioning.”

“Apologies Your Honour. It’s alright. I think I’m done anyway.”

“Mr. Peel, do you have any further questions for the witness?”

Liam waits, hoping that the prosecutor will stand up and refute some of the bullshit the defense counselor just spewed out, but he doesn’t and it feels like a crushing blow.

“No, Your Honour. The prosecution rests its case.”

“Right, thank you Mr. Styles, you are finished. If the tech could cut the feed now, court will recess for one hour for lunch.”

Seconds later the ambient sound from the microphone is cut off and the solid red light on the camera starts blinking in wait again.

It’s silent for a long moment before Harry lets out a soft whine, hands coming up to scrub at his face and through his hair. Liam leans forward and pulls him into a hug. He rubs his back gently and Harry sinks into it. He spots Sandy watching them from her perch, face blank, but she says nothing.

What feels like an hour later there is a knock on the door and Mr. Peel steps in. His face is slightly stern, but he doesn’t look that fazed by the grilling Harry had just received.

“Harry, are you alright?”

Harry stares at him for a moment. Shock and horror cross his features before he sits up suddenly, looking angry.

“What the hell was that?” He spits out, brows knitted together in a frown.

“I told you the defense intended to try to paint you in a bad light that way. We discussed this…”

“Why did you not object more often? Ask Harry further questions to refute some of that bullshit? You just let him do it and say all of that crap. You let him get away with it!” Liam interjects, sitting up angrily as well.

Mr. Peel appears unfazed by their outbursts, eyeing both of them carefully before closing the door behind himself.

“First, it would have been helpful for me had you two been more honest with me about the nature
of your relationship. I fully expected him to use all of the media made rumors about you Harry, that’s no surprise. But you two could have at least given me a heads up so I could have prepared better,” Mr. Peel grumbles out, staring them both down accusingly.

“What do you mean the nature of our relationship?” Harry says quietly. “I told him the truth. Liam and I are very close mates, that’s it. I can’t even consider anything else right now and you know why.”

Liam nods in agreement. He figured it would serve no purpose to bring up the kiss, it was years ago and he didn’t particularly want Harry to say it meant nothing. He also wasn’t going to bring up the fact that they had admitted to loving each other.

“Harry, from an outsider’s perspective there does appear to be a whole lot more going on,” he points out, sighing angrily. “I missed the fact that you went to Liam instead of your own family when you escaped. I overlooked it and for that I am sorry because I could have given you the chance to explain that in better terms before he ripped into you. But the door is open now and I hope you are ready Liam. I did my best to fight this, but the judge agreed to it and I can’t do anything now,” he says darkly, pulling an envelope from his jacket pocket and handing it over.

Liam opens it quickly, confused as to why he would be receiving mail at the courthouse, but then he sees the word Summons and his body feels cold.

“He’s calling me as a witness,” Liam says quietly and Harry jolts next to him.

“Yes, he is. Right after lunch. He got the conversation started in regards to your relationship and now he has the ability to use you.”

“Only because you didn’t stop him! Whether or not you feel slighted because you seem to think we left you in the dark about our relationship, you should have still been doing your job and objecting to most of the questions he was asking! They were disgusting and made me look like a whore!” Harry yells, panting when he’s done from the exertion.

“I didn’t because it would have been pointless. You answered well for the most part. I was sitting there watching the jury and they weren’t buying what he was trying to sell because your face told the truth. So please calm down,” Mr. Peel chides him before turning to Liam. “I need you to be able to do the same and for the love of all that is holy, is there anything else I need to know before you go in there? Now would be a good time to let me know or I can’t help you very well. Remember, you will be in open court. You do not get a vulnerable witness designation so there will be an audience.”

A wave of panic washes over Liam at the thought and he fidgets with his sleeves, unrolling the cuffs and doing up the buttons.

“Shouldn’t I have been warned further in advance of being asked to testify? Isn’t there protocols? Can’t we get a delay?” He asks nervously and Mr. Peel shrugs slightly.

“Yes, there is protocol. You are actually due two days to prepare, but the defense council argued hard just to get your name put in there and it’s up to you if you want to just get it over with this afternoon or if you want to wait.”

Liam looks at Harry’s pale face. His eyes are full of fear and sadness and Liam realizes that there was no way he’d want to leave him for an extended period of time in a few days. It was better to
just get it over with. He wanted it over with.

“No, it’s fine. Tell them I’ll do it.”

“If you’re sure. I must warn you that gives us no time to prepare and we can only guess at what he’s going to ask you. It also gives me no time to prepare any cross,” Mr. Peel points out and Liam nods his understanding. “Well, back to my other question, is there anything I should know before we go in there?”

“No… no, there’s nothing, honestly,” Liam answers carefully, trying to sound confident. “Where does Harry go while I’m on the stand?”

The prosecutor stares at him incredulously for a moment before rolling his eyes slightly and sighing.

“There is a waiting room across the hall. He can sit in there. You won’t be able to hear or see anything Harry, but that might be for the best.”

Harry frowns at that comment, but he also clearly does not want to step foot into that courtroom. He looks at Liam nervously, chewing on his bottom lip and Liam knows exactly what he’s worried about.

“Let’s find Gemma and Louis and the rest of them. They can sit with you, right?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” Mr. Peel answers and Harry’s eyes flick between the two of them before he shrugs slightly by way of response. “Right, let me show you where it is. We will find your family and then maybe you and I can have a private word Liam.”

Liam isn’t sure what that’s about, but he follows the man nonetheless. He gently helps Harry find a chair in the waiting room while Sandy goes to look for the group. She returns with them a few minutes later.

They all surround Harry immediately, looking concerned. Anne sits on one side of him while Gemma sits on the other and Harry looks at Liam just as he is led back out of the room by Mr. Peel. He can hear them all asking him how it went or if he needed anything and Harry just tells them he doesn’t want to talk about it. He pulls his knees up under his chin and looks small and fragile in the black plastic chair.

It’s Niall that stops Liam in the hall, holding his arm and looking at him meaningfully.

“Be honest, how bad? And where are you going?” The Irishman looks confused at his departure and Liam glances at the prosecutor who waits patiently just up the hall from them.

“It was awful Niall. Do me a favor and get him some water. He was really sick when Mr. Peel finished and then he had to go through the cross examination where he was made to look like a sexual deviant and a whore,” Liam swallows hard, anger filling his chest. He wasn’t done with giving the prosecutor shit for letting that go on. He was ready to blast him the second they were alone.

Niall’s eyes go wide, shock crossing his face before it’s replaced with his own anger.

“Look, Niall, I’m not gonna go into details. It’s up to Harry how much he tells you, but it was…”
he stops, swallowing hard again. He remembers some of the details Harry had told, the horrific pain he had endured and his eyes fill. “It was awful. So just get everyone to be quiet and kind and gentle with him right now. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Of course, I’ll spread the word and get Gemma to control them, but where are you going?”

“The defense is calling me as a witness,” Liam admits, feeling defiant now.

“What? Why in hell would they call you?” Niall blurts out, voice rising before he catches himself.

“Harry came to me when he escaped. The defense counselor is trying to make it sick and twisted. Don’t worry about it. I’ll deal with it. Just take care of him for me, ok?”

Niall nods dumbly, still shocked and a moment later he goes back into the waiting room. Then Liam spots Des standing there, having been listening the entire time.

“Eavesdropping?” Liam accuses him.

“I came to ask the same questions Niall did, since Harry isn’t telling us much, but I am definitely curious as to why the defense wants you on the stand,” Des replies, not looking the least bit repentant and Liam’s jaw tightens.

“It’s exactly what I just told Niall. Go take care of your son. He needs support right now,” Liam advises him, hoping he won’t do what he suspects he will, come to court to listen to Liam’s testimony.

Des takes a deep breath, humming in consideration before disappearing into the waiting room as well.

“Mr. Payne, let’s go. Court resumes in twenty minutes and you need to be ready in ten,” Mr. Peel urges and Liam turns towards him, anger returning as he stalks down the hall towards him.

The prosecutor leads him into a small meeting room, closing the door behind them and putting his file folders on the table.

“Look…” he starts, but is cut off immediately.

“How dare you not stand up for him!” Liam yells. His fury at this man, the bastards that hurt Harry, Des, the media, all of them suddenly erupting from his very centre in one sentence. “He is the fucking victim and you let that slimy bastard just rip him to shreds using only rumors and baseless evidence! Did you even graduate from law school?”

Mr. Peel puts his hand up and Liam tries to keep yelling, but he quickly finds himself out of insults. His mind not working fast enough in his fury.

“Mr. Payne, stop. Harry handled it, very well in fact. If I thought he needed my help I would have stepped in more, but I saw no reason to. The way he was attacked by the defense does not seem to have sat well with the jury and he has no real evidence proving his clients are innocent. What I need you to do is be a character witness for Harry. Tell them all what a wonderful person he is because you know him well.”

Liam jolts back, trying to process.
“Right… So I just go in there and testify that Harry is a nice bloke who would never be a sexual deviant?” He asks unsurely, knowing full well he had a terrible poker face. After the way the defense had grilled Harry on their relationship, he knows full well it will come up again and he’s not sure he will be able to lie about his feelings.

“Yes. Exactly that. Don’t fall into his traps or rise to his attempts to upset you.”

Liam nods, anger fully abated. It’s replaced with nerves at having to testify. To sit in that courtroom surrounded by officials, a judge and an audience.

And the two accused.

Liam goes cold as he realizes that the two assholes would be in there as well. He’s not certain he will be able to control himself.

He doesn’t get much time to think about it either before Mr. Peel is ushering him down the hall to sit on a hard wooden bench in a small room to wait to be called. He then spots Des in the crowd being herded back into the courtroom and grumbles to himself.
The feet just outside the door to his little vestibule sound thunderous. Liam hears the Judge’s gavel as she calls court back into order and instructs the defense counselor to call his first witness. Seconds later, there is a knock on the door and an official in a uniform opens it. He beckons Liam forward with one finger. His face is intense and it’s clear he takes his job very seriously.

Liam follows him dutifully all the way into the courtroom and down the aisle to the witness box where he is quickly installed. The half door is closed behind him and a bible is pressed into his hands along with the same cue card Harry had held.

“Mr. Payne, if you could hold the bible and read the oath on the card please,” the bailiff urges him. Liam starts once, his voice squeaking, so he clears his throat and tries again.

“I swear by God that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

“Thank you,” the bailiff says stiffly, taking the items back gruffly and lumbering off.

It’s then Liam finally gets the chance to look around a little. He spots Mr. Peel sitting at his table off to the right. Papers are spread across the top in front of him, but his eyes are on Liam, looking friendly and confident.

Another table sits to the left. A short man with grey, thin hair peeking out from under his wig and thick rimmed glasses stands behind it. The man is slight and wiry, his black robe swimming on his frame and his face is slightly pinched as he regards Liam right back. Clearly it’s the Mr. Ryan he had only heard so far. Liam scowls at him for a moment before moving on. He looks over at the jury, ignoring the defense counselor as he walks towards the witness box to get started. The jury is mostly middle aged people. The majority of them are women and there are several kind faces in the group. Seeing that makes him feel a little better and he continues on looking about the room.

“Mr. Payne, good to finally meet you. Can you tell me when you first met Harry Styles?” Mr. Ryan asks him at exactly the same moment Liam spots them. Gary and Brian are sitting in a small booth wearing matching grey suits and they are exactly as Harry described them. A spear of fury and hatred goes through Liam, his hands tightening on the arms of the chair as the pair of them stare at him with smug expressions. Neither one appears repentant and he swears he can feel his blood boiling. The rest of the room melts away as he starts to imagine just how many ways he could kill both of them and the types of torture he would gleefully inflict upon them if given the chance.

“Mr. Payne, are you alright? Mr. Payne?”

The counselor steps into his peripheral vision and it snaps Liam’s attention away from them. He whips around to stare at the man, openly glaring at him.

“How can you defend them?” Liam demands in disgust and the counselor’s thin brows go up in surprise.

“It’s my job for one and my duty. My clients deserve the chance to defend themselves against these accusations. Might I remind you, we aren’t here to discuss what I’m doing. We are here to discuss
you and Harry and this case,” the counselor replies tersely.

“He’s right Mr. Payne. Please refrain from questioning the counselor on his job and stick to answering the questions,” the judge adds in an annoyed tone and Liam glances at her. She’s an older woman with dark skin and dark eyes. Stark in contrast to her court mandated attire, but also quite striking and very stern looking.

Liam’s eyes land on Mr. Peel again, who appears to be imploring him to behave. He takes a deep breath, remembering that this was for Harry and to punish those that hurt him. He could do that.

“What was the question?” He asks tersely, eyes going back on the defense counselor. He is still glaring at him, but with an air of civility.

“I had asked if you could tell us when you first met Harry Styles.”

“Um… in 2010. While we were both competing on the X-Factor in London.”

“What was your first impression?” Mr. Ryan asks in a faux friendly tone and Liam scowls at him.

“I thought he was a nice lad. We were both the same age and got on easily.”

“You were put into a band with him, is that correct?”

“Yes we were, along with three other lads. It was a good thing and we all became friends really quickly.”

The counselor nods, lips turning down noncommittally.

“When you finished on the X-Factor, the band was signed to a record contract, is that correct?”

“Yes, Simon Cowell’s company signed us.”

“And then you started recording and touring and gaining a great deal of fame?”

“Yes, it was an exciting time. We were all really grateful for the opportunity.”

“What exactly did you think when Harry started dating Caroline Flack, a woman fourteen years older than him?”

Liam rolls his eyes and sighs angrily.

“I didn’t think anything. It was what it was and it doesn’t make me think any less of him.”

“According to Harry, the relationship was nothing. Do you think that’s accurate?”

“I wouldn’t know. I wasn’t a part of it.”

“What about all of the other women he’s been linked up with? Did he ever say anything about those relationships?”

“No. I mean, it wasn’t really something we discussed. I didn’t talk about mine with him either. We were mates and there was no judgement between any of us about what we did in our personal
“According to Harry, most of them were just rumors and lies. Is that accurate?”

Liam shrugs. “I know for sure some of them were, maybe even most of them. He’s a good guy and he respects women. He idolizes his mum and his sister and I know the reputation he seemed to have bothered him. He didn’t like to be seen as a player.”

“He didn’t try to put an end to it either.”

Liam shakes his head. “No, there would have been no point with the way stuff swirled around us. Anything he said would have probably just made it all worse.”

“Or it was the truth all along?”

“No.”

“What about men? Did Harry ever mention having any relationships with men to you? Did you ever see him with any?”

“No, never.”

“Is there a possibility he was hiding them from you?”

Liam shrugs and shakes his head. “Maybe, I don’t know. But if he says no then I see no reason not to believe him. Harry isn’t one to lie about something like that.”

“What makes you say that?”

“He’s not ashamed of who he is. That’s part of the reason he never said anything to dispute the rumors of him being a womanizer. He knew the truth and those closest to him did and to him that’s all that mattered. Harry is a very open person. He’s got a good heart and would see no reason to hide a relationship or someone who mattered to him from his close friends and family.”

“So what you are saying is that, were he of that inclination, he would have told you?”

“Yes, he would see no reason to hide it. He doesn’t see it as shameful. He’d be proud.”

“So he would openly flaunt his multiple sexual relationships? His inclinations and kinks?”

“Ok that isn’t what I just said at all, and no. I mean, we were kids when we got started. We were silly as all teenage guys are and girls were always available, but it wasn’t a free for all and there was no flaunting at all.”

The counselor stops and regards him and Liam instantly regrets saying what he had. He didn’t need to give away so much.

“But there was plenty of casual sex going on, is what you are saying?”

Liam sighs angrily. “It happened, with all of us, not just Harry exclusively. We were young and dumb and were dealing with so much fame so quickly.”
“Yes, but oddly enough Harry is the one who is notorious for bedding over a hundred women, for breaking up a marriage in a rather public manner and for having several high publicity relationships. Only Harry.”

“The media chose to focus on him in that way early on. Probably because he’s the youngest or because of whatever reason they chose. Maybe because Harry wouldn’t tell them anything and it pissed them off, I don’t know. But that doesn’t mean everything you’ve read is true.”

“Fair enough. What about you and Harry? Did your friendship become closer as time went on?” Liam narrows his eyes, knowing the direction this was heading.

“We were always good mates and that never changed, for all of us. A lot of the time all we had was each other.”

“So you were all close?”

“Yes.”

“Were there some other feelings between some of you that developed?”

“I don’t know what you are asking?” Liam replies cheekily, trying to deflect now as his heart picks up speed. He promised to tell the truth, he said an oath. Maybe he should have taken the two days to prepare.

“Do you have romantic feelings for Harry Styles, Mr. Payne?”

“Objection! Relevance?” Mr. Peel says suddenly, coming to life finally. Liam throws him a grateful look, but it’s short lived.

“Overruled, continue.”

“Do you have romantic feelings for Harry Styles, Liam?” Mr. Ryan presses again, standing just in front of the witness stand and trying very hard to loom despite his lack of height.

Liam starts to fidget more, the feel of so many eyes on him like matches about to set him aflame. He can feel Des the most, eyes boring into him, waiting to use what he says next against him in the fight to take custody of Harry.

“Um… I….” He stutters out and the judge turns towards him.

“Answer the question Mr. Payne,” she demands. He glances at her quickly, finding her eyes critical as her patience dwindles.

“I… yes… I do,” he finally manages to get out and there is a rumble of whispers from the audience.

“When did you discover those feelings?”

“Uh… about a year before he was kidnapped.”

“Are they mutual?”
“You’d have to ask him,” Liam deadpans, trying to get his own digs in, useless as the activity might be.

“Did you ever act on those feelings?”

Immediately he knows where this is going. Back to painting Harry as a promiscuous whore again, willing to seduce anyone to satisfy his own urges.

“If you are asking if we ever slept together, had sex, then no. No we did not,” he grumbles out, glaring at the counselor who only smirks in reply.

“Didn’t get to the front of the line, eh?” He asks cheekily and immediately Mr. Peel stands up.

“Objection!”

“Sustained. Mr. Ryan, be careful.”

“Apologies Your Honour,” he says demurely before turning back to Liam. “Would you say Harry had a higher than normal sexual appetite?”

“Wha… How the hell would I know?” Liam stutters out, stunned at the question.

“You said he was proud and not at all shameful. We’ve seen evidence of him performing sexual acts on stage in front of a crowd of young fans. We’ve seen the BDSM toys that he purchased and also boldly displayed in a magazine photoshoot where he was half naked most of the time. So I would think as young lads, you would often discuss sex. It’s normal after all.”

“I still have no idea if he had a big sexual appetite, but I would say he was the same as the rest of us.”

“Did he ever talk about things that turned him on? Sexual kinks he found interesting? Like how some lads might mention that they like to watch two women or a certain kind of pornography.”

“Not that I remember, no,” Liam squeaks out, cheeks heating from the very personal nature of the questions.

“Did he ever mention any of his fantasies to you? Tell you about the collar?”

“No, for God’s sake, no. What has this got to do with what those disgusting assholes did to him?” Liam demands, growing furious at the salacious questions.

“The court will decide the relevance Mr. Payne and we don’t know that they did anything wrong at all.”

Liam opens his mouth to refute him and to tell him that there was plenty of evidence that they were guilty as sin, but he sees Mr. Peel’s eyes widen out of the corner of his own and he snaps his mouth shut.

“Did he tell you about the collar?”

“No.”
“Did you talk to him much the year after the band went on hiatus?”

“Yes, we texted a lot. We had an email chain going with all of us as well, just keeping in touch.”

“What did you think of the Another Man photoshoot?”

Liam shrugs. “I thought it was cool. Harry is pretty artsy, he likes that kind of thing and I know he was happy to get the chance to do something true to himself.”

“True to himself like wearing bondage gear and posing half naked?”

“Yeah I didn’t see it that way and I know he didn’t either.”

“We didn’t hear him say that. In fact, he admitted to purchasing the collar from Fleet Ilya, a company that he knew sold that type of product already, and he chose to wear it very publicly in the magazine. Are you sure he wasn’t trying being true to himself in a sexual manner?”

“Yes, I’m pretty sure,” Liam snaps back. “That isn’t who Harry is.”

“Strange. Everything I have seen seems to make it clear that is exactly who Harry is.”

“Objection! Personal opinions again.”

“Sustained. Mr. Ryan, this is your second warning. I will not give you a third so keep your personal opinions to yourself.”

“Right, apologies Your Honour,” he says demurely again, turning back to Liam. “We know how you feel about Harry now, but you seem unsure of how he feels about you. So why do you think he chose to come to your home? To you, when he could have gone to his own family or his sister?”

“He was angry with them. He told me he felt betrayed because they held a funeral for him.”

“Why didn’t he tell us that himself?”

“I don’t know, maybe he forgot? He’s over it now and he’s forgiven them.”

“Did you go to the funeral?”

Liam sighs. He had to admit it and he knew he should probably tell Harry before Des did.

“Yes.”

“You did?”

“Yes.”

“I never saw any mention of you being in attendance?”

“I know, I did that on purpose. I didn’t want anyone to know I went.”

“Why not?”
“Because I thought it was a farce and complete bullshit when he wasn’t actually dead.”

“You knew he wasn’t dead.”

“I…” he breathes out angrily, finding it hard to explain that he just felt that Harry wasn’t dead. He knew that would sound strange. “I just didn’t think he was. There wasn’t enough evidence to prove he was and I didn’t understand why people would just accept that he was gone without proof.”

“So you went to his funeral and hid for what purpose?”

“To be honest… I have no idea. I really don’t.”

“Did you ever believe he was dead? In all that time?”

“No. Never.”

“Liam, what did you do during the time Harry was supposedly missing?”

“He was missing,” Liam growls out, glaring at the counselor again. “I tried to help find him and just waited for news. Not a lot.”

“Not a lot. You basically locked yourself in your house for a full year, did you not?”

Liam bites his bottom lip and shakes his head, eyes rolling before he looks down at his hands.

“Yes I did. It was hard for me to accept that he was gone.”

“You essentially became a hermit. You barely saw your own family, refused to see friends, stopped taking care of yourself and only emerged because you were threatened with a lawsuit by your record company, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“You released an album, yes?”

“Yes, though I didn’t want to.”

“But you did, under one condition, is that correct?”

Liam huffs a humorless laugh, seeing the direction of the conversation.

“Yes, the song is about Harry.”

“Thank you. Not the question I asked though, but since you said it, you refused to release your album unless a song called The Scientist was put on it. A song you had just written hours prior to meeting with your record company, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And, as you have just told us, the song is about Harry. Telling him you love him and wishing you could go back to the start. What start are you referring to?”
“The beginning, when we first met. Maybe things could have been different.”

“Different how?”

“I don’t know. It’s just lyrics, but it’s referring to going back to a time before he was kidnapped. Before horrendous things were done to him.”

“There is one line I want to ask you about in particular. A line where you tell Harry to come back and haunt you, but you have said you never thought he was dead. So what is the meaning behind that line?”

“Haunting isn’t just something referring to death. It’s having memories of something. It’s dreams and feeling them near even when they aren’t. It’s not just saying they are dead and a ghost.”

“Ok, fair enough,” the counselor agrees strangely and Liam wonders what the point of all of this questioning is. It wasn’t related to the case at all other than establishing that Liam didn’t think Harry was dead. It said nothing about the two assholes in the accused box and what they did to Harry. “The song did pretty well, did it not?”

Liam shrugs. “I guess so.”

“You performed it at the Billboard Music Awards and it went straight to number one, where it sat for several weeks. So yes, we can say it did well. But the rest of the album didn’t do as well, did it?”

“No.”

“You were never really happy with the success of the song either, were you?”

“I didn’t really pay attention at first, but no. It was hard to handle.”

“Did you and your manager butt heads about it?”

“Yes.”

“What ultimately happened?”

“I fired him and was sued by the record company for refusing to complete my contract requirements of promotion. I paid them and went home.”

“The song carried on being famous though, did it not?”

“I don’t know. I stopped paying attention.”

“Ok, then I will tell you. It did. It sat in the top five of the music charts for many more weeks, was discussed, gone over and brought up on multiple talk shows. Everyone was speculating on who it was about. In fact, you were asked point blank if it was about Harry by James Corden, were you not?”

“Yes,” Liam replies tersely.

“You refused to answer?”
“Yes.”

“That refusal could basically be seen as agreement, yes?”

“Sure, whatever you say.”

“I propose that Harry heard the song while he was at my clients’ house. Since he had grown tired of the arrangement, he saw the chance to start a new sexual relationship with you and went to your house for that purpose. The trouble was, he needed a cover story. A reason he was gone for so long that wouldn’t look bad in the press. So he gave you a sob story about being kidnapped and sexually assaulted and you bought it hook, line and sinker. He got exactly what he wanted. You, wrapped around his little finger. Am I correct?”

“OBJECTION!” Mr. Peel yells at the same time Liam replies.

“NO! NOT EVEN FUCKING CLOSE!” Liam shouts, standing suddenly in a rage. “THOSE BASTARDS KIDNAPPED HIM! THEY ABUSED HIM IN WAYS WE CAN’T EVEN IMAGINE AND YOU ARE DEFENDING THEM!”

“Mr. Payne! Sit down and stop yelling right now or you will be restrained!” The judge hollers, smacking her gavel several times, making him jump. He dutifully sits down, though he keeps glaring fire at the little defense counselor. Peripherally, he can see Des doing the same.

“Objection!” Mr. Peel repeats, voice terse.

“Sustained. Mr. Ryan I am fining you £10,000. Next time you will be held in contempt of court and will be removed.”

The counselor only looks smug, nodding once.

“Nothing further Your Honour.”

With that he turns on his heel and returns to his seat, sitting down with a small flourish. Liam’s nails dig into his palms in his lap.

“Mr. Peel, do you have any questions for the witness?”

The prosecutor looks at Liam, clearly deciding whether or not the young man could handle anymore and he opts against it.

“No Your Honour.”

“Right, thank you Mr. Payne. You are dismissed.”

The bailiff opens the little door and Liam hurries out, all but running up the aisle to escape. He doesn’t stop until he finds a side door leading onto a small fenced in terrace. It was clearly available for the smokers who worked in the building, but hidden from view from the street. He takes in big gulps of fresh air, trying to calm his nerves. He can feel the dampness of sweat on his back and under his arms. He knew it would be hard, but he hadn’t expected to have to admit so much or for so much to be brought up and shoved in his face. He has no idea what he’s going to tell Harry, but he knows that Harry will want to know.
“You love him,” comes a voice from behind him. Liam jumps in surprise, whirling around to find Des standing there, hands fidgeting beside him. “Strangely I think I’ve known the whole time, but I was so in my own head, so worried about being the one Harry turned to and being the most important person in his life I hadn’t stopped to see what was right in front of me.”

Liam nods.

“He loves you?” Des asks and Liam nods again. The older man’s face relaxes. “Yeah, I knew that too. I’m sorry Liam. I’ve been terribly unfair to you. I should be thanking you really, because I don’t know if Harry would have made it this far or recovered as much as he has without you.”

“Thank you,” Liam says quietly, unsure of what else to say.

“I just… I haven’t handled it well. I’ve felt so useless, unable to do anything for him and barely able to even process that he’s back here with us or what he’s been through. I just wanted to protect him so much. To keep him safe and hide him away so he couldn’t disappear again. I can see now that I haven’t actually been helping at all,” the older man admits, hands clenching at his sides.

“You can’t say that. It’s hard to know what the right thing to do is because none of us have ever dealt with something like this before,” Liam says as he sits down on top of the short stone fence around the paved terrace.

“You seem to know what to do though. You knew right away how to help him when he was confused or when he had a nightmare,” Des points out, not in an accusatory way, just as a matter of fact.

“No I didn’t,” Liam shakes his head, laughing once without humor. “I was just trying things and letting Harry guide me more than anything. He seems to find ways to let you know what he needs. He’s just not good at saying them so I’ve just let him show me. I find it’s best to ask him first. He does know his own mind you know.”

Des nods, looking down sheepishly.

“Yes, I see that now. I’ll have to apologize to him as well.” He takes a deep breath and looks up at the grey sky for a moment. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. Thank you for defending him. What that bastard was implying…” Des stops and his hands become fists. “Was it that bad when he questioned Harry?”

Liam takes a deep breath and nods slowly.

“It was worse, so much worse. Harry did his best to deflect it, but that jackass was determined to make him look like a whore,” Liam spits out.

“Why the hell is Peel not stopping it? Why the hell didn’t he do more to help you? It doesn’t make any sense.” Des growls out, storming over and sitting on the fence next to Liam, hands still fists.

“Because he doesn’t think the jury is buying it. That’s what he told me, but I hardly think that’s enough to go on. He can’t read their minds.” Liam stops and considers it. He analyzes his interactions with the counselor throughout the day, without the specter of testifying over his head, and something niggles at the back of his mind. “I think he’s hiding something, not telling us something. I don’t know what though.”
Des stares at him confused, brows together in the same way his son’s tended to do. He nods a moment later though.

“Well, we didn’t hear the testimony or see the evidence on the first two days. So maybe he’s got his confidence from somewhere, but if they get away with this because he bungled it, I’ll kill him,” Des says ferociously, standing suddenly. “I’ll kill those two bastards as well while I’m at it.” He starts towards the door as though he intends to march into the courtroom right now to complete the task and Liam grabs his arm to stop him.

“Des, relax. Let’s just see what happens yeah?” He implores the man. “Let’s just worry about Harry right now. We should get him home.”

Des takes a deep breath and nods, body relaxing and the two of them start the walk to the waiting room together. Liam notices that the courtroom sounds awfully quiet as they pass.

“Are they on another break?” He wonders out loud. Des shrugs and they carry on their way.

“I won’t tell him about you going to the funeral. It’s up to you if you do, but I know he wasn’t pleased about us doing it. I don’t want him looking at you badly about it as well,” Des says quietly just before they reach their destination.

Liam nods, grateful but also aware he shouldn’t have hid it this long anyway.

“Thank you. I think I should tell him, but later. Hopefully he will understand.”

With that settled they hurry into the little room. All eyes turn their way the second they come in and there is a deep tension in the air. Harry’s eyes land on Liam the second he can see him, full of pleading. He looks worse, far worse than how he had left him. He’s balled up on a different chair and Louis has draped his jacket across Harry’s shoulders. A second coat from Niall is over his knees, trying to keep him warm and comforted. His face is grey, eyes haunted and puffy. His exhaustion is palpable.

“Hey, you ready to go home?” Liam asks him and Harry nods immediately. “What’s going on, you ok?”

“Peel came in twenty minutes ago, asked to speak to Harry alone,” Louis fills him in quietly. Liam frowns. “Where were you?”

“Went to get some air,” Liam answers before turning back to Harry, feeling guilty for not having come sooner. “What did he want Haz? Is everything ok?”

One look in Harry’s eyes tells him that nothing is ok and a wave of panic rolls over him.

“I’m fine. I just want to go home,” Harry lies with a soft wobbly voice. His eyes are imploring Liam not to ask any more questions and to just get him the hell out of there.

Liam hurries over, not willing to make him wait any longer. He leans over and kisses the top of Harry’s head before sliding an arm around his back and one under his knees, picking him up carefully.

“Ok, let’s go,” he says to the room. All of them staring at him for a moment at the blatant show of affection. Everyone but Des, who quickly adjusts the jackets on Harry to keep him covered and pulling Louis’ up and over Harry’s head so he could be hidden from view of the waiting press
outside.

“Let’s go. Everyone form a circle around them. Try and hide Harry as much as possible,” Des says as he holds the door open, waving at the group to get moving. Anne gives him a strange look as she passes.

They all do as they are told however, forming an impenetrable shield around Liam and Harry as they hurry to the cars. Harry huddles in against Liam’s neck, holding the jacket over his head in place and whimpering softly as they walk. The media are beyond anything they could have expected when they walk out, with questions coming loud and rapid fire as they pass. Cameras are flashing so fast that it makes Liam dizzy.

“Harry, how did your testimony go?”

“Why can’t you walk?”

“What happened to you in there?”

Des shoves a hand in front of several lenses. He’s careful to not touch them, but he blocks their view nonetheless. He gets the car door open for Liam and all but shoves him and Harry in before jumping in behind them. Anne hurries into the front seat while Louis, Niall, Robin and Gemma get in the second car behind them.

Liam doesn’t bother to put Harry on the seat. He just holds the shaking man against his chest, trying to soothe him by rubbing his shoulders and back, rocking him slightly. He feels so weak in his arms that it is worrisome, but Liam knew getting him home was absolutely necessary before anything else. Harry needed to be in familiar, safe surroundings with some peace and quiet.

“I’m worried he needs to go to the hospital again,” Anne says from the front, turned fully in her seat to look him over with concerned eyes. Her hand reaches back to gently squeeze his leg.

“I don’t want to take him there. He hates it there,” Liam says quietly and Harry gives a noise of agreement, shivering immediately after.

“Let’s call the doc, see if she can come to your house and bring some stuff to help him,” Des says quickly. He pulls out his phone before remembering his conversation with Liam and what he suggested he do. “Would that be ok with you Harry?” He asks, letting Harry decide.

Harry shivers harder, but manages to say ‘ok’.

Plan in place, Des calls Dr. Mercer and she agrees after hearing that Harry had been in court.

Once home, Liam hurries him up the stairs and pulls his shoes off before tucking him under the covers. He joins him a moment later, trying to warm him up. He wasn’t sure if Harry’s lowered body temperature was a form of shock or because he had been ill and hadn’t rested all day.

He knows that any serious conversations about what was going on at court would just have to wait until he was doing better. Des makes it clear to everyone that no one is to turn on the news or let any information into the house, so as not to upset Harry.

The doctor stays for several hours. She gives him several bags of saline through IV to deal with his dehydration, as well as a few medications to help him relax and calm his stomach. He manages to
get a banana shake down before he finally collapses and falls into a deep sleep just after the sun sets. The rest of the house relaxes along with him. Liam can see they all have questions and things they need to know, but he’s not up to talking about it yet and they respect that. Anne brings him some cheese on toast and a cup of tea. They sit and watch Bake Off in the bedroom while Harry sleeps. Gemma stays with Harry while Liam quickly changes and brushes his teeth and then they all leave. Letting Liam take care of Harry alone for the rest of the night.

He carefully removes Harry’s suit, hot tears dripping down his cheeks as he sees all the scars in a brand new light. Knowing now exactly what caused each of them. He slides a t-shirt and sweatshirt onto him, along with some fleece pajama pants. Harry hangs like a limp rag doll in his hands most of the time, but as soon as Liam gets back under the covers with him he curls himself up against Liam’s chest again as always.

It’s a long night, and no matter how tired Liam is he can’t sleep. Every time he closes his eyes he sees the two bastards staring at him smugly. He knows what they did. Every horrid detail now. He’s not sure he will ever sleep again.
Chapter 17

The house is deadly still in the morning. It’s silent as can be as everyone tip toes around worried about Harry’s state of mind, not wanting to frighten or startle him.

He wakes lucid, but also on edge. His eyes are distant as though he has something on his mind, but he won’t talk about it no matter how much Liam tries to get him to. He offers to call the therapist and have him come round, but Harry says ‘no’ as he settles in against the pillows and stares out the window.

The trial carries on at the courthouse, far enough away that they feel like it can’t touch them, and Liam would assume that would be a good thing. Yet at the same time, everyone wants to know what is happening, even if they don’t really say it. Des’ declared blackout ends around noon when it’s decided that the news can be put on the telly downstairs, so long as the volume is kept low so Harry can’t hear it.

Though when they ask him if that would be ok, Harry barely shrugs and doesn’t even seem to hear the question.

The defense would be continuing their side of the case today and it was expected that he would call Gary to the stand first, giving the bastards the chance to try to lie and justify their way out of what they had done.

Liam fights his curiosity to see what is going on and chooses to stay with Harry, his concern over his strange behavior far more pressing.

Harry doesn’t notice his concern, or much really as he robotically drinks his shake, eats a piece of toast, brushes his teeth and showers with Liam’s help. His eyes are on the tile the entire time, blank. He gets dressed and curls up under the covers again, not acknowledging Gemma, Liam or Louis when they ask if he wants to watch a movie or listen to music or play cards.

His listlessness and blankness remains for the majority of the day and after a while it’s just Liam and him in the room. The others having moved off to watch the TV downstairs or help cook dinner.

“Haz, do you want to talk? About yesterday? Are you alright? What can I do to help you?” Liam implores him, worried about how long this has gone on.

Harry doesn’t respond. He just continues to stare out the window, though it’s clear that isn’t where his mind is. He’s lying on his side, curled up in the fetal position though his back is still pressed against Liam who is sitting up.

Liam gently rubs Harry’s shoulder, trying to get his attention and he feels the other man tense slightly.

“Harry please, talk to me at least. Tell me what I can do to help you.”

Harry takes a deep breath, sighing softly and leans back against Liam more, hand coming up to take the one on his shoulder. His mouth opens to reply at the same time the door opens and Des steps in quietly, looking confused and surprised.
“They… uh… I know you don’t want to know, but… the news is saying they pulled the jury out of the courtroom. They all went into some back room…” he starts before Harry cuts him off.

“To watch the video,” he finishes, voice dull and flat.

Liam and Des’ eyes meet, both of them shocked and frowning.

“What video?” Des asks, stepping towards the bed.

“Peel must have just started cross examining one of them. That’s when he said he would do it,” Harry replies making zero sense, but voice the same.

“What? Harry, what are you talking about?” Liam asks. He leans over to see his face better and watches as it starts to crumple, showing real emotion for the first time that day.

“Peel came and talked to me yesterday, just after you got off the stand. He got a call from the police,” he starts, voice wobbling as tears drop off the side of his nose. “They were following up on the laptop they took as evidence from the house. I guess it took them a while to get into it and they found…” He stops and sniffles, one quiet sob escaping. “They found video.”

“Video?” Des asks, sounding confused.

“Yes, video… there was a hidden camera in the dirt hole. I never knew it was there in the two fucking years because I was always chained up. I couldn’t really see the walls well and they…” he swallows loudly. “They recorded everything they did to me.”

The room drops to absolute silence. Des and Liam’s eyes lock again, but this time in horror.

Harry shudders and sobs again, breaking the paralysis the news had given Liam. He slides down and wraps himself around Harry from behind, pulling him close to his chest and shushing in his ear. He squeezes him as tight as he can without hurting him.

“Harry… I’m so sorry,” Des says quietly, coming to kneel on the floor on the other side of the bed, hand reaching out to gently push Harry’s hair back from his face. “I’m so sorry son.”

Harry whimpers quietly, and pulls in a wheezy breath.

“Peel asked me for my permission to introduce it and to use it at the trial. I didn’t think I could say no. How could I? It’s key evidence and it’ll convict them for sure but… they are all going to see it. See what they did to me…”

“Are they playing it in open court?” Liam asks in horror.

Harry shakes his head despite his position and scrubs his sleeve under his nose before Des quickly hands him a tissue.

“No, Peel promised he would request to have it done privately with just the jury and the court officials present, like when I testified,” Harry answers after blowing his nose.

“Well that’s good I guess, but I hope Peel didn’t pressure you into it Harry. It was your choice,” Des tells him gently.
“I know, but I didn’t see the point in stopping it. They had already filmed it, the police and detectives have seen it, I lived it, why stop it being shown to the jury?” He deadpans, sighing loudly. “But it just feels like it’s happening again.”

“It’s not Haz, it’s not. You’re safe here with us and it’ll all be over soon,” Liam assures him. He gives him another squeeze, knowing that there still lay a long road after the trial ended, but it seemed moot to mention it.

“Liam’s right son. It must have been a very difficult decision, but you made the right one and we are all here to help you start moving forward, alright?” Des adds, squeezing Harry’s arm gently. His eyes flick to the scars there and then back to Harry’s face.

Harry sniffs and takes a deep breath, but nods after a few moments.

“Thank you.”

“Look, let’s not think about any of that. What do you want to do right now? What would be a good distraction?” Des asks him with some mustered cheer. “It can be something silly, or simple, whatever you want.”

Harry goes quiet for several long minutes and Liam and Des’ eyes meet. They both assumed he was going blank again, but then suddenly he draws in a breath and speaks.

“I want to bake a cake.”

There is another beat of silence while this information is digested before Liam breaks.

“I… what? A cake?” He stammers out. Of all the things Harry could have come up with, that was not even remotely on Liam’s radar.

Harry turns slightly and looks up at him, cheeks still streaked with tears he hadn’t wiped away.

“You said anything,” he points out tersely and Liam is forced to nod. Des shrugs at him and nods as well.

“Ok… we will bake a cake then…” Liam agrees carefully, helping Harry sit up on the side of the bed.

“I’ll just… head down and turn the telly off and start getting some stuff out,” Des suggests before he quickly hurries out.

Liam gets Harry’s feet into some slippers and helps him hobble to the bathroom to wash his face and blow his nose again before they head out to the stairs and down. When they reach the kitchen Gemma and Anne are standing there with slightly gobsmacked faces, but there is an array of bowls and ingredients laid out on the marble topped island.

“So uh… what flavor we going for here?” Gemma asks carefully, watching Harry as he shakes off Liam’s hands. He supports himself on the counters as he heads to the oven and sets it to preheat.

He doesn’t answer her. He just throws her a smirk and leans against the counter while he starts measuring out butter and sugar into a large bowl, placing it into the mixer and turning it on. He
works quietly, knowing some recipe off by heart in true Harry fashion and he only asks for help in handing him things now and again. Otherwise the audience just stands and stares quietly as a strange bliss seems to come over Harry as he goes through the motions.

Liam had heard the ‘I used to be a baker’ line a thousand times and it wasn’t unlike Harry to make them things while they were working in the studio or on the road if he could. He liked to cook and bake, but Liam had never really witnessed it or saw how much he really loved it and how it seemed so natural to him; a soothing sort of activity.

When he’s got the batter all done, with a variety of fruits and nuts mixed in, he gets Liam to butter and flour some pans before instructing him on just how much to pour into each one. Gemma is given the task of setting the timer after they have gone into the oven and Anne quickly cleans up the mess as Harry starts on making frosting. Claiming it will need time to chill.

When that’s done and all the dishes are cleaned up, there is nothing to do but wait and that’s when he wobbles again. Without the distraction he’s back to how he was before. Liam almost suggests he make some cookies too, but instead Louis offers up a marathon of Bake Off to keep the theme going and Harry relaxes a little. They all find seats around the living room, Harry cuddled up against Liam again, and settle in. Des pulls the cakes out of the oven when the timer goes off and the house fills with a rich, spicy scent that makes Liam’s mouth water. Harry gives his father clear instructions on how to set the cakes on the racks to cool and they continue their marathon.

Liam catches several of the others surreptitiously checking their phones, looking for updates from London. He secretly wishes he had his to do the same, but he knows Harry would end up looking too if he did and the whole point was to make him forget about it, At least for the rest of the day.

It ends up being something they can’t achieve however, as Mr. Peel arrives just after six. While Des goes and lets him in, Harry suddenly stands and heads to the kitchen, pulling the frosting out of the fridge and asking Liam to fetch him a cake plate. Liam has no idea what in hell a cake plate is and with the distraction of the prosecutor now standing in the kitchen, finds it hard to concentrate on the task. Gemma finds it just as Mr. Peel starts talking.

“Harry, how are you doing?” He asks, face a little confused as he watches Harry carefully halving the cakes horizontally to add more layers. He places the first one on the plate and pipes a small bead of icing around the perimeter.

“Gemma, can you get me that jar of apricot jam from the cupboard?” He says by way of answer to the counselor’s question.

“Harry, we have an update and I am obligated to come talk to you about it. So if you have a minute,” Mr. Peel tries again.

“Go ahead, I can listen and do this at the same time,” Harry replies. He spreads a layer of jam inside the bead of frosting and places another layer of cake on top, beginning to repeat the process.

“Have you spoken to your family? Are they aware of what happened today?” Peel asks carefully, eyes shifting around to the people surrounding the kitchen.

“I told Liam and my father,” Harry replies, plopping the next layer of cake on.

“Wait, what’s going on?” Anne asks, face jumping from Harry to Peel and back again.
“You can tell them,” Harry says quietly, sighing softly and then refocusing on his creation.

“Right,” Peel starts, sighing himself. “I received a call late yesterday from the police detective on the case informing me that they had found new, extremely important evidence. There had been a delay in retrieving it for technical reasons that I won’t go into. But they found a video camera in the cell that Harry was held in. The two accused recorded the entire ordeal.”

Harry’s hands start to shake as he places the last layer of cake on and Liam moves closer to him, sliding an arm around his back supportively.

Anne and Gemma gasp at the news, both of them staring at Harry for a moment before turning back to the counselor.

“The sick motherfuckers taped all of it and they just found that evidence?” Robin spits suddenly. “What in hell were they doing this whole time? It could have saved Harry ever having to step foot in that courthouse!”

“Robin, stop,” Anne cuts in, putting a hand on his arm.

“Like I said, there were technical problems. The point is, it was found and I was able to get a hearing with the judge yesterday afternoon to present it and argue to have it made admissible. The defense council fought hard on it, but he lost and I was able to get it shown today during cross with the first defendant who took the stand.”

“Is that why the jury was taken out of the room?” Niall asks, eyes watching Harry as he carefully spreads the rest of the frosting all over the assembled cake. He has a large, flat spatula in his hand as he tries to make it even and neat despite his shaking hands.

“Yes, and that is what Harry and I discussed yesterday after Liam testified. I needed to get his permission to even consider putting it in the trial and we agreed so long as it was done in private, like his testimony was.”

“Right…” Niall says after a moment, scratching his head.

“So you did it, showed it. Why are you here? What do you need to discuss?” Des asks him carefully and Liam can see him working hard to control himself, trying to keep calm out of consideration for Harry and he appreciates it.

“I’m here because, not surprisingly, Mr. Ryan is asking for a plea bargain. He knows he’s lost, but he wants to try to get a lesser sentence for Brian,” Peel replies, sounding none too pleased with it himself. “And as I said, I am obligated to ask you Harry. Though I would very strongly advise you to say no.”

“What? He’s trying to get a lesser sentence for one of them? On what grounds?” Gemma asks, frowning deeply.

Peel turns and looks at Harry, unsure again as to what Harry may have told them or withheld and Harry glances up at him. The hand that was placing candied orange pieces on the cake stopped.

“Gary was the one who used knives on me. I’m assuming that is considered more heinous,” Harry deadpans, resuming his task. Peel nods, looking down at the counter.
“In the courts, yes, the use of a weapon is considered more heinous. Ryan is arguing that because Brian didn’t use a weapon he should not be held to the same standard.”

Liam sees Gemma surreptitiously wipe away a tear. Her eyes glance at the scar running through Harry’s mermaid tattoo and he knows she’s seeing it in a whole new light like he did when he found out.

“Well isn’t that nice? It’s rather unfortunate that I feel he can just go fuck himself,” Harry replies, plopping the last piece of fruit on the top of the cake and leaning back to admire his work.

“I figured as much,” Peel agrees, smirking. “Ok, that’s all I needed to know and I’ve done my duty.”

“Is he even going to bother to continue with his side of the case?” Louis asks. “Seems it would be pointless now, yeah?”

“I’m not sure. Legally he can. He still has another witness to call. It’s a pharmacist who filled prescriptions for antibiotics for them. I’m assuming that’s to prove they did take some care in Harry’s health and wellbeing, but if he’s asking for plea bargains then I doubt he will,” Peel replies, picking up his briefcase. “I’ll find out tomorrow.”

“How much longer can it go on for?” Anne asks. “Surely the jury will find them both guilty, but when do they get to deliberate?”

“Depends on tomorrow. If the defense rests, then we will move on to closing arguments. I plan to keep mine short and then the jury will be given instructions from the judge and sequestered. Assuming they come to an agreement quickly, we could be done and dusted by the end of day tomorrow. Then we would just have to wait for the sentencing hearing.”

“Well,” Anne breathes out. “That’s fast.”

“If the video evidence hadn’t been found, it certainly wouldn’t be over that quick, even by UK standards,” Peel points out, sounding surprised himself.

“Do you want a piece of cake before you go?” Harry asks suddenly and the lawyer laughs once in surprise at the sudden change in topic.

“I suppose… Why are you baking?” He asks, brows together in confusion.

“I wanted to,” Harry replies, as though that is a perfectly good explanation. He shrugs slightly as he moves to let Liam cut it, refusing to touch the knife himself.

Liam feels bad about destroying his artistic decorating, but Harry just laughs him off and pushes the pile of plates that Anne retrieved towards him.

Peel takes his with a smile.

“I suppose it’s a small celebration, in a way,” he says carefully and Harry nods.

“I’m glad it’s over. So yes, it’s a small celebration, a step,” he replies, passing a piece down the counter to his father.
“Oh my God Harry,” Gemma says around a mouthful. Her eyes go up in bliss at the first taste and everyone laughs.

“It’s a Hummingbird cake,” Harry says quietly, taking a few nibbles of his own and smiling softly. “I think I saw Martha Stewart make it once and I had to try it. I’ve loved it since then.”

“It’s wonderful honey. I’m glad you made it,” Anne compliments him, taking another big bite.

With his little creation a success Harry eats his own piece with a little more ease. Liam had intentionally made sure his was a bit bigger, since he needed it more, and he’s extra happy when Harry finishes it.

When the rest of the cake is covered up for snacking later, they let Mr. Peel get on his way and he promises to keep them updated the next day.

Several more hours of Bake Off later, one of which featured a hummingbird cake that everyone agrees is nowhere near as nice as Harry’s, they all head up to bed.

Lack of sleep the night before gets Liam’s eyes dropping quickly, but he can’t quite drift off because he senses that Harry is still awake.

“Haz? You ok?” He asks carefully, words slurring slightly in his exhaustion. He feels Harry take a deep breath.

“Yeah… I’m just… I don’t know… processing I guess,” he says carefully, fingers tightening reflexively in Liam’s shirt. “It’s just that so much has happened, and so much is already behind me too, it just feels like things have moved so quickly. I’m glad they have. The trial is basically over and they are probably going to jail, the world knows I’m alive and the media has come and gone. It’s just weird. It’s like, what now? What happens next?”

Liam understood where he was coming from. It was only four weeks since Harry had appeared dirty and terrified in his kitchen and to look at where they were now was astounding. He was glad that some of the worst was over and he could tell Harry was as well, but then there was this strange blankness in front of them. The big ‘what now’ being posed.

“I don’t know Harry. I really don’t,” he answers honestly, rubbing Harry’s back gently. “I guess we just focus on helping you get better and get healthy again. Things will sort themselves out. There’s no pressure you know. I just want to make that clear. You take things at whatever pace you need and don’t let anyone hurry you.”

He feels Harry nod against his chest, sighing again.

“Yeah, it’s kinda nice actually. Not really having a plan or deadline or anything,” Harry whispers, sounding a bit more drowsy. “Can we go for a walk tomorrow?”

“Sure, Haz. Whatever you want.”
Chapter 18

Two Months

The jury finds both Gary and Brian guilty on all charges. Ryan gives up right at the start of the next day by declaring he had no further witnesses and the defense rested. According to Peel, he barely gave a closing argument. He suspects that if given the chance, the little counselor would have quit and refused to continue acting as council for Gary and Brian if it wouldn't have fucked everything up so much. Turns out the guy had a conscience, and after seeing the video himself had stuck it out only because it meant the trial wouldn’t be compromised and the two assholes would be convicted.

Sentencing is scheduled for the following Tuesday. Harry decides to record his statement to be used in consideration in Liam’s office. He didn’t fancy traipsing back to London to sit in the courthouse again and the judge agrees.

In the end, both men get life sentences for the worst crimes and maximum sentences for each of the others. All will be served concurrently, meaning they would never see the light of day outside of a cell again. While everyone is glad at this outcome, it is much less of a relief than Liam would have thought. Since locking them up didn’t take away anything they had done. He can only hope time will help and that Harry will be able to move on, put it behind him as much as possible and restart his life.

They go for a walk as promised. Not far, just into the woods a little ways. Harry’s eyes dance all over, absorbing the lush green blooming everywhere as spring starts to make its entrance. The air is filled with a warm richness, damp earth and foliage. Sharp pine and musty moss can be seen creeping up from the floor.

It becomes Harry’s new favorite thing. Especially after visits from Dr. Howard, which were now just twice a week. Everyone can see some improvement in Harry and his ability to greet each day with a little less wariness. His nightmares are still a constant, though he does start having the odd night where they don’t occur. His confusion upon waking does go away though, which is a welcome change and the house relaxes a bit.

Louis and Niall head back to London and then off to LA. They still call and face time daily to check in on Harry, but Louis was missing Freddie and Niall was hosting a charity golf tournament that he had been planning for a year. Gemma also starts going back to work, though she still returns to Liam’s house every night. Soon the question of how the domestic situation was going to proceed rears its head again. Liam knows that Anne would love for Harry to come back to Holmes Chapel and stay with her and Robin for a while and he understands why, but every time she brings it up Harry points out that Dr. Howard is closer to Surrey than to Holmes Chapel so it made more sense for him to stay at Liam’s.

With the start of May and St. George’s Day, a holiday that often saw Harry’s family collecting to share in quality time, rapidly approaching, Anne proposes a short visit up to Cheshire to celebrate. Harry hadn’t seen a lot of his family at all yet and some of them not since the disastrous welcome home party.

Harry agrees on one condition: Liam comes with him.
Liam would happily go, except Ruth would be very upset if he missed the celebration she was planning for the first time in the new house she and her husband just bought.

“Harry I know it won’t be easy, but maybe you should try and spend some time with your family and I will be with mine,” Liam says quietly one night after they’ve turned the lights out. He feels Harry tense immediately. “Harry relax, I’m not leaving you. This is not permanent and rest assured I do not want to be away from you any more than you from me. But it would only be for two days, tops, and if you needed me I could drive up there quick.”

Harry sighs softly and Liam can almost hear the frown, but surprisingly he doesn’t disagree.

“I know I’m just being ridiculous,” he admits. “I would like to see my grandfather. And it’s only two days, like you say.”

“And Gemma will be with you. Your dad said he will come too. So you should be ok,” Liam assures him, following it up with a gentle peck on his forehead.

Harry’s relationship with his dad had vastly improved since the trial because Des was no longer treating Liam like an enemy combatant and was actually listening to his son all of the time. He had even issued reservations about Harry leaving Liam’s house since he was improving there.

Harry sighs again, fingers tugging on the collar of Liam’s t-shirt slightly, mouth tight for a moment.

“Alright, fine,” he finally agrees, but then his eyes snap up to Liam’s face, twinkling in the moonlight. “But you promise me if I call you and need you, you will come get me ok?”

Liam smirks, pushing Harry’s hair behind his ear.

“Yes, I promise. But you will be ok. I have faith in you.”

Harry’s eyes narrow slightly assessing his response, but then he smirks as well and that familiar urge to kiss his lips flows over Liam. It had been happening more frequently, giving him a great sense of guilt since he shouldn’t even be considering such things with Harry. He’s glad that at least Harry hasn’t seemed to have noticed, at least he hopes he hasn’t.

Except this time it goes on much longer than before. Their eyes are locked together and there is a strange silence between them. Liam finds himself moving closer, millimeter by millimeter, until their noses are almost touching. Harry’s warm breath crosses his lips, fingers twitching at his collar again and Liam forces himself to break out of the trance he just fell into, pulling back away again.

“Alright, with that decided. Let’s get some sleep, yeah?” Liam asks, deftly breaking the moment. He clears his throat and swallows loudly while Harry continues to stare at him a few moments longer, brows flickering with confusion. Eventually he nods and settles in with his face pressed into Liam’s chest.

There is a part of Liam that hopes some time apart will stop this from happening because it needed to stop. Despite whatever his heart or body might be telling him, his head needed to rule and he had to keep reminding himself that Harry was not at all in a place where such a thing could be considered. The last thing Liam would ever want to do is take advantage of him.

Anne is overjoyed the next day when Harry reveals his decision to go to Holmes Chapel and plans
are quickly put in place. Liam helps him pack a bag and carries it down and out to the car for him. Harry trails behind him wringing his hands nervously. He’d gotten much steadier on his feet, though he was still painfully thin. Eating was a constant battle, but he had improved a little bit.

When Liam has his own bag packed and in his own car, his dog Watson bouncing happily in the front seat with his head out the window, he locks the front door and turns to wish everyone well. He then feels a sudden wave of reservation wash over him. He can’t stop the thought forming in his head that the last time he parted with Harry he had barely seen him for a year and then lost him for over two years. As he looks at Harry standing beside the car, clothes hanging off him and face innocent and afraid, Liam almost changes his mind. He pulls Harry into a tight hug, holding it for longer than was generally socially acceptable, but Harry refuses to let go either. No one says anything. They just sit in the car waiting quietly.

In fact, it’s Watson who breaks the silence, barking loudly in his impatience to get going on their adventure. Harry jumps at the noise and they pull apart, staring into each other eyes.

“You’re gonna be ok. Try and enjoy yourself. Text me or call me anytime you want, ok?” Liam asks him. They bought Harry a new cell phone for this purpose and he checks his pocket to make sure he has it. “Don’t worry, I packed your charger,” Liam adds cheekily and it earns him a smirk.

“Thanks,” Harry laughs and glances at the car. Gemma is pretending not to watch in her oversized sunglasses, but it’s clear she is and the small smirk on her lips is a giveaway. “Alright, I suppose we should get going. I’ll see you in a couple days, yeah?”

“Yes, of course,” Liam replies immediately. He holds the door open for Harry even though it was actually starting to kill him a little bit to do this.

Harry slides into the car and fiddles with his seatbelt, but he gets it in place. Liam squeezes his shoulder gently once before closing the door, worried that emotion was about to overwhelm him and he would make a scene.

“Have fun” he calls as they pull away, waving like a fool until he can’t see the car anymore. He drops his hand and pulls in a shaky breath. He immediately regrets the decision of letting Harry go and his heart aches in his chest. Waves of panic wash over him that something horrible could happen and he wouldn’t be there to help.

His phone pings in his pocket and he almost rips the fabric pulling it out, praying that it is Harry telling him he’s changed his mind and they are on their way back. Instead, it’s Ruth.

You on your way yet?

Liam glances over at his car, his dog panting at him from the open window and he sighs. He texts her back quickly to say he’s just getting in the car and then puts his phone back in his pocket.

The drive is quiet. He keeps the radio off and his eyes on the road. Watson enjoys himself, wrinkle face flapping in the wind and tail smacking Liam at random intervals.

He gets to Ruth’s just after noon and settles in, trying to focus on spending time with his family. All of them ask how Harry is and what has been going on. Since Ruth is the only one he’s seen since Harry arrived at his house over two months ago, a lot them haven’t really gotten the chance to talk to him about it and he gets cornered more than once.
Thanks to a spy planted by the media in the courtroom, the outside world had gotten wind of his confession about having feelings for Harry. It had been the top story since then with speculation, rumors and stories running wild. Their entire relationship from the start of the band until Harry disappeared had been picked apart and discussed ad nauseam. Liam had done his best to keep Harry from seeing it, but in the end had to sit down and tell him what happened. The confession isn't surprising to Harry, he knew already, but he isn't pleased about its worldwide attention. The only upside is that it had distracted from everything else that was discussed in Liam’s testimony, like Harry’s sexual prowess and dating history, and for that they are both grateful.

Liam still hadn’t worked up the nerve to tell Harry about him going to the funeral, however. Though he knows he will have to sometime.

Harry’s testimony is unknown, thankfully, since it was done in private. Word had also gotten out that there was video evidence, but the media could only guess as to what had been on the film.

Being sequestered at Liam’s house had helped them all stay away from it and it had started to feel like the media and fans were talking about different people.

But now Harry was off in Holmes Chapel, without Liam, and the chances of the media getting wind of that were very high. This causes Liam to go into a bit of a panic just before he and his family all sit down to dinner.

He hurries upstairs to his bedroom pulling his phone out and dialing Des because he had to warn someone to keep an eye out for the press and he seemed the best option.

“I know Liam. We are already on the lookout for them and have asked the police to help if required. Harry is fine. I promise you he is,” Des replies tersely, mildly offended that Liam thinks he would forget something like that. “Go see your family. We will see you in a few days.”

“Ok, thank you. Sorry for disturbing you, it had just occurred me is all,” Liam apologizes and quickly lets the older man get off the phone and back to his own dinner.

He sits and takes a deep breath, letting the panic in his chest calm before he considers returning downstairs, but seconds later his phone rings.

“Liam? Is everything ok? Why are you calling my dad?” Harry asks him in a frightened voice and Liam’s heart pangs. He hadn’t meant to cause Harry distress.

“Everything’s fine Haz, I promise. I just needed to remind him of something, but he’s already taken care of it,” he assures him in a calm voice. “How are you? Are you having fun?” He can barely hear the sounds of frivolity in the background, as though Harry is sequestered in a room with the door closed while making this phone call.

“Uh… yeah… I guess,” he answers after a few moments, sounding entirely unsure of his answer. “I just… I miss you… I don’t like not having you with me,” he admits in a small voice and Liam’s heart pangs again.

“I know honey. I miss you too, but it’s only for a few days, good days with our families and then we will be back together again,” Liam assures him, barely believing it himself.

He hears Harry take a wobbly breath before he replies.
“Ok, I guess,” he says unsurely.

“I know Haz, I know. It’s not easy for me either, but it’ll be ok and I’m right here whenever you need me. I promise,” Liam says quietly, throat feeling a bit thick. It was going to be very hard to try to sleep without Harry next to him. Funny how it had become such a normal and comforting thing in such a short period of time.

“Ok,” Harry says again, voice still small. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Liam replies quietly, warmth in his chest. “Text me. Tell me what’s happening, how everyone is behaving, what you’re eating, tell me all of it. I’ll do the same for you, yeah?”

“Alright,” Harry answers, sounding a little better. “My aunt is already pretty drunk, so I’m sure I’ll have plenty to tell you.”

Liam laughs.

“Yeah my sister is on the way there too. So let’s see who gets worse.”

With that decided they let each other go and seconds later, Liam gets a text from Harry.

_Gemma says hi._

Liam laughs and replies in kind, telling him that his own family had been inquiring after Harry. They carry on like this the rest of the evening, exchanging banter and keeping each other updated as to the goings on in each household. Pictures are added quickly, with Harry sending one of some very scary looking burned Brussels sprouts and Liam sends a selfie pic with his sister Nicola, that features both of them making silly faces.

There’s something cathartic about texting Harry and getting responses again. After spending two years texting and hearing nothing, seeing the replies and pictures and his attempts at jokes was nothing short of joyous.

It makes the time pass faster and before he knows it, it’s bedtime. Harry’s tone becomes more frightened and Liam knows this will be hardest part for him. It’s going to be hell for Liam as well.

Wanting to see for himself that Harry is settled, he FaceTimes him and is hit with Harry’s frightened wide green eyes on his screen.

“Hey, you ok? Thought I would check in before bed,” Liam says quietly, not trying to disturb the rest of the house.

Harry glances behind him, biting his lip. His old bedroom in the background, the same one Liam had spent some time in after Harry had gone missing.

“Yeah… I guess I’m ok. It’s just weird,” he replies a moment later, sounding unsure. “I don’t like it,” he admits after, brows knitting together.

“Neither do I, but I’m right here and I can see you so that helps. It’s only two nights. We can make it through two nights, yeah?” Liam asks him, though the question is also for himself.

Harry looks unsure, brows still together and he starts worrying his lip in his teeth again.
“I’m sorry Haz. I shouldn’t have pushed you on this. I should have come with you. I don’t like this either, I really don’t,” Liam admits finally, the guilt washing over him in waves.

Harry cocks his head to the side slightly, face softening.

“You didn’t push me into anything. We both thought we could do this and it’s harder than we thought, but it’ll be over soon, right?” He asks and Liam nods. “Yeah, and then I can catch up on sleep since I doubt I’m going to sleep at all while I’m here. It just feels way too weird. I don’t know why, the surroundings are familiar enough.” Harry says while looking around the room himself.

“Yeah, but please try and sleep ok? You still get tired easily and you need to rest,” Liam pleads with him gently, not wanting to risk any of the slight movement Harry had made on getting physically better. “Why don’t you go sleep in Gemma’s room? I’m sure she’d let you. Then you wouldn’t be alone.”

Harry glances at the door and looks unsure before turning back to Liam.

“Yeah… I’ll do that if I need to,” he relents, still sounding unsure. “Can you… can you stay with me like this until I fall asleep? Just talk to me?” He asks carefully, eyes so innocent and full of pleading. Liam immediately agrees.

“Of course honey, no problem. Get settled, ok?”

Harry frowns and looks down.

“Sorry, this is really unfair of me to make you do this for me,” he says quietly.

“No, no, Harry, it’s fine. I want to. It’s ok. It’ll make me feel better knowing you are alright, so it’s good for me too!” Liam assures him, not wanting him to look guilty for a second longer.

“Really?” Harry asks him, looking at him under his brow.

“Yes, really. Now get settled. The sooner you sleep, the closer we get to being back home together again,” Liam tells him, smirking as Harry immediately obeys with that reminder.

He settles down on his side under the covers, the phone propped on the pillow so Liam can still see his face.

“Comfortable?” Liam asks him and Harry shuffles slightly.

“Not as good as having you here, not as warm, but it’ll have to do,” he admits frowning slightly again, but yawning just the same.

“What do you want me to talk to you about?” Liam asks, trying to come up with an idea of something that would both comfort and bore Harry enough that he might sleep.

“I dunno,” Harry slurs out, mouth moving in thought. Then it hits Liam, the perfect way to help him sleep and to comfort him.

He will sing him a lullaby. Not just any lullaby, but the song he wrote for Harry. The song Harry
had been listening to non-stop since he’d first heard it. He often absconded with Liam’s phone in order to do so. Liam had made sure it was on his new phone when he bought it, along with a pair of headphones so Harry could listen to it whenever he wanted.

But right now he could give him something better: a live performance.

Quietly he starts and Harry startles slightly, but then he visibly relaxes, mouth falling into a small smile involuntarily.

“Come up to meet you, tell you I’m sorry, you don’t know how lovely you are,” Liam sings quietly, not wanting anyone else to hear, but enough that Harry could still hear him.

He carries on and Harry’s eyes droop further and further with each line until finally he starts to snore softly and Liam finishes the song off in almost silence.

“I love you Haz,” he whispers. His finger moves to end the call, but he finds he can’t. The sound of Harry’s quiet snores is weirdly comforting and he’s not sure he will be able to sleep without them. So instead he puts his phone on the pillow next to him where he can hear it and see it if need be and soon he drifts off as well.

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“Liam? Liam where are you? Liam?”

Liam wakes with a start hearing Harry calling for him. He reflexively reaches for him and gets an armful of pillow. Opening his eyes he looks around and sees an unfamiliar room, one that he is alone in and recollection washes over him.

“Liam, I want to go home,” Harry whimpers out and the sound of his fear is palpable even though he isn’t in the room. It makes Liam sit straight up, heart pounding in his chest.

He starts digging in the blankets for his phone and the quiet whimpers are muffled by the fabric, but he eventually finds it. Harry’s face fills the screen, eyes wide and tears streaked down his cheeks.

“Babe, what happened? It’s ok, I’m right here. What’s wrong?” Liam says, turning the bedside light on so Harry could see him better.

Harry sniffs and his face crumples for a moment.

“I want to go home… I don’t like this. I don’t like it here. I just feel so exposed here, and alone,” he says with a wobbly voice and Liam’s heart breaks.

“Did you have a nightmare?” He asks gently and Harry nods, another tear trickling down his cheek. “Do you want me to come get you?”

Harry closes his eyes, clearly fighting an inner war on that very question and after a few moments he shakes his head.

“No, I mean… yes, I do, but you shouldn’t have to. I should be able to be ok here. I’m being ridiculous,” he says quietly, voice full of remorse.
“No you are not. Not even a little bit, ok? I told you I would come get you if you needed me to and I will. Just give me a few minutes to get dressed and I’ll get on the road. I should be there in about three hours,” Liam says as he gets out of bed, hand reaching for his discarded jeans on the chair.

“No, Liam, stop, no, don’t. It’s the middle of the night and I’m ok. I feel better just hearing your voice. I was just really scared when I woke up, but I’m ok now,” Harry assures him, wiping under his eyes with his sleeves. His voice is still a little wobbly, but he does look calmer and Liam sits back down on the side of the bed.

“Are you sure?” He asks carefully, eyes flicking to his clothes and back to the screen. His eagerness somewhat due to his own desire to see Harry himself.

“Yes, I am,” Harry says calmly, taking a deep breath and blowing it out with a whoosh. “Look, I’m gonna go crawl in with Gemma. Maybe if I’m not alone I’ll be a little better.” He says unsurely.

“Ok, all you can do is try and if it doesn’t work, I can still come get you alright? That offer is always available to you, I promise.”

Harry nods at him, throwing him a grateful look.

“Thank you,” he whispers. “Ok, I’m gonna take my phone with me, but we should probably stop face timing. I don’t want to disturb everyone too much and I think it might be weird for Gemma.”

Liam laughs quietly.

“Then Gemma will just have to live without hearing me sing you to sleep.”

Harry smirks at him and looks wistful.

“That is unfortunate indeed, but at least I have your song on my phone to listen to I guess.”

They sit quietly for a minute. Harry looks down at the floor, so frail and pale despite the progress. It’s like a weight that sits on Liam’s chest, this distance between them.

“Ok, as much as I don’t want to I’m gonna have to hang up, but let’s keep texting yeah?” Harry asks, eyes hopeful as they come back up to the screen.

“Of course. Tell me how much your sister snores,” Liam deadpans. Harry laughs and lifts his brows.

“That would be dangerous because she can be vengeful, but thanks. I hope I didn’t disturb you too much?”

“No Haz not at all, not even a little bit. I’m glad you are ok now. Try to get some sleep alright?”

Harry nods and smiles at him for a moment.

“Ok, I will. Love you,” he whispers.

“I love you too. See you soon,” Liam replies, meaning every word.

Harry stills waits a few more moments with his eyes locked on Liam before he ends the call with a
resigned sigh. Liam looks at the call time, 2 hours, 45 minutes and 38 seconds and sighs himself. He hadn't even hit the three hour mark before having a nightmare. That was concerning.

A few minutes later, Liam has settled back under the covers with his phone now plugged into the charger. He stretches the cord so he can still have it right next to him when suddenly a text comes through.

*I’m in Gemma’s room. She’s ok with me being here.*

Liam breathes out a sigh of relief, but ignores the tinge of jealousy and worry that Harry won’t need him anymore.

*Good. Try and get some rest. Text me when you get up in the morning, ok?*

Liam reminds himself that what is most important is for Harry to be ok, to be comfortable and to feel safe. If that happened to be with someone other than Liam beside him, then that was fine.

*Ok.*

With that Liam sends one final text, the sleeping emoji, and puts the phone down. He closes his eyes and resolutely tries to sleep. But every few minutes he opens his eyes and checks to see if Harry has texted. After about an hour of this, he sets the phone to vibrate and chastises himself for not doing it sooner.

That helps him relax for another hour, but he’s still not sleeping. He’s listening for the phone to vibrate, worried that he won’t hear it if he’s asleep.

His response to this is to change it to a loud pinging noise that will surely rouse him immediately if Harry makes contact. No matter that it will likely also wake the rest of the house, but at least Liam won’t miss any messages.

To be on the safe side he sets his ringtone to a loud jingle as well, along with his FaceTime app, just in case Harry uses one of those to get in touch.

Then and only then does he finally fall asleep. It’s restless and his hands search the empty bed all night, but it’s sleep nonetheless.

He wakes to a ping right in his ear in the morning, body and head achy, but he grabs the phone quickly to make sure Harry is alright.

*Good morning. Just got up. Evidently I woke the whole house last night and they were all waiting for you to show up.*

Liam snorts a laugh. He’s not surprised by that, but feels they should have more faith in Harry.

*Did you tell them you told me not to come?*

*Yes. Gemma backed me up.*

*Good! What are you up to? Breakfast? Make sure you eat something please!*

*Yes mum. I’ve already had my shake and dad’s making pancakes. How long do I have to drink*
these stupid things for anyway? It’s been weeks.

Until your weight is at an acceptable level, which is why you need to eat more.

Harry sends the eye roll emoji and Liam laughs, feeling a bit better despite his headache.

They continue like they had the day before, texting constantly and telling each other about every minute of their day. Like it had before, it makes the time pass quickly.

When the sun sets, Liam and his family all pile into the cars and head to the park for the St. George’s day fireworks. Harry’s family had wanted to do the same, but Harry had reservations about being out so openly in public and they had realized he was probably right. Robin had decided the solution was to get their own fireworks. So Liam gets several pictures of Harry’s dad and step-dad attempting to light the little rockets before scampering off to avoid being lit up themselves. These are followed by shots of the fireworks exploding in the sky. The small bursts of lights are minuscule in comparison to what Liam is seeing in the sky over London, so he sends back several shots of his own so that Harry can share in them. He gets a snarky comment in return stating that size doesn’t matter.

Gemma sends Liam his favorite picture of the night however, one that he immediately saves to his phone and makes into his wallpaper. It’s a close up profile shot of Harry holding a lit sparkler. He has a big grin on his face as he stares at it with a childish sort of glee. He looks so young, innocent and sweet that it makes up for being away from him for these few short days.

Bed time is much the same except Harry just goes straight to Gemma’s room. He grabs his ear buds first, after having Liam agree to sing him to sleep again, but this way Gemma won’t have to hear it as well. Liam gets the extra bonus of hearing her snoring however, so he takes a few minutes to record some of it just in case he needs ammo later on. Though he decides he will be nice for now, since she did send him the picture.

He prays Harry won’t have another nightmare and feels much better knowing he will see him tomorrow.

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Harry wakes first, though not from a nightmare, just from the sun rising and he’s up before anyone else. He chatters in Liam’s ear until he too wakes up.

“Liam? Come on Li! Get up! We’re going home today! Get moving!”

Liam grumbles slightly and snorts loudly as consciousness creeps over him. He must admit he rather enjoys listening to Harry’s cheerful voice first thing in the morning, even if it is an ungodly hour.

“What time is it?”

“6:30…ish… around there anyway. But get up, get packed. I’m gonna get everyone else up so we can get going.”

Liam cracks one eye open, suspicious about the time. He sees 6:04 staring back at him and he grumbles again.
“Harry, the sun is barely up babe. I get your enthusiasm, but maybe you should let people sleep so that they will be conscious enough to drive. You don’t want them falling asleep behind the wheel,” Liam points out, groaning as the sun starts to poke into his eyes.

There is a few beats of silence where he hears Harry stop moving. When it goes on too long, Liam’s eyes open more and he frowns at the screen in confusion. He finds Harry’s slightly hurt face on the other side.

“Are you… do you not want to go home?” Harry asks quietly. Liam’s heart snaps in two, pain pushing in on his chest at the expression on Harry’s face and he sits up quickly.

“No, Haz, no. That isn’t what I meant babe. I can’t wait to see you and to get home. I’ve missed you and worried about you this whole time. It’s just that it’s really early and you should be resting,” he says quickly, hoping it assures the other man. “At least give your dad until seven. And make him some strong coffee.”

Harry’s face relaxes and he nods, smirking at the last suggestion.

“What time are you going to head home?” He asks Liam, moving again. Liam can see he’s in his old bedroom, packing up his bag.

“Dunno,” Liam answers honestly. Though now that Harry had mentioned it, he was itching to get on the road. “Might stop and pick up some shopping on the way. Anything you want?”

Harry hums and puts the phone down on the dresser, leaving Liam to stare at the ceiling, but he can still hear Harry shuffling about.

“I don’t know. As long as it’s not more fucking shakes,” he grumbles out and Liam laughs.

“Uh huh, do me a favor and have one of those before you leave though. And something for breakfast.”

“Doesn’t the shake count as breakfast?” Harry whines.

“No Haz, it’s supplementary. You still need to eat,” Liam insists in a motherly tone. “What about some ice cream? I can pick up some for you if you want.”

Harry hums in thought again.

“Yeah, I guess,” he agrees noncommittally. “Um, can you get some bread flour though? And some yeast? Oh and you are out of baking powder and baking soda.”

Liam laughs quietly. Baking had become Harry’s favorite hobby since the end of the trial. Liam’s waistline was paying dearly for it, but at least Harry tended to snack on the stuff he made as well so that was the plus side.

“When do I get to start calling you Paul Hollywood?” Liam asks laughing and Harry’s face suddenly appears on the screen, looking unamused.

“Never. I prefer Mary Berry if you please,” he retorts and walks away again. Liam laughs harder.

“Alright, alright. Just text me a list of the stuff you need, yeah? And let me know what time you
leave so I can make sure I’m there before you get there.”

“Yeah, ok,” Harry says, picking up the phone again and running his hand through his hair. It was starting to look a little healthier near the roots now that he was getting better nutrition. “I can’t wait to get there. This just doesn’t feel like home anymore,” he admits quietly, eyes traveling around the room.

“Yeah, I know mate,” Liam says gently. He hadn’t broached the subject of Harry’s London house yet. Though he suspects Anne has probably hinted that he would be even closer to Dr. Howard there and that Gemma could stay with him. While Des was in the know about the entirety of the feelings between Harry and Liam, Anne still only had half the story based on Liam’s testimony. She seemed to have gotten it in her head that Liam was obsessed with Harry and was pressurizing him into a relationship. Liam had hoped Des would set her straight, but it seemed he hadn’t yet.

He does think that Harry needs to consider his options though. Whether he wants to sell the house, and start fresh or keep it and just leave things as they are for the time being.

“Ok, I’m gonna finish packing and go make coffee as you suggested,” Harry says finally and Liam watches as he picks up a pair of socks and tosses them into his bag. “I’ll text you as soon as we are on the road.”

“Ok, drink your shake while you’re making coffee,” Liam urges again and gets an eye roll in response.

“Yes Mum,” Harry replies cheekily and smirks at him.

“Harold Edward Styles do not make me come up there,” Liam retorts in a very serious voice and Harry laughs.

“Harry? What the hell are you doing up?” Liam hears Gemma say and he laughs quietly. It was only a matter of time before the two of them starting disturbing people.

“Packing,” Harry replies matter of factly.

“It’s only 6:30 in the fucking morning Harry, calm down,” Gemma replies. Her voice is annoyed, but Liam assumes it’s only because she was woken up by them laughing.

“I know. I’m gonna make coffee in a few minutes, don’t worry, then we can get going,” Harry replies, unfazed by her grumpy demeanor.

“Harry…” Gemma starts and then seems to give up. “I’m going back to bed. Be quiet.”

Harry snorts a laugh and turns back to Liam.

“Ok, I’ll text you in a bit,” he promises, glancing at the door quickly and then back to Liam. “I love you. See you soon.”

“Love you too babe. See you in a bit,” Liam replies and waits until Harry ends the call.

He’s happy that Harry didn’t have a nightmare, at least not that he knows of. But he does know they went to bed late, which means he still didn’t get much sleep either.
Scratching his chest and yawning Liam debates on what to do. He didn’t particularly fancy getting up yet, but at the same time, Harry’s exuberance to get home had wiggled in under his skin as well and now he felt anxious to get moving.

After a few more minutes of deliberation, he gets up and heads into the bathroom to shower. He packs and takes Watson for a quick walk around the block. When he gets back, the rest of his family is up. They look at him curiously as he comes in, fully dressed and cleaned up.

“What time are you heading out?” Ruth asks carefully, pouring him a cup of coffee. His mum is at the stove getting started on making what appears will turn into a full english breakfast, judging by the amount of ingredients on the counter. He feels bad for wanting to leave. He had barely seen his family since Harry had returned, at the same time Harry was his priority now. But he wasn’t leaving just yet. The drive from Holmes Chapel was at least three hours if the traffic was decent. After a holiday weekend it was likely to be murderous, so he still had some time.

“Not too soon. Harry’s gonna text when they set off and it’ll take them a good while to get down here. I do have to go pick up some shopping, but I’ve got a few hours yet.”

“Why are you up and showered and dressed so early then?” Nicola prods, sitting at the table in her dressing gown, hair mashed into a knot on top of her head.

“Harry woke me and I couldn’t get back to sleep. Thought I’d get a head start on using the shower before everyone else and Watson needed a walk,” he replies easily. It was the truth.

“Why is Harry up so early?” Nicola asks. She’s pushing now and Liam shrugs, feeling a tad annoyed at being questioned.

“No idea Nic. He just was. He wants to get home and was awake. It’s no big deal,” he replies tersely, taking a big gulp of his coffee.

“Isn’t he at home right now?” She asks and Liam rolls his eyes.

“Nic, you know full well he lives at Liam’s now. Why are you giving him an inquisition?” Ruth steps in, putting a pot of tea on the table.

“Yeah but, I mean, I would think he’d want to spend time with his family, in his hometown. See all his old mates from there and stuff. Stay a few days longer at least.”

“Nic, he doesn’t feel at home there, not anymore. He stayed the whole time we planned he would, so I think that’s pretty good.” Liam replies, defending Harry. While Ruth was like Des, fully accepting and unquestioning of the mutual feelings between Harry and Liam, Nicola was more of the mind that Harry was confused about whether his feelings were real and that he was starting to overstay his welcome. His parents didn’t seem to know what in hell to think. Though his mum did believe that what Liam was doing, helping Harry, was very kind. She had always been very fond of him, as people tended to be when it came to Harry. She just didn’t understand what exactly it was they felt for each other or how it had continued to exist after so much time apart.

“I just don’t think he’s trying hard enough to reconnect with his family. He seems to just rely on you and use you as his crutch. I can’t imagine his mum is ok with all of this,” Nicola retorts.

“Nicola, stop. You don’t have the slightest clue what Harry’s been through or how this has affected him or what he’s feeling for that matter. None of this has been easy for him, but he’s been lucky to
have Liam there to help him and he is very grateful to Liam for that. I know he is,” Ruth interjects again, trying to head Liam off at the pass before he said something angry.

Nicola opens her mouth to say more, but is cut off immediately by their dad.

“Nicola stop. Obviously Liam knows far more about this than any of us and he knows what is best. So just drop it.”

Nicola huffs angrily, but closes her mouth. Liam debates on just leaving right now, the tension in the room killing any happiness there might have been, but Ruth gives him a pleading look and he relents and sits down, pouring more coffee for himself.

“Is Harry still baking all the time?” She asks conversationally, smiling and looking relieved.

“Yup, he’s sending me a list of stuff he needs. Sounds like he’s got bread in mind for his next creation,” Liam laughs. Ruth had started finding ways to pop round when Harry was baking, having discovered just how good he was at it.

“Oh,” she says carefully, trying to hide the depths of her curiosity. “Just any bread or is he going to try a whole bunch of different ones?”

“Dunno, he never tells anyone what he’s going to make ahead of time. You know that,” Liam points out. Harry would just disappear into the kitchen and start working with little discussion as to what he was planning. Liam loved sitting and watching him though, the peacefulness that would creep over his face and the gentle joy he got at looking at the final product before it was devoured.

“Is this the plan then? He’s just gonna live at your house and bake for the rest of his life?” Nicola snarls out suddenly. Clearly she hadn’t moved on from the argument. “I thought he was seeing a therapist. Is the doctor aware of the living situation? Do they approve? Because if they do, you need to find a new doctor.”

“No, we do not need to find a new doctor. The current one has been helping Harry a great deal. And if he wants to live at my house and bake for the rest of his life that’s perfectly fucking fine with me. At least we both would be happy and he would get to choose how he lives his life. Unlike how things were when he was locked in a fucking dirt hole,” Liam snarls right back, fury coursing through him. He stands suddenly, appetite gone and he knows there is no salvaging this family breakfast now. He knows his sister just doesn’t understand, but he’s tried to explain to her and she refuses to see it from his perspective. He can’t do anything about that. “I’m gonna go.”

With that he turns and heads upstairs to grab his bag. He puts Watson on his leash and heads out the front door. Seconds later Ruth follows, along with his mum and dad.

“Liam, please, don’t leave. She just doesn’t understand because she hasn’t seen it, hasn’t seen Harry or talked to him as I have,” Ruth pleads, hand on his arm.

“She shouldn’t have to Roo. She should just take my word for it. And if not mine, yours,” he points out. He closes the car door after Watson has hopped into the front seat, big head popping out of the window immediately and panting happily. “I’m sorry, it’s just for the best that I go. I have stuff to do anyway, but thank you for having me. The house is lovely and pass on my regards to Thomas, will you?”

Ruth cocks her head to the side and nods a moment later, leaning in to give him a hug.
“Ok, fine. I’ll try and talk to her again,” she promises, patting his back and releasing him so he can hug his parents goodbye.

“I wish you weren’t leaving like this son. We don’t get to see you enough anymore,” his mum says quietly, voice sounding a bit thick.

“Then come to my house. Ruth does all the time. I know that for a while it was best to let Harry adjust, but he’s better now. So you are welcome to visit any time. I’m sure he’d be glad to see you,” Liam points out, realizing that in all this time he hadn’t exactly made an effort to invite his family in, just Ruth.

His mum brightens at this and nods.

“Let us know when he’s baked some bread and we’ll bring some nice preserves,” she says happily. She’s glad to no longer feel like an outcast and Liam realizes with guilt that’s exactly how he’s been treating them. He needs to fix that.

“Tell Nic to come too. She can see for herself that Harry isn’t using me,” he says carefully, trying not to sound angry.

His dad nods and gives him a big hug as well. He’s glad that he’s at least made amends with them. It’s something he should have done a while ago.

“Look, you don’t have to leave yet. Come in for breakfast at least. We will tell Nic to shut it,” Ruth asks again looking slightly hopeful, but Liam shakes his head.

“I think it’s best I go and let her cool down. Like I said, she needs to see for herself. I don’t think she’s going to be convinced otherwise. I should go get the shopping done anyway, so Harry can bake that bread.”

Ruth looks despondent but nods, understanding his reasoning.

“Ok. Well let us know when you get home safe.”

“Sure, no problem. Thanks again,” he says before rounding the car and hopping into the driver’s seat. Watson turns and pants doggy breath all over his face.

As he pulls away he waves at them and his phone beeps in his pocket. He waits until he gets to a red light before pulling it out, seeing a message from Harry.

On our way! Just typing up the shopping list. I’ll send it soon.

He has added a smiley face emoji at the end and it’s weirdly comical to Liam. It’s so much like the old Harry he knew.

He heads home to Surrey, dropping his bag and Watson off before popping back out to the shops. Harry’s list has arrived just after he gets to Sainsbury’s and it’s not small by any stretch. It contains some very odd ingredients that Liam isn’t even sure are food, but he muddles on through with the help of a kind clerk who instantly recognizes him. In gratitude for her help he agrees to a quick picture with her and within seconds there are several more fans milling around. They ask how he’s doing, how Harry is doing and want pictures. His good mood means he’s more willing, but it’s still
a little tiring after a while. He soon starts to get anxious to get home, worried that Harry will be there before him.

With one final promise to share their good wishes with Harry, he closes the boot door on his car and drives off.

He manages to lug all the groceries in and put them away only minutes before Harry and his family arrive. Harry barrels in the front door like a shot. He gives Watson a quick pat on the head before landing in Liam’s arms and locking him in a death grip. Liam wraps his arms around Harry more gently, squeezing softly and noticing that he is shaking slightly. Instantly he’s worried something has happened to upset him and he glances up at Gemma for answers. She just shrugs slightly and shakes her head.

“Haz, what’s up? I’m glad to see you, but what’s wrong?” Liam asks quietly and Harry breathes in loudly beside his ear.

“Nothing, I just... it was hard being away from here, from you. Harder than I had even thought,” he admits quietly and guilt pours over Liam. He should have gone that first night when Harry had the nightmare. He should have known right then that he was struggling and trying to hide it.

“Harry, I’m sorry. It’s ok. You’re here now,” Liam soothes quietly, rubbing his back. Slowly Harry starts to relax and loosens his grip.

He pulls back a moment later and Liam immediately notices the dark circles under his eyes and his grayish colour. Sure signs that he hadn’t had enough rest, so he decides the first order of business for the day was going to be a nap.

“Did you get all the stuff?” Harry asks, eyes glancing around the kitchen. Liam knows he’s about to disappear into the baking bowls again, but he stops him.

“Yes, even the Garam Masala, whatever the hell that is. But first I think we should both have a rest. You look like you need it and I sure as hell know I do.”

Harry turns back to face him and closes his eyes slowly, smirking and acknowledging the truth of Liam’s words.

“Yeah, I could do with a nap,” he admits. “Also, Garam Masala is a spice. It’s in butter chicken.”

“And now I’ve learned something today,” Liam laughs. “Come on. We’ll unpack later.”

They turn and head towards the stairs, meeting up with Des and Robin coming in. Anne trails behind with her own bag in her hand.

“You going up for a rest?” Des asks hopefully. He had apparently noted Harry’s wilted appearance as well.

Liam nods and Des relaxes.

“Ok dad, thanks,” Harry smiles quickly and starts up the stairs with Liam right behind him.

They both quickly change into t-shirts and pajama pants, crawling under the covers and Harry
sighs loudly in relief.

“This bed is so comfortable. I missed it,” he slurs out, snuggling right in against Liam and groaning with pleasure as he stretches out.

Liam laughs and pulls him in, giving him a quick squeeze and kissing the top of his head.

“I missed you Haz. It was hard to sleep without you right beside me.”


“I hate to break this to you, but you do as well, though admittedly not as loudly. It did help to be on face time both nights so I could hear you. It is weirdly comforting,” he laughs and Harry huffs a laugh as well.

“Yes, it is very odd that my snoring is comforting to you, but I’m glad it helped,” Harry acquiesces. “I’m glad I could hear you doing those weird little groans you do.”

Liam tenses. He had no idea he made any sounds when he slept so this was news.

“I do not… do I? No one has ever told me that before!”

“You do. Trust me, you do. But it’s not anything weird. You just kinda grunt and groan every time you move. I guess it’s kinda become comforting for me like my snoring has for you,” Harry laughs.

Liam relaxes again. He was glad that at least he didn’t talk or fart loudly or anything, but still it was odd to hear about something you did while unconscious. So long as Harry wasn’t bothered by it though, then he figured it was fine.

“Ok, well as long as it makes you happy,” he laughs. “Now go to sleep.”

“Yes mum,” Harry slurs out. Moments later the aforementioned snoring starts up and Liam laughs softly.

“Love you Haz,” he whispers into the dark hair below his chin. He falls asleep himself moments later.
Chapter 19

Liam’s family gives them all of two days before asking if they can pop round for a visit. He runs it by Harry first, wanting to make sure he’s feeling fully recovered from his little weekend away, but he gets an affirmative and a promise to make some nice sweet bread to go with the preserves Liam’s mum was going to bring.

And so the next day at just half three, they arrive with a tentative knock on the door. Liam leaves Harry in the kitchen where he’s just turned the loaves out onto racks to cool and goes to answer it himself. Anne, Des and Robin all turn their attention to the front entry, shutting the telly off to be polite. Gemma had promised to be home a little earlier from work to be in time for tea, but that was still a while off.

When he opens the door they stand in a line on the porch, all but Ruth looking a tad nervous and unsure of how to behave, even Nicola.

Ruth just walks in, giving her brother a quick peck on the cheek before sauntering into the house and greeting Anne with a congenial hug and a quick hello to the gentlemen. Moments later they hear her greet Harry with a laugh and a comment about the bread.

Liam steps aside and beckons the rest of his family in. Thomas follows last with a furrowed brow at his wife’s disappearance into the house.

Harry’s parents all stand and greet Liam’s in a friendly manner with hugs and handshakes. Despite having been close for many years, there is still the sense of distance between them now. A gulf that had developed over two very difficult years. Liam can only hope it can be bridged and mended in time.

Liam notices Nicola looking around, eyes scanning about for the person she was most interested in seeing for herself. It’s not until Liam pokes his head into the kitchen to see what Harry is doing that he finally comes forward, looking nervous and shy as he tended to do now.

He makes his way to the entrance to the living room, staying close to Liam. His arms wrapped around his middle and face a bit cautious, but he gives them a small friendly smile when he sees them.

Karen just stops dead. Her hands come up to her mouth and her eyes fill with tears as she finally sees him, really sees him for the first time in person and not in the few pictures that Liam had showed them.

Nicola stands stock still as well, eyes wide as she takes in the changes. Harry shrinks, inching towards Liam slightly and without even thinking Liam puts an arm around him gently and supportively. Harry glances at him quickly and then his eyes go back to Nicola.

The silence stretches for a few minutes too long, enough that Ruth feels it necessary to step in.

“Stop staring, it’s rude,” she declares, walking over to Karen and taking the paper bag with the preserves in it from her and heading back into the kitchen where she loudly starts filling the kettle and getting out plates.
Her little storm through shatters the silence and startles everyone from their revelry. Karen drops her hands, one landing on her chest as her bottom lip wobbles slightly.

“Oh… sorry honey, I’m sorry. It’s just so good to see you, so good,” she manages. Harry relaxes slightly, nodding and giving her a quick smile. He glances at Liam again, as always, for reassurance.

Liam can feel Nicola studying their every move and analyzing every minutiae of their actions towards each other. Part of him finds it annoying, but he knows that at least she will finally see for herself that Harry isn’t using him or confused or anything sordid. The situation was real, and while it was difficult to truly understand, that didn’t minimize it in any way.

His dad is the first to truly find himself in the room, coming forward with a hand out towards Harry in a friendly manner and after a minute, and one more glance Liam’s way, Harry tentatively takes it and shakes it.

“It’s good to see you son. The best news we could have heard,” he says warmly and Harry nods.

Karen takes the exchange as a positive sign and comes forward next, arms outstretched and a hopeful look on her face. Harry smirks softly and steps into the hug. Liam isn’t surprised at her expression when she realizes just how little of a person there is to hug, but to her credit she schools her face before backing away, kissing Harry’s cheek loudly and making him laugh.

She moves enough to let Thomas shake Harry’s hand quickly, welcoming him home before he offers to go help Ruth. He gets a sound of approval from the kitchen where the kettle has started to whistle.

Anne and Karen follow, while the three older men find seats in the living room and start chatting quietly.

That just leaves Nicola, who continues her study of Liam and Harry with a critical eye and it’s not long before Harry starts to fidget under the scrutiny. He throws Liam several questioning looks.

“Nic, what?” Liam finally says, startling her.

“Oh, sorry, nothing. I’m just taking it in, that’s all. It’s just, finally seeing you in person, here, it’s a lot to take in,” she manages and Harry looks a little confused, but nods a moment later. “Um, I should go help in the kitchen,” she adds a moment later, passing them quietly. Her eyes are still on Harry as she goes, but she says nothing else.

“What is going on? She seems upset with me. I don’t understand.” Harry asks quietly after she’s gone and Liam sighs loudly.

“She’s just being Nic, overprotective of me as usual. Don’t worry about it. I’ll sort her out,” Liam promises. Harry’s head cocks to the side, brow furrowing and looking even more confused, but he doesn’t get the chance to say more before they are called to the kitchen for tea and bread.

They all shuffle in and take up places around the island. Anne, Karen and Ruth all lead the conversation quickly, keeping things light, friendly and happy. Liam appreciates it and knows Harry does as well.

The bread is amazing. It’s full of candied fruits with a dense, eggy sponge texture that goes
wonderfully with the variety of homemade preserves. Harry carefully cuts his bread into several pieces and Liam worries for a moment that they were returning to his old habit of shredding food rather than eating it. However, he then takes the time to put some of each flavor of jam on each section so he can try them all and Liam can’t help but laugh. Harry gives him a faux offended look and moves quickly to smear marmalade on Liam’s nose, making everyone else laugh as well.

“So Harry, what’s the plan? Like, what is your future plan, long term goals, all that?” Nicola asks suddenly and the laughter dies down some. Everyone turns to look at her in surprise and Ruth narrows her eyes suspiciously, just like her brother.

Harry looks startled by the question. He takes a moment to swallow the mouthful of bread he had been chewing at the time and shrugs a moment later.

“Dunno really. Haven’t really thought long term yet. Right now I’m just trying to get through each day, each week, intact and maybe a little better than I was the day before,” he responds, glancing at Liam and then Ruth. “My therapist has told me not to worry too much about future goals or life changes right now and I think he’s probably right. Why do you ask?”

Nicola digests his answer, her own eyes narrowing as she considers his.

“Just curious because it’s not just you in the situation right? I mean, I’m glad you are home and that you are getting better, but there are others to consider whose lives are currently on hold while you heal and put off thinking about the future.”

Harry jolts back slightly at her reply, the candor and tone taking him off guard. He glances around the kitchen with worried eyes. He looks at his parents, who had relocated to Surrey because he wanted to be there. Next he turns towards Liam and his face looks guilty as he fully gets Nicola’s meaning, that he was disrupting and halting Liam’s life.

“Nic,” Liam says severely, arm sliding around Harry’s waist. “No one is being forced to do anything they don’t want to do. No one in this room is troubled or put out by him. Stop trying to upset him.”

Nicola stares him down while Harry continues to stare at him looking hurt and guilty.

“Are you sure about that?” She asks in a challenging tone, turning to Anne and Robin. “Would you not rather your son was at home, in your home where your life is, for his recuperation?”

Anne looks a bit startled at the bluntness of the question, but her eyes slide over to Harry and it’s clear that she agrees with Nicola.

“Yes, I mean, of course I would love to have him home. Last weekend was lovely having him there, but that isn’t what Harry wants,” Anne says carefully, voice slightly disappointed at the end. “We are still all together though and that’s what matters,” she adds after, with forced enthusiasm.

“I do understand that this is what Harry wants, but are we sure it’s what’s best?” Nicola asks, somehow now talking about Harry as though he wasn’t even in the room.

“Nicola, shut up. You don’t know anything about the situation because you haven’t bothered to learn anything,” Ruth spits out, glaring at her sister. “Stop being a bitch and making him feel bad for no reason. I don’t see anyone who is upset with the situation in this room except you.”
“Except his own mother just said she’d rather have him at home. I think a lot more people need to start being more honest,” Nicola retorts.

Harry shrinks down, curling in on himself slightly and anger rips through Liam that she would make him feel that way.

“Nicola,” he growls out. “You need to leave. Now.”

“No, Liam,” she throws back, standing up straighter, fixing herself in place. “I’m sorry, but these are things that need to be said. I know it was all well and good when Harry first got here. I think it’s great you did so much for him and I don’t doubt he’s grateful, but it’s gone on way too long and now you seem to have convinced yourself that it’s because you love him or something. It doesn’t make sense because as far as we all knew you guys were just mates, but somehow in two years of not seeing each other you fell in love with him?”

“Nicola!” Ruth spits out, getting ready to rant when Harry cuts her off.

“I love him too you know,” he says softly, face serious as he fixes his eyes on Nicola. “I can’t speak for Liam, but I knew I loved him well before we even went on hiatus with the band.”

This brings Liam up short. He’d only really realized he was in love with Harry a few weeks ago when he’d first said it. Though if he were being entirely honest he knew before that, but still he hadn’t really defined it in his own mind. Choosing to instead focus on other distractions like Harry being missing.

Nicola too is flummoxed by this admission and the whole room has gone quiet, but Harry stands firm, still staring her down, waiting to be challenged. She chooses to move her attention to Liam instead.

“What about you? Have you known for a long time as well? Why did neither of you say anything?”

Liam feels Harry’s eyes move to him, also curious about the first question, and heat fills his cheeks. His mouth moves as he tries to find words until he finally settles on the truth because Harry deserved that at least.

“I don’t think I fully defined what I was feeling, but I knew there was something,” he replies carefully, turning towards Harry. “Especially after…” He stops. He knows he just said too much, but Harry knows exactly what he’s referring to. He prays no one will ask, but fully expects someone will.

“After what?” Nicola presses, leaning forward. She’s no longer angry and demanding, but curious and eager.

Liam sighs loudly and Harry laughs once. He elbows Liam slightly as a hint that he’s stuck his foot in it, like Liam didn’t already know.

“After nothing. Don’t worry about it Nic. Just drop it ok,” he answers and almost instantly her mouth opens again, but he cuts her off. “Nic, I’m serious, leave it. Just stop with your suspicions and bullshit, Harry is staying here because this is where he wants to be. He’s happy here and he’s making progress. That’s all that matters as far as you are concerned.”

“If you think I’m dropping it, you’ve got another thing coming because now we all want to know.
It’s because we care. Don’t you think we want to see you both happy? And this is news! Can’t say I thought this would happen,” she says with a laugh and the rest of the room nods along with her, though Des just looks confused.

“I thought you said you two didn’t… at the trial,” he starts and then catches himself, realizing just what he’s asking as he starts turning red in the face.

“We didn’t! We haven’t! Oh my God I cannot believe we are discussing this!” Liam blurts out. He’s horrified at Des and frankly the rest of them for looking so damn eager for details. He feels Harry start next to him, shifting to stare at him again with wide confused eyes.

“Didn’t what? What in hell were you asked at the trial? I thought you told me everything?” He accuses and Liam drops his face into his hands.

Ok, so he hadn’t been entirely forthcoming with all of what had come up in the trial, but some things he didn’t think needed to be said. Really they were insignificant because he had answered no.

“Dad? What did the counselor ask him?” Harry turns to Des, sounding a bit short now. He was clearly annoyed at being kept in the dark, but Des just turns redder.

“The counselor was being a shit Harry, you know that. When Liam admitted his feelings for you, he started poking further for more information, but it’s fine. Don’t worry about it son.”

“Poking…. oh,” Harry starts and then groans out, finally fully understanding and he rolls his eyes in exasperation. “He asked if Liam had gotten the chance to ride the town bicycle I presume. Well Liam was telling the truth when he said no.”

Des nods and sighs in relief, glad to have confirmed that so they could move on. Except it was clear that the rest in the room still wanted to know what had occurred between them since Liam had let it slip something had.

“I’m assuming that we are saying you two haven’t slept together, something I really don’t need to know anyway, but what happened that helped you realized you had feelings Liam? I’m still confused,” Nicola starts in again and if Liam was close enough he’d dump a pot of jam on her head. He tries to tell Ruth to do just that with his eyes, but she ignores him. Instead she is waiting to hear an answer herself.

“Can you all just stop? This is a lot of very personal questions you are asking and I don’t think this is really fair to Harry,” Liam tries again to reason with them.

“But…” Nicola starts again and Harry cuts her off.

“We kissed for fuck’s sake. That’s it,” he says in an exasperated tone. “Happy now?”

Nicola finally backs down and everyone relaxes, all nodding slightly and looking pleased to finally have an answer.

“Why couldn’t you just tell us that Liam?” Ruth points out and Liam rolls his eyes.

“Because Harry and I haven’t even discussed it since it happened and frankly, it was none of your business,” he retorts and she nods, looking sorry for asking.
“When did it happen?” Anne asks suddenly, looking between them as though she was trying to figure out a timeline.

“Last performance we did as a band, that New Year’s thing we prerecorded. It was just before that, in the green room,” Harry replies easily, eyes on the piece of bread he was smearing jam onto.

Anne looks slightly smug at that and nods.

“Thought so. When you came home that Christmas something was different and we heard Liam’s name about fifty times a day, but I never figured it out. Even over these last few weeks,” she admits. “I feel a bit daft now and I’m sorry if I’ve done or said anything unkind. It’s actually nice to know now. It makes things all a bit more clear.”

“Well I think it’s wonderful news and something positive for us to focus on,” Karen adds in, smiling warmly at both of them. Liam’s shoulders feel a bit lighter suddenly.

Harry leans on him slightly, taking a bite of his bread and sighing softly. Liam senses that he’s feeling the same.

The front door opens and moments later they hear Gemma calling out a hello followed by the sound of her shoes clattering as she comes towards the kitchen.

“Hello! Wonderful to see you all! Sorry I’m late, work was a beast. Oooohhh the bread looks amazing Harry,” she starts in cheerily. “Have I missed anything important?”

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“We never did talk about it, did we?” Harry says quietly.

It’s late and they’re in bed, cuddled together as always. Harry’s back is to Liam’s chest and Liam was just starting to doze when the question had come out.

He grunts in surprise, trying to decipher what Harry was talking about and it’s quiet for a few moments. Only the sound of an owl outside the open window fills the space. Summer was starting to take hold and it was warm enough out to leave it open all night. They had only a sheet and a light blanket covering them.

“Talk about what Haz?” Liam finally asks, voice deep and sluggish.

Harry’s foot twitches, sock covered toes brushing across the top of Liam’s foot and he turns slightly, looking at Liam over his shoulder in the moonlit room.

“The kiss. We never talked about it. It just happened and we went and performed and never talked about it that night. Or for like the year after.”

Liam’s brows flicker in surprise, but he nods a moment later because Harry wasn’t wrong. Frankly, Liam had been scared to bring it up, worried that Harry would declare it a big mistake and crush his heart. Even if he hadn’t actually realized his feelings for the other man yet.

“I was worried you would tell me it shouldn’t have happened or brush it off or something,” Liam admits, figuring there was no point in hiding the truth now. Especially since it had all been laid on
the table in front of their family at this point. Gemma had been quite smug when she had been filled in, declaring that she knew it all along, but she gave them both a big grin all the same. The rest of the night had been far calmer, everyone relieved to finally know what the whole truth was and to get answers for both Harry and Liam’s behavior, particularly Harry’s. Nicola had finally backed off and given her blessing. Pizza had been ordered and a sense of a normal had been restored.

Harry huffs one quiet laugh, rolling further to face Liam properly.

“I was worried about the same thing,” he says a moment later, laughing again. His voice deep and rich.

“Well aren’t we a pair of fucking idiots,” Liam deadpans, hand gently tucking Harry’s hair behind his ear. His fingers trail through it enough to watch one curl stretch out and then bounce back into position as he lets go.

“Yup, wasted a whole fucking year talking about completely unrelated shit,” Harry adds, his own fingers playing with the collar on Liam’s t-shirt. His fingers make contact with Liam’s skin and his breath ghosts over his collarbone, sending a slight jolt down Liam’s spine.

Then that familiar desire creeps back. Harry’s face and his lips are so invitingly close, but seem so dangerous and impossibly far all at once. When Liam doesn’t say anything for a long time, Harry’s eyes travel up to his face, wide and open and Liam can see the instant he reads his expression. He sees where his mind is and his face flickers with a flurry of emotions, the most prominent being apprehension, and it stops Liam in his tracks. He breaks the moment, not wanting to make Harry uncomfortable or scared, and gently kisses his forehead instead. He starts to pull him close so he can tuck his head under his chin as usual, but Harry fights him. His hand lands on Liam’s chest, pushing slightly and head refusing to be tucked. His face remains right in front of Liam’s, much closer than before and then his lips are there, on Liam’s, ghosting so soft and gentle, so unsure and tentative. Liam freezes for a moment, but then he barely presses his own back, sealing them together. He can smell Harry, his soap filling his senses. He feels the softness of the skin on his cheek under his hand and the sharpness of his jaw.

Moments later Harry pulls back, studying Liam’s face. His brows are together as he works through his own thoughts and Liam licks his lips, a faint taste of Harry still there that heats his belly. He fights for sanity and control though and pulls away more. He creates more distance to let Harry sort his mind out and he can see that it was mistake in the way Harry’s eyes become worried and overwhelmed. There is a fight to stay calm taking place.

“Har… we… it’s way too soon, ok. Don’t feel like…” he stammers out, unable to form a coherent sentence because he’s not entirely sure what it is he wants to say. He just wants Harry’s expression to change, to relax, to stop worrying. After a moment it does, instead he looks disappointed and relieved all at once as he nods.

“I know… I just wanted to try it, I guess. Since we were talking about it, but yeah… it’s too soon,” he agrees finally, sighing with resignation.

Liam tries to smile at him to reassure him and to make him believe that it would get better eventually. Liam needed to believe that as well.

“Look, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it, ok? I’m not leaving. I’m in this with you no matter what, alright?” Liam says firmly, fingers trailing through curls again and Harry’s eyes come back up to
his, searching for the truth. He relaxes a moment later and breathes out in a soft sigh.

This time when Liam leans forward and kisses his forehead and pulls him close. Harry goes willingly, tucking right in and holding on tightly.

“IT’s gonna be ok Haz. I promise,” Liam assures him. For once he feels confident in the words.
Chapter 20

6 Months

Days and weeks have a tendency to blend when they are repetitive. One day Liam looks up and it’s the beginning of August. Somehow May had given way to June and then to July. Each day much like the one before it.

Harry had continued to dutifully meet with his therapist twice a week, though they had started meeting at the doctor’s office for the last few weeks. No explanation is given for this change, but strangely no one asks either. Harry just asks Liam to drive him there one day and it becomes a new routine for them. Harry goes to therapy while Liam goes and does some shopping. Rinse and repeat.

Liam never asks him what he talks about with Dr. Howard. He doesn’t want to pry and he also feels very strongly that he heard enough while Harry was testifying. Harry doesn’t offer any information either, though he does continue to have nightmares. Thankfully, the frequency does start to decrease.

He gains a few pounds. It’s not enough to really notice unfortunately, and it’s nowhere near enough to have him be considered healthy in any way, but Harry seems to feel it’s enough to stop drinking the shakes. Eating remains an ongoing struggle, with some days being better than others.

Robin and Des had both gone back to work, but come to visit on the weekends. Gemma had started doing the same, as she finds it easier to stay in London during the week. Anne remained at the house however, but it felt normal now.

Various members of Harry’s family come to visit and Harry gets more comfortable with them again. He watches footie with his cousins and bakes for them. Liam’s family become regulars as well, popping around to help out where needed and checking in on them. Louis, Niall and Zayn had all been visiting with some frequency as well, and all of these houseguests served to break up the monotony a little.

They all come to help Harry clean out his London house when he finally makes the decision to just sell it. Most of his clothes were already out, but his furniture and other things were still there and it was surreal for him to actually see the stuff that had mattered so much to him with a new set of eyes. Most of it he ends up selling on Ebay and donates the money to charity. It’s something that puts his name back in the news again for a week or two, but then it quiets.

The world hadn’t forgotten him and the fandom still remained active. They were constantly sending letters and messages to Harry’s long forgotten social media accounts, but the media had moved on. He was becoming somewhat boring for them now since he was never seen in public.

Cleaning out his house gets Harry to start making decisions on other aspects of his life as well. Prior to his abduction, he had been working on a solo album, had signed a record deal and was set to take on the entertainment industry. The record company offers to let him just shelve things for now, indefinitely if need be, but he decides it would be unfair to make them wait for something that might never happen. He also cuts ties with his management and the rest of his team. He wants to let them move on and focus on their other projects and lives. It’s an emotional time for him, seeing something he had been so focused on being laid to rest. But he tells Liam he’s still not sure what
he’s planning for the future and he doesn’t want to burden anyone by making them wait for him.

Liam has no doubt that should Harry change his mind, they’d all come back in a heart beat. But it seemed that Harry was quietly leaving music behind. His passion for it had waned and instead he fills his time with other things like baking. Liam tries to talk to him about it, but Harry isn’t receptive and just shrugs, looking uncomfortable with the topic. So Liam drops it, knowing that there were things he would just have to accept.

So it is a shock for Liam, after Harry had essentially shut down his entire career, to find him sitting in Liam’s home recording studio in the middle of the night in late August. The summer heat has been bearing down, making the air outside stifling even during the night. It’s one of the worst heat waves that England has seen in decades. Liam wakes to an empty bed, sweaty skin sticking to the sheets. Even though he’s only wearing his pants, he still feels over dressed.

He rolls over and looks at the bathroom door, checking to see if the light is on and assuming that’s where Harry is, but he finds the door wide open and the room dark.

A trickle of nerves crawls over him as he gets up and heads out into the hallway. He spends a few minutes checking over the house until he finally finds Harry sitting behind the big board in the studio. He’s not touching anything, just sitting and staring into the vocal booth, face wistful.

“Haz?” Liam says carefully, not wanting to startle him.

Harry turns slowly, eyes still fixed in place for a long moment.

“Sorry. I came down for some water and somehow ended up in here,” he answers quietly, eyes going back to the booth and then around the room.

“You don’t have to apologize. You are welcome in here anytime you want. Use it if you like, I don’t mind,” Liam replies.

Harry is quiet for a few minutes. Then he takes a deep breath, the sound loud in the room, before standing and heading for the door.

“Let’s go back to bed,” he says as he passes Liam.

He doesn’t say anything about it in the coming days and Liam doesn’t ask. He figures that whatever Harry was doing in there was a personal mission and he would find out when Harry was ready for him to.

He disappears every night after that, tip toeing down to the recording studio. Liam creeps down after him and watches him slip in there, closing the door behind him. He curses his insistence on fully sound proofing the area because try as he might he can’t hear a thing through the door or wall.

Harry’s mood changes though, becoming lighter and more hopeful. Liam starts to get impatient wanting to know what Harry is up to. He finally finds out four weeks later when Harry suddenly rolls over in bed and looks at him with a strangely eager expression.

“I’ve been thinking,” he starts and Liam lifts one brow. With Harry Styles, that was never a good thing to hear. “Don’t look at me like that, it’s a good idea… I think.”
“Ok, hit me with it and I will decide if I think it’s a good idea or not myself,” Liam says carefully and Harry gives him a smirk. He sits up on his elbow and props his head on his hand.

It takes Liam a full five minutes to recover after he’s heard it and another five to get with the program and agree to help Harry pull off his scheme.

In the end, he’s just as excited about it.

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Two weeks later and they are on a plane. A private one Liam had insisted they charter because he didn’t think Harry flying commercial was a good idea just yet. He still wasn’t great with crowds and Liam just couldn’t trust the paparazzi not to ruin the entire thing.

Harry had done most of the rest of the planning, including calling certain people, swearing them to secrecy and setting everything up. Like Liam, everyone he had spoken to had been dubious at the beginning, but somehow Harry’s enthusiasm had rubbed off on them and they had all agreed. Despite the somewhat harebrained pretense it was.

The others were supposed to be meeting them there. Niall and Louis were already in LA and had been doing a lot of the ground work prior to Harry and Liam’s arrival. Now that everything was done, they just had to be in the right place at the right time.

Liam is frankly shocked they have managed to pull it off and that Harry convinced an entire group of people to help him do this. They have actually put the money and energy into creating this surprise and are doing it without even really questioning it.

Harry fidgets on the plane and then fidgets in the car on the way to the hotel. Anne had offered to come, Gemma too, but Harry had told them they didn’t need to. It wouldn’t be on the air for a few days anyway and he was very adamant about the cloak and dagger nature of the entire plan. He was worried enough about being spotted himself without adding his family in.

The next morning after they arrive, Harry and Liam confirm all the details with the producers and get ready. Harry looks so different, almost foreign in his blue jeans. They were ones that likely used to be skin tight, but were now more loose. He’s also wearing a white button down shirt with tiny red roses embroidered on it and his hair is pulled up into a bun, further enhancing his sharpened jaw and cheek bones. For the first time Liam truly sees how much more of a man he is now. Compared to the dimpled kid he first met so many years ago.

Harry notices him staring and frowns slightly. He adjusts his collar to cover the scars on his neck a little more, before pulling his sleeves down to cover the ones on his wrists.

“What?” He asks, looking down at his outfit. A pair of black and white Adidas trainers complete it, also foreign on Harry’s feet in comparison to the crazy boots he used to wear. “Do you think I should change?” He asks, looking unsure now, fidgeting and brows pulled together. Liam feels a deep pull of desire deep in his core that he now knows the name of and he walks up to Harry, sliding his arms around his tiny waist, and pulling him close.

“No, no, you look fine. You look good. It's just not gonna be the Harry people were used to,” Liam says, trying to sound reassuring while tucking an errant strand of hair behind Harry’s ear.

“I’m not the Harry I used to be anymore though,” Harry points out, one brow up.
“I know and that’s ok,” Liam assures him again, pulling him in for a tight hug and a wet kiss on his forehead to make him laugh. “Ok, we should get going.”

They meet Louis and Niall at the location they had scouted out for the purposes of being able to hide. It’s a pretty nondescript looking office building, but it has a courtyard out front that is surrounded by thick hedges, so they are able to be concealed from the road.

They all greet each other with warm hugs, laughing about Harry’s crazy idea, but also all agreeing that it was pretty awesome.

The producer texts about the car’s imminent arrival just minutes after the last member of the party arrives and they all wait just out of view, giggling like kids when they hear it pull up. The window goes down and a familiar voice calls out.

“Hey? Who am I picking up here? In all my years of doing Carpool Karaoke, I’ve never not known who my ride is. Now I’m here and I don’t even bloody see anyone,” James calls out, sounding genuinely confused and even slightly annoyed. Harry laughs quietly.

They wait a few more moments, dragging it out slightly to truly irritate the late show host, before Louis nods at Harry and steps out. He heads around the back of the car and hops in the back seat behind James.

“Louis! What the hell?” James says, sounding shocked but happy and he gets even louder when Niall steps out next. He hops in the front seat right next to James, greeting him with a handshake and a warm hello as though it was entirely normal that he was getting in the car.

At this point they all know that James is starting to catch on and they can hear it in his voice, especially when Liam rounds the corner, leaving Harry grinning behind the bushes.

“LIAM! Holy shit!” James yells out, issuing the first of what was likely to become several curses that would have to be beeped out in post-production.

Liam gets in the back seat, sitting right behind Niall for a moment and he watches James’ eyes as they flick between Liam and back out the window, anticipation and hope all across his face. But he doesn’t start to break down fully until Liam slides over to the centre, opening up his seat. Suddenly James is out of the car at rocket speed, flying by the front of it and tripping over his own feet just as Harry reveals himself. He is immediately engulfed in a hug by his friend, damn near knocking him off his feet. When they watch it in a few days, the audience reaction has been added in and the sound is damn near deafening, but in the moment all they hear is James’ bursting emotion. Tears flow down his face as he laughs and swings Harry around, making Harry laugh loudly as well.

When they finally stop moving and dancing, James holds Harry at arms length, taking him in from head to toe. He looks a bit surprised at his outfit choice as well, but doesn’t say anything. Instead he turns to stare all of them down.

“Oh, who’s bloody idea was this?” He asks loudly, still holding Harry’s arms but staring at Niall accusingly.

Harry awkwardly lifts his arm, waving his hand slightly and laughing and James laughs again. He yanks Harry in for another hug, while the cameramen follows the entire ordeal closely.
When he lets Harry go again, he shakes his head in disbelief and wipes his eyes. Harry then nods towards the car.

“Let’s go for a ride, yeah?” He asks and James laughs, glancing towards the car himself.

“Not sure I can drive right now, but yeah let’s go,” he replies, starting towards the car with one arm around Harry’s shoulders. Liam catches him looking at Harry’s scars and he also notices his bone thin arms, but he keeps his face clear of reaction. No doubt a learned trait from being on TV for so long.

Rather than heading to the drivers seat or even making Niall move, James suddenly seems to decide he wants to be close to Harry. He still seems to be in shock and disbelief, so he just blindly follows him to the backseat. Louis glances at Liam and knows that of the two of them Liam was not going to be the one leaving Harry, so he jumps out and takes the drivers seat. Liam quickly slides over so Harry can get in the middle and James heartily thanks him while sliding in on the other side. He then takes Harry’s hand and holds it tightly.

“Right boys, you got me. You got me really good this time. So where are we going?” He asks, buckling his seatbelt and turning back to Harry again. James’ eyes once again go over his face, noting the changes and absorbing every detail.

“Hold on, we’re just waiting on someone else,” Louis says, adjusting the seat slightly. James spins and looks at him confused. Seconds later, Liam’s door opens and he jumps out quickly to let Zayn get past him into the back row of seats.

James’ jaw drops as Zayn just nods at him, sitting back and putting his seatbelt on. Liam gets resettled in front of him and then they all just look at James with smug expressions, knowing they had truly pulled it off.

“Right, let’s get this show on the road,” Niall drawls out, sliding his sunglasses on as Louis puts the car into gear.

James turns and stares at him in disbelief for a moment before barking out a loud laugh and reaching back to shake Zayn’s hand.

“Good to see you mate! This is amazing, truly amazing. Thank you all for this!” James says with a slightly thick throat. His eyes land back on Harry who just smirks at him. He seems to remember a moment later that they were supposed to be doing karaoke and he leans forward to talk loudly in Niall’s ear. “Have we got any tunes?”

Louis pulls his phone out of his pocket. It’s already set up with a cord to be plugged in and a playlist carefully selected by Harry.

“Here we go. I’ve got a little something,” he says as he hands it over to Niall. James laughs and shakes his head.

The car fills with the opening notes of the Rolling Stones’ Satisfaction and they all start singing loudly, laughing intermittently.

They had debated long and hard about just doing all One Direction music, but they had eventually agreed that was their past and this little spectacle was more about the future. So instead, the playlist is filled with a fun mix of classic rock and some upbeat songs from Ed Sheeran, the Arctic
Monkeys and other favorites of Harry. All of whom had been quite willing to let their music be used on the show when they found out who was asking.

They did decide to add just one of their One Direction songs though, their first one, because it made them laugh in a full circle kind of way. So when the opening notes of What Makes You Beautiful comes on, no one is surprised when James is the most excited and the loudest singer. His arm goes around Harry’s shoulder as he pulls him in to a drunken type of swaying dance. Harry just laughs while Liam sits and enjoys seeing true joy on his face again. It’s actually nice to know he can stare at Harry with open affection, since the world already knew the truth about his feelings anyway. So he does, catching James’ eye now and again, a conspiratorial wink coming his way and he feels strangely lighter. It was like that promise he made to Harry all those months ago that everything would be ok eventually was actually coming true.

Zayn soon starts really getting into the karaoke, singing his part loudly and gesturing wildly with his arms. Harry’s eyes meet Liam’s as the two of them laugh, a flutter of happiness filling Liam’s core.

The song ends as they pull up to their first destination on the itinerary they had planned out. They knew most of what they did would end up being cut, but it wasn’t just about being on TV. It was also meant as a fun day for six friends to get together and enjoy each other’s company for the first time in far too long.

Harry’s smile is wistful as they get out at the little bakery, the same bakery Liam and Louis had visited the day Dunkirk came out. They all stand in a line in front of it. All of them reminiscing except James, who just looks confused.

“What’s this place then? I’ve never seen it before?”

“This is my favorite bakery in LA,” Harry replies. “I haven’t been in forever,” he adds more quietly, eyes still on the pale pink awning announcing the name Sugar Cakes.

“Wow, I had forgotten about your obsession with this place. I haven’t had one of those sweet buns in forever,” Zayn adds, laughing quietly.

“Harry used to bring us these little Portuguese sweet buns from this place every day when we were in LA,” Louis fills James in, since no one else was making the effort to do so. “It became sort of a tradition for a few years.”

“I found it my first time in LA. I was exploring on my own, which I got into trouble for later,” Harry laughs. “But it quickly became my fave place and I liked to bring something to the studio or whatever to share.”

“I love that!” James exclaims, hurrying forward to open the door for the rest of them as they follow behind him more slowly. “It smells amazing. I must say.”

Harry and Liam are the last to enter. Liam watches him quietly as he looks around the shop, noting the changes and the things that have stayed the same. He looks forlorn, as though seeing a part of himself, a person he used to be vanishing away and being lost in the sea of happier memories that he had trouble connecting with nowadays. Liam immediately wants to go back to the car where Harry had been happy and joyful. He wants to take the sadness away again, but the best he can do in the moment is to stay close to him, slide an arm around his shoulders and smile at him reassuringly. He knows some of the others are watching, but no one says anything.
Harry does manage to school his face back to happiness when James turns towards him asking him a ton of questions about the selection and he grins when the owner of the shop comes out from the back and immediately recognizes him. She gives him a big hug and for one heart stopping moment she touches the scars on his neck and Harry freezes. She says nothing, but she gives him a sad look, nodding quietly before smiling and kissing his cheek. She hurries back behind the counter to quickly box up a huge selection of treats and cups of coffee that she gives them all on the house. Liam takes Harry’s hand and feels the slight tremor there. He knows she meant nothing bad by her acknowledgment of the scars, but it was still hard on Harry. A terrible reminder that he would wear for the rest of his life.

They hadn’t planned on staying in the shop for long, knowing that they didn’t have much time, but they feel bad leaving so quickly all the same. So they thankfully accept the gifts from the elderly owner and Liam makes sure to drop several hundred dollars into the tip jar when she’s not looking. Harry throws him a grateful look and then they are back out in the car, stuffing their faces as they continue on. Harry is sandwiched in the middle again, laughing quietly as James moans in pleasure with each bite.

“My God, these things are bloody heaven. Much better than when we went through the McDonald’s drive through” James exclaims, taking another huge bite of a sweet bun. Harry laughs and pops a piece of his own into his mouth. “Right boys, where next?"

“It’s a surprise,” Louis quips, sipping his coffee and James huffs a frustrated laugh.

“Fine, talk to me. What are you all up to anyway? I haven’t talked to any of you in forever,” he retorts, turning around to Zayn first. “What about you Zayn? Your last album is a year old yeah? You working on anything new?”

Liam hears Zayn laugh quietly, sipping his own coffee loudly before replying.

“Yeah. I mean, I work on stuff, but I have no deadlines. It is what it is and when I have something done, I’ll release it,” he replies cryptically and Niall laughs.

“Always the dark and emo one Zayn. Fine, I’ll accept the answer that you are working on stuff, for now” James replies in a slightly threatening tone, turning forward to go after Niall next.

“Niall! What about you? How goes the golf game?”

Harry leans against Liam who responds by sliding an arm around his shoulders as Niall starts talking about his progress in improving his game. Talking at length about some new club he had gotten that was all scientific and weighted and fancy. It goes on long enough that Louis starts pretending to snore loudly and they all laugh.

“Now now Louis, he’s excited about his new putter,” James points out, patting Niall on the shoulder. “Does this mean the music career is on hold though? Cuz I would be disappointed if that were the case.”

“No, no it’s not,” Niall answers, still giving Louis a faux offended look. “And you be careful or I’ll really show you what I can do with a golf club… wait that didn’t come out right…”

Louis barks out a loud laugh, hand slapping the steering wheel.

“Well that took a turn!” James laughs. “Moving on! Ok Louis, since you scoffed at Niall’s new toy,
what the hell have you been up to?”

“Bein’ a dad mostly. I’ve been doing some writing, been working with Steve Aoki again, but you know, family focused. My priorities have been rearranged,” he replies easily, signaling to turn left and grumbling about the driver in front of him turning too slowly.

“Good, I’m glad to hear that. I think we’ve all got a reminder that we need to focus on what’s most important these last few months,” James replies. He turns to smile gently at Harry before suddenly moving forward and pulling Harry into a tight hug, gripping onto him and squishing their cheeks together. “Harold my dear, how are things going?” He asks carefully, still holding onto Harry who starts to laugh softly. He had tensed up when James first grabbed him, which earned the host a stern look from Liam.

Harry carefully extricates himself slightly, still leaning on James and grinning at him, but not being pulled in as much. James lets him, realizing that he made a mistake and he throws Harry an apologetic look.

“Good, just, day by day. I’m enjoying spending time with loved ones and just seeing what’s new out there,” Harry answers. “Been catching up on Netflix and baking a lot.”

“Baking! And you didn’t bring me any samples? I call foul!” James hollers out, looking grossly offended. “Look at me, clearly I’m partial to a baked good or two, come on now. Why would you hold out on me?”

Harry laughs and shakes his head.

“My deepest apologies. I will never make such a mistake again,” he replies in a serious tone before laughing again.

“What’s next Harry? Do you have future plans?” James asks. This gets him another look from Liam, but he doesn’t see it. He is instead focused entirely on Harry who just shrugs slightly.

“I don’t know. It’s just wait and see. I’ll figure it out when I need to, but for now it’s good to do this. I’ve missed this,” he says wistfully and James appears emotional for a moment.

“Yes, this has been amazing. Thank you all for this. I have missed you little bastards you know,” he laughs. “And Niall, don’t think I won’t pull out tattoo roulette again. I’ve got the perfect design for you.”

Niall’s head swings around and he stares at James alarmed, making the other man laugh.

“Don’t even think about it Corden. You’d have to open a box too and I can assure you that I will make it even worse for you,” Niall promises darkly and they all laugh.

“I think I should be allowed to pass since I got one last time,” Harry points out.

“Only if you bake me something,” James bargains and Harry laughs and nods.

“Fine, I think I can agree to that.”

“Right! Enough of that. Let’s get the music going again,” Louis announces, turning the volume up and hitting play again. Move Bitch by Ludacris blasts out of the speakers and they all laugh and start singing, each taking turns. They all know it will never make it to air, there would be way too much beeping of curse words, but it makes them all double over laughing.
They finish most of the pastries on their way to Harry’s favorite park where they spend a half hour playing hide and seek in the trees at Louis’ insistence. The cameramen scampers along behind them trying to get it all on film before Liam notices that Harry is tiring and they pile back into the car.

The rest of the tour is spent in the car, reminiscing and seeing the sights. They stop by Louis’ house, another part that won’t make it to air, but they all agree they need a chance to use the bathroom and stretch their legs.

The final stop is the studio where James’ show is taped. They make him believe that they are leaving and won’t see him again before their flights to London or wherever, but in fact they fully planned on being back at the studio in three days when the Carpool Karaoke segment was to air because Harry had one more big surprise up his sleeve.

They crash early that night. Harry is exhausted, but happy. They are up early the next day to meet with the guys and the rest of the team that would help pull off the second part of their surprise. When everything is set by the end of the day, Liam offers to take Harry to whatever restaurant he wanted for dinner, but he declines.

While he was ok exploring LA in the safety of the car or with a small group, he seemed apprehensive of the city, especially at night. It’s tough for Liam to see. Harry used to love LA and would willingly explore it all the time, but now he would rather just stay in the hotel room until they had to be back at the studio. As usual, Liam gives in and they order room service and Louis, Zayn and Niall all come and pile into the room with them. It’s almost like when Harry first came home, sitting around eating junk food and watching bad TV.

When the day of the second surprise finally arrives, Harry’s nerves are palpable and Liam does his best to calm him. He tells him it will be alright and that he can alway change his mind, but Harry declares he’s determined to go through with it.

The surprise was going to take place during the filming of the show in the early evening, but they make sure to arrive after filming has already started to avoid being seen by any fans outside. The producer who had helped set everything up quickly guides them to a green room that isn’t used on the show. It’s less decorated than the ones usually seen when James introduces his guests, with just a few couches and a vanity type table with lights to check your appearance.

Harry had gone with a pair of black skinny jeans that, like the blue jeans, were now loose on him and a plain white t-shirt. He had brought a hoodie with him, but seemed weirdly determined to leave it off in order to show the damage on his arms and neck. To let the world see what he had become. Liam suspected this was something he had discussed with his therapist, but he was worried that Harry might be pushing himself too much. He’s also left his hair down, longer than it ever was back in the day, but thinner, damaged and less what people were used to seeing on him. He keeps nervously tucking it behind his ears as they wait.

They watch the filming on the TV in silence. Harry sits next to Liam on the couch with his knee bouncing, hands knitting themselves together and fidgeting constantly. The Carpool Karaoke segment is better than Liam had expected it would be. He had been growing increasingly nervous about how it would be edited together and that it wouldn’t be tasteful or kind to Harry, but he is pleasantly surprised with the results. The game of hide and seek in the park is quite funny, they can hear the audience laughing all the way back in the green room and it only gets louder when they see Niall trip and fall flat on his face while running to find a spot to hide, Louis not far behind him.
It’s especially funny to those in the room who had no idea he had fallen because he hadn’t told anyone in embarrassment.

“I had hoped they wouldn’t include that,” Niall grumbles from the couch and Louis laughs louder.

“I did wonder how you got that grass stain,” Zayn says in a deadpan voice.

“There were a lot of bloody tree roots sticking out of the ground.” Niall defends himself hotly. “And I was being chased. I have a bad knee, have some damn sympathy.”

Harry snorts next to Liam and laughs quietly, shaking his head slowly at Niall who crosses his arms over his chest and pouts.

The guests that night are Jennifer Lawrence, Emma Stone and Kristen Wiig. All of whom were doing promotion for their new movie together. James is his usual self, poking fun and getting them all up to learn a new popular dance craze that had shown up on YouTube. They all laugh and enjoy it, but Liam can feel Harry getting more nervous the closer they get to when they will be leaving this room.

When James breaks for the commercial there is knock on the door, a young woman wearing a headset pokes her head in and smiles gently at them all.

“All set? We’re gonna have you head out and get in position now. We’ve got the curtain pulled so no one will see just yet.”

Her eyes land on Harry and he stares at her wide eyed for a long moment before nodding once nervously. He wipes his sweaty hands on his jeans and stands up. Liam follows and stays close and isn’t surprised when Harry’s hand finds his, leaning slightly on him as they follow the woman down a dim concrete hallway and out into the dark curtained space. Harry hangs back while the others get in position. His eyes sweep around taking it all in and Liam can see the moment he settles, that he absorbs it and prepares himself. He’d seen it a thousand times before. This was always where Harry belonged and where he was born to be. This time it was all about him, his own voice, his own words and there was something strangely emotional about that. Liam feels lucky to be able to see it first hand. Especially since it was probably the last time.

A moment later, the rest of the musicians that Louis had found come in. All of them stare at Harry a little wide-eyed as they realize just who they were working with. It had all been done under deep stealth. Only the music had been shared with them, but no names, no lyrics, no nothing. Just a plan on how it was to be done.

The crowd starts to cheer again, the designated space for the commercial coming to an end and the producer amps them up as the lights come back up on the other side of the curtain. Then James’ voice fills the space.

“So, I’ve just been informed that we have a performer tonight,” he blurts out, sounding equal parts stunned and perplexed. “Did you know that Reggie?”

“I didn’t James. Though I had noticed that we still had some time left. I was a little concerned,” the musician replies dryly and James laughs. “But it’s kinda exciting. We don’t know who it is?”

“No!” James replies quickly, voice sharp. “But I guess we are about to find out! So here we are folks, our mystery performer!”
With that the lights outside the curtain go dark again and the drummer starts up. The heavy percussion shakes the floor under Liam’s feet, making him feel alive again. It’s something he had missed for a long time.

The curtain opens just at the moment Harry moves to the microphone, alone in the centre. Liam and Zayn are off to one side, Louis and Niall on the other. They were only backup singers tonight, just there to support Harry in a song he had written and that he had agonized over, but it had blown Liam away the first time he heard it.

Upon seeing Harry, the crowd loses it’s collective shit and starts screaming, but they quiet enough to be able to hear him. Liam can see James standing with mouth and eyes wide open as he realizes what’s happening. The girls stand as well, all of them glancing at each other and then back at Harry in shock.

“First things first, I’mma say all the words inside my head. I’m fired up and tired of the way that things have been, ooh ooh, the way that things have been, oh, oooh” Harry sings. His voice is crisp and clear, his body quirking in time with the beat. One hand quickly swipes his hair away from his face, his eyes intense as he stares out at the crowd. “Second thing second, don’t you tell me what you think that I can be, I’m the one at the sail, I’m the master of my sea, oh oooh, the master of my sea, oh oooh.”

Liam moves quickly and joins in for the stanza leading into the chorus. The words are fast, clipped, rhythmic and short. He and Harry had to practice a lot to get it right and he prays they don’t mess up this time, of all times.

“I was broken from a young age, taking my soul into the masses, write down my poems for the few, that looked at me took to me, feeling me, singing from heart ache from the pain, take up my message from the veins, speaking my lesson from the brain, seeing the beauty through the…” they sing together, getting through it perfectly. The lights come up from the floor as the music pulls out a long dramatic note, electric and alive. Harry leans back, body fluid and looking almost inhuman in the strobe light from below before he suddenly rockets forward back to the microphone. His hair flies over his face as he screams into it.

“PAIN! You made me a, you made me a believer, believer,” he fills the space with his voice. Liam and Zayn are right along with him, while Niall and Louis add backing words behind him as well. “PAIN! You break me down, you build me up, believer, believer!”

“Paaaainnn,” Louis and Niall sing before Harry continues.

“I let the bullets fly, oh let them rain, my luck, my love, my God, they came from…PAIN! You made me a, you made me a believer, believer!” Harry, Liam and Zayn come back in.

Harry moves with each beat. His body jolting, skin and bones, but strangely powerful for the first time since before he disappeared. Liam can see how much this song is him retaking control over himself, his life, his voice, his own words. He can see how transfixed the crowd is now, their eyes stuck on Harry like glue while he sings the second verse.

“Third things third, send a prayer to the ones up above,” Harry points to the ceiling as he sings, veins in his hand standing out. “All the hate that you’ve heard has turned your spirit to a dove, oh oooh, your spirit up above, oh oooh.”
“I was choking in the crowd, living my brain up in the cloud, falling like ashes to the ground, hoping my feelings, they would drown, but they never did, ever lived, ebning and flowing, inhibited, limited, till it broke up and it rained down, it rained down, like,” Harry and Liam sing together again. Liam almost feels light headed at the end, the speed of it leaving no room for breath, but the punching of the words leaving a mark.

They go into the chorus again, the lights now flickering rapidly, making Harry’s movements even more pronounced as he leans even further back. One leg comes up and his arms are spread while his head is tilted back with his hair falling like a curtain. Then he’s hurtling towards the microphone again, hands grabbing it just in time and his face and throat tense as he puts all of his energy into it.

“PAIN! You made me a, you made me a believer, believer… PAIN! You break me down, you built me up, believer, believer, I let the bullets fly, oh let them rain, my luck, my love, my God, they came from…”

“Paaainn.” Louis and Niall sing between lines, both barely visible like Liam and Zayn, but still present.

“PAIN! You made me a, you made me a believer, believer,” Harry finishes the chorus and wobbles slightly and flash of worry goes through Liam. He had improved physically, but was still nowhere near healthy. He still tired easily, got dizzy, was painfully thin and he had been pushing himself a lot to practice for this moment. Harry seems to get control again a moment later, leaning into the microphone to belt out the last verse and Liam jumps in again as they had rehearsed.

“Last things last, by the grace of the fire and the flames, you’re the face of the future, the blood in my veins, oh ooooh, the blood in my veins, oh ooooh,” Harry sings, glancing back at Liam for one meaningful moment before going into the stanza. “But they never did, ever lived, ebning and flowing, inhibited, limited, till it broke up and it rained down, it rained down, like…”

He leans forward this time, hands still holding the microphone as his head drops between them. His shoulder blades poke out as he scrunches down and then back up again. His eyes are closed tight and his skin is shiny with sweat from the effort.

“PAIN! You made me a, you made me a believer, believer… PAIN! You break me down, you built me up, believer, believer… Pain, I let the bullets fly, oh let them rain, my luck, my love, my God they came from… PAIN! You made me a, you made me a believer, believer.”

The song ends in an almost abrupt way, much the same as it had begun with the heavy percussion. The lights dim quickly, giving Liam the opportunity to hurry forward before Harry crumples to the stage. He gets his arms around him and keeps him on his feet. He lets Harry lean heavily on him, one hand gripping Liam, the other gripping the microphone stand as a crutch. The other three hurry over as well, offering hands and looking concerned.

They manage to get him standing well enough, all of them in a line as though this was intentional like a group bow versus keeping Harry vertical. He rallies enough energy to keep his face up, smiling softly at the camera and the crowd. James comes hurrying over, arms out to take them all into a group hug, grinning from ear to ear, but his eyes belie the fact that he saw Harry collapsing. His worry is clear the second his back is turned to the camera. He seems to assess the situation quickly, doing the group hug, but eyes firmly on Harry before he turns around and smiles at the crowd, clapping along with them.

“I’m blown away right now, absolutely blown away. I think we need a break to recover, so we will
be right back!” He announces before the stage lights cut again. The crowd keeps cheering, but the
curtain closes rapidly and the second the audience can’t see him anymore, Harrys legs give out.
Liam carefully lowers him to the stage, intending to just let him sit, but Harry flops completely,
lying on his back. One shaky hand comes up to cover his eyes as he breathes hard.
Liam kneels next to him. The rest of them crowd around, bending over with faces full of worry.

“Haz? You ok? What’s going on?” Liam asks carefully, one hand pushing Harry’s hair back, the
other rubbing his arm. Harry drops the hand from over his eyes.

“I’m ok,” he says quietly, voice wobbly. Kristen, Emma and Jennifer all come through the curtain
looking excited for a split second until they see Harry lying on the floor.

“Oh my God, is he ok?” Kristen asks, hurrying forward to kneel on Harry’s other side.

“I’m ok…” Harry answers again, trying to sound stronger, but failing. “I just got really dizzy. I
needed to lie down for a minute.”

“They’ve got a medic on the way,” James says from above Liam, several producers now coming
into the space.

“No, no, I don’t need…” Harry starts but is cut off by the need to breathe again for a moment. “I
don’t need a medic, just a minute.”

Liam worries about the slightly wheezy sound that was coming from his chest. His ribs are
pumping quickly as he tries to pull in a deep breath. Harry’s asthma had been dormant for a while,
but that didn’t mean it couldn’t rear it’s ugly head when they least expected it.

The commercial break comes to an end quickly and James hurries out to finish off the show,
crowing about how wonderful Harry was and what a spectacular surprise it was. Niall and Louis go
out to stand as the representatives, but they all know people will be wondering where in hell Harry
is.

Reggie plays out the show as the medic comes onto the stage. She takes one look at Harry before
immediately strapping an oxygen mask on his face and instructing him to focus on controlling his
breathing if he can. She checks his blood pressure and heart rate as well, brows knitting together at
his wasted body, but she doesn’t comment on it.

“Your blood pressure is really low and you appear to be dehydrated. When did you last eat or drink
something?” She asks him. Harry considers it for a moment, appearing unable to even remember.

“This morning, he had tea and some toast,” Liam supplies. He realizes with horror that Harry
hadn’t eaten or drank anything since that point and with all of the chaos involving this
performance, he had failed to monitor that fact. He feels guilty immediately, knowing it was up to
him to take care of Harry and to watch over him. He had failed.

“Oh, considering your general physical condition, that is not enough Harry,” the medic gently
chastises him, listening to his breathing for a moment. “You are sounding wheezy. Any history of
breathing problems or underlying conditions?”

“He has asthma,” Liam supplies again, trying to remember if they had his puffer with them at the
studio or if they had left it at the hotel. He feels guilty again.
“Ok, let’s get you over to the hospital, get you checked over properly. I don’t think you are having an asthma attack, but you do need fluids and some supplements,” she decides.

“No ambulance,” Harry tells her. He moves the oxygen mask, which she immediately presses back onto his face.

“Fine, is there a car ready and available right now?” She asks, looking at the assembled crowd and James immediately jumps in.

“Yup, I can drive him. I’m right outside. I’ll grab my keys from my office and meet you out there in a minute,” he says quickly, already hurrying off.

Liam doesn’t hesitate. He just quickly crouches, sliding his arms under Harry’s back and legs to lift him and carry him. The medic looks slightly stunned by this, but quickly collects her bag and the oxygen to carry alongside them. Niall and Louis hover close to help.

Harry isn’t heavy by any stretch, but he’s also not that light and Liam begins to regret this choice halfway there, but he persists. He moves fast to avoid failing Harry any more today and they find James standing outside by his running SUV as promised, back door already open with him beside it.

Liam guides Harry into the back. He allows him to lie down on the seat, but sits himself so Harry’s head is on his lap. His hand brushes through his hair gently as Harry continued to pant breathlessly. The medic loads the bag and oxygen in and jumps in the front seat, turning around almost immediately to watch over him while James gets in the drivers seat. They peel out of the parking lot while Louis, Zayn and Niall get in Kristen’s car with her to follow.

The ride is quiet, but tense. James turns into a Nascar driver in short order, hurrying them around traffic and laying on the horn several times.

Harry does his best to regulate his breathing, eyes opening once to look up at Liam with worry. Liam tries to comfort him as best he can, whispering that he’s going to be fine and combing his fingers through his hair.

Their arrival is greeted much the same as the other two times they’d been to a hospital in the last few months with Harry being whisked off to be checked and treated while Liam lamely waits in the hall outside the door. James starts pacing immediately, ruffling his own hair into a mess and dropping his jacket onto a chair.

“While I very much appreciate what he wanted to do tonight, doing so at the risk of his own health was not smart,” he points out not long after they arrive, sounding breathless in his worry.

“It’s partly my fault,” Liam says quietly. “I’m supposed to keep an eye on him and make sure he’s eating. I didn’t keep track today.”

“He’s still not well Liam. You can’t blame yourself for that. I do understand that he wants to move on, to get back out there again, but he might have wanted to give himself a little more time,” James points out, stopping next to Liam. “Though selfishly I’m still glad he did this, that you all did, because I have missed him. It’s been so good to see him, but I would never want it to have this result.”

“He didn’t know this was going to happen James,” Liam points out, because Harry didn’t. He’s
been doing well. He’d been feeling good, had more energy, was still going for walks every day and his mood had been much improved. But Liam should have known, should have said something. He should have reminded him that even though he felt better, he was still not one hundred percent and had a long way to go. “He was determined to do this. He was so excited and it just seemed like he had to do it. I didn’t even think to stop him or delay him on it.”

James turns to look at Liam and puts a hand on his shoulder a moment later.

“Don’t blame yourself. I totally get why you would not even consider getting in the way of something that he wanted to do that would make him happy. I think everyone can agree that we all want nothing more than for Harry to be happy again,” he says gently and Liam nods. That he could agree with. “Besides, I’m sure he’s going to be fine. A little IV fluids and some rest and he’ll be back on track.”

The door opens and the doctor steps out just as the others arrive and crowd around. They all stare at the older man in the white coat while Liam tries to see around him to Harry. He’s laid out on the stretcher, oxygen mask still on his face, IV now in his hand and various monitors and leads hooked up to him. He does look a little better and more alert as his eyes meet Liam’s.

“He’s alright, just over extended himself,” the doctor tells them gently. “A few days rest, lots of fluids and some regular meals and he will feel better.”

There is a collective sigh of relief. Liam darts around the doctor to get to Harry’s side, taking his hand and squeezing it gently.

“Jesus Haz. You know how to scare the shit out me don’t you,” he jokes playfully to lighten his own tension and Harry shrugs and smirks at him from behind the mask.

“Gotta keep you on your toes,” he deadpans and Liam laughs.

The rest of them pile into the room, even Kristen who shakes her head slowly at him in exasperation.

“Harold, while I appreciate all the effort that went into these last few days, I would ask that you not risk yourself on my behalf ever again, alright?” James scolds him, squeezing his arm gently.

Harry snorts, flicking a hand at him.

“Fine, I’ll do it for Fallon next time,” he retorts and James laughs.

“God I’ve missed you,” James says a moment later, face filling with emotion. “Thank you. I do mean it. The song was amazing and it’s just been so fucking good to see you.”

Harry nods and smiles at him softly.

They all settle in the room, finding chairs, talking and laughing. This earns them some hard looks from the hospital staff, but without a proper room to move Harry to and with no reason to since they didn’t intend to keep him long, they were forced to stay in the emergency department. They get recognized. Liam notices a group of women staring in the window in awe for a moment before a nurse chases them away. She returns to pull the curtain closed, but he knows it’s too late and it will be on social media by now.
He decides to worry about that tomorrow. He knows already that Harry’s appearance on the show, the song and then his sudden disappearance will get tongues wagging.

When Harry’s vitals are finally stable they let him leave. The ride back to the hotel is decidedly less Grand Theft Auto. Harry sits up in the back, leaning on Liam with his head on his shoulder, yawning intermittently. 

It takes approximately twenty minutes to get James to stop hugging Harry and begging him to come stay at his place in L.A. Harry politely declines, stating that they were leaving for London tomorrow and their stuff was already upstairs in the hotel. He does promise to keep in touch however and that seems to mollify the older man somewhat.

They stumble into the room and almost immediately Harry is horizontal on the bed, snoring loudly. Liam has to undress him, tucking him under the covers before stripping down to his pants himself and joining him. He debates on putting pajamas on Harry, worried that he might not feel comfortable in just his underwear and a t-shirt. But with him lying like a dead weight on the bed, Liam finds he just doesn’t have the energy. So he tucks them both in and pulls Harry close, happy as always to feel him near. His warmth and weight are a solid presence giving him comfort and he’s unconscious himself only a few minutes later.
Chapter 21

7 Months

The trip back to London is less insane than Liam had been predicting. It turns out the paps still thought Harry was in the hospital and were camped out there, missing them going through the airport entirely. Of course word gets out while they are in the air and the press are waiting at Heathrow when they land. Security is kind and helpful though, and escorts them rapidly to the waiting cars outside.

Overall the reaction to Harry’s appearance on James Corden is being met very positively. The fandom goes out of its mind at having all five of them back together again. They lose their shit a second time because Harry had done a solo song, something that had been talked about and heavily anticipated throughout 2016. A lot of questions had been raised while he was gone about whether he had recorded any music before he went missing and no definitive answers had ever gotten out. Harry never talks about it and Liam doesn’t ask. He’s just glad that his former manager and record company hadn’t felt it necessary to release a posthumous album because he knows Harry would be pretty pissed now.

The girls who had seen him in the hospital had of course been telling their story all over the place. Louis quickly sets the record straight, stating on Twitter that Harry is fine, just a little dehydrated and grateful for the support.

Strangely, when they get back to London things just go back to as they were prior to Harry’s grand scheme. Anne comes back to stay at the house, Gemma and Robin visit on weekends and Des comes every chance he gets. Harry bakes and they watch a lot of Netflix. It’s all as though LA and Corden didn’t even happen. No one in his family acknowledges it publicly, at least not anyone in the house, though Liam knows Louis, Niall and Zayn have all been battered with questions. They don’t really have answers though as to why Harry did it and what he was planning in the future. No one knew that except Harry and he wasn’t exactly being upfront about it.

He stops going down to the studio in the middle of the night and just seems to relax. It’s as though some strange weight has been removed from his shoulders.

Two weeks after they get back from LA, Harry and Liam are in bed watching some late night TV. Harry is flopped on Liam’s shoulder and an advertisement for the movie starring Kristen, Jennifer and Emma comes on, making Harry sit up slightly.

“I’d like to see that, I think,” he says idly, voice curious and relaxed at once.

“Yeah?” Liam asks in much the same manner. “We could go see it tomorrow night if you want. I think the theatre in Woking is playing it right now.”

They hadn’t really done much outside the house aside from the foray to LA and the twice weekly trips to the therapist. Harry had expressed some trepidation about being recognized and having to deal with people and so Liam hadn’t really asked or pushed it. At the same time, he was worried both of them were turning into hermits. This seemed a good way to toe the water.

Harry starts a little from the suggestion and Liam waits to see how he will react. He assumes the idea will be shut down, but instead Harry snorts a quick laugh a moment later.
“Are you asking me on a date Liam?” He asks. He laughs again and sits up to look at Liam, smirk on his lips.

This brings Liam up short. That hadn’t been his intention, but he could see how it might look that way.

“No… I wasn’t. You just said you wanted to see it is all,” he says quickly, waving his hand at the TV and Harry laughs again. He drops his chin and lifts his brow.

“The correct answer to my question was ‘yes’ Liam,” he says seriously. “And sure, I’ll go on a date with you. It’ll be fun.”

With that he settles back down on Liam’s shoulder, leaving the other man flummoxed and then amused.

“Well then, glad to hear it. Be ready at 6,” he deadpans and Harry snorts again.

“Are you going to try any moves on me? You know, stretching your arms in the air and casually putting one round my shoulders?” He laughs and Liam hums in consideration.

“Thought I’d try the old reaching for the popcorn at the same time and brushing hands thing first. See how that went and then go from there.”

Harry barks a laugh at that.

“Might work. Just depends on how charming I find you,” he replies a moment later.

“Ohh, it’s like that is it. What if I don’t find you charming enough to try any moves?” Liam asks seriously and Harry sits up again. His brows are pulled together in an attempt at a frown, but the smirk on his lips gives him away.

“As if! I’m very charming. I’ve been told so many times. You won’t be able to resist me,” Harry replies hotly and Liam laughs.

“Yes true, I’m already charmed by you. It’s a lost cause trying to resist.”

“Exactly,” Harry confirms, head going down on Liam’s shoulder again, both of them laughing softly.

Anne is non-plussed by their plans the next day. She eyes Harry warily, worried about him going into a public place and what his reaction might be, but he assures her that he will be with Liam so he will be fine.

The day passes slowly and Liam starts to feel nervous as it goes on. It’s as though he really is going on a first date with Harry. They have already lived a lifetime of experiences together, but this was new for them. It was a step, a move in a direction they had acknowledged, but not pursued very much yet. He also worries that Harry was just kidding about it being a date and he’s putting too much stock into it. After all, it still felt like maybe it was too soon.

At 6:00, with the two of them dressed similarly in jeans, trainers and hoodies they head out and Harry’s nerves become palpable in the car. The movie was several weeks old, so it was unlikely
there would be many people in the theatre and they had chosen a Monday night for the early showing. But no matter what there would be other people there, people who would very likely recognize one or both of them. They hadn’t discussed what they would do if fans approached them, but Liam fully intended to head them off and ask them politely to let Harry be.

The theatre itself is fairly new with multiple screens inside. There is a small crowd of people outside milling around, meeting friends and lining up to get in to buy tickets. He finds a parking spot in a darker area and glances over at Harry who is watching the people with wide, frightened eyes.

“Hey, we don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” Liam points out softly and Harry turns to stare at him.

“No, no, it’s ok. I want to. There’s just a lot more people than I thought there would be,” he admits, voice a tad wobbly.

“Yeah, I think there’s a new superhero one out. It just came out last Friday,” Liam says with a sigh. In all his careful planning he’d forgotten about that factor. “I could go buy the tickets and come back and get you. I’m sure there is a side door we can go in and someone I can ask,” he offers.

Harry glances at him again, turning back to the theatre looming just up the road before shaking his head.

“No, it’s fine. I mean, we can just go inside. Let’s just be quick about it and look unassuming,” he says carefully, as though he’s convincing himself more than Liam.

“Harry…” Liam starts, already considering starting the car and just driving away, but Harry cuts him off.

“No, Liam, it’s fine. I’m with you. I’ll be fine. I need to start actually having a life again and behaving like a normal person,” Harry states, opening his door and getting out of the car.

“And going off to LA and doing what you did there counts as that. You don’t have to push yourself if you aren’t ready,” Liam points out, hurrying to follow him out of the car. Both of them now stand beside it.

“LA was different,” Harry says evenly, as though that makes complete sense.

“What? How so? It’s a much bigger city and you went on TV, sang, did a performance. It was kinda huge,” Liam points out, realizing that he may not be helping by stating this fact.

“LA was my goodbye to that life, to that part of me,” Harry says quietly. “It was just a release of that piece of my life and it was easier for me because it was so otherworldly. That city has always felt that way for me. Like I’m someone else or somewhere else, which I guess I kinda was when I was there, but still,” he stops and looks at Liam. “I know I’m not making a lot of sense, but it made sense to me. I feel better for having done that, but this is different. This is, you know, moving forward, starting again and being a person again. It’s a little scarier.”

Liam kinda gets it. In LA he could be the old Harry. The famous singer with a charming smile and talent that was often synonymous with his name. It was like acting. He was taking on a role and playing it to it’s fullest. Going home afterward, he could shake off that character, that persona. That was the hard part.
“Still doesn’t mean you have to rush things if you aren’t ready,” Liam points out, arm going around his shoulders and giving him a supportive squeeze.

Harry glances at him and smirks.

“I thought you weren’t going to try any moves until I charmed you,” he points out with a quiet laugh. Liam joins in a moment later before Harry turns serious again. “No, I need to do this. Mainly because I want to, but also because it’s the next step and, like my therapist says, I can’t grow and get better unless I keep putting one foot in front of the other, taking each step.”

“Are we sure your therapist isn’t Yoda?” Liam asks with a laugh. Harry grins and laughs loudly, making someone further up the sidewalk glance their way, but they turn back to their friends a moment later having not recognized them.

“There are times I wonder, I must admit,” Harry says with a laugh. “Ok, lets go or we will miss the damn movie at this rate.”

With that they walk up the sidewalk side by side. Liam let’s his arm drop from Harry’s shoulders, not wanting to impinge on his ability to turn and flee if he needed to, but Harry’s hand grips his arm a moment later anyway.

More people turn and look at them as they walk up to the doors and Harry shrinks slightly. He tilts his head forward to hide his face even though his hair is knotted up on the top of his head.

The lobby is warm and bright. The scent of buttered popcorn is in the air and a thousand voices talking fill the space. Weirdly, it’s not Harry who gets recognized first, it’s Liam. Though in the grand scheme of things it makes sense. Harry really did look different, whereas Liam had stayed basically the same.

He hears his name being whispered a few times as they pass a small group of younger girls, all of them crowded together and eyes wide as they pass.

“Just keep walking,” Liam says quietly under his breath, both to himself and to Harry.

They reach the ticket counter and the woman glances up at him once, looking bored. Then her face comes right back up a second later as recognition sets in and her eyes widen. She stares at Liam for a long moment before she seems to realize he’s not alone and then her eyes nearly pop out of her head.

Liam gives her a long pleading look to not say anything and to just behave professionally. Harry huddles in close to him, sleeve covered hand up hiding half his face as he plays with his bottom lip nervously and she seems to get the message.

“How can I help you?” She asks in an overly cheery tone.

“Two tickets for Dance Quest please,” he replies quietly, pulling out his credit card and quickly tapping the machine when she tells him to. A moment later she hands him the two tickets and smiles gently at Harry who nods quickly before turning and taking hold of Liam’s arm again.

They head towards the line of theaters and the snack bar. Liam nods his head towards it in question.
“Do you want anything? Popcorn? Kit Kat?” He asks and Harry looks at it considering. His eyes quickly travel over to the group of girls that were not only still watching them, but seemed to be slowly inching their way towards the two of them. Liam turns and gives them a stern look. He hopes they will back off and they stop, all looking in different directions as though they weren’t doing anything at all.

“Haz?” Liam asks carefully, redirecting Harry’s attention back to him. The sleeve covered hand is back over his mouth again, eyes wide and frightened. “Do you want to go?”

Harry glances at the girls again and notes that they have stopped moving. He takes a deep breath and shakes his head.

“No. I wish they would leave me the fuck alone, but no I don’t need to leave. I’m alright,” he says carefully, startling slightly when an older woman brushes past him. She doesn’t recognize him nor apologize, just continues her loud conversation on her cell phone. “Let’s get something I guess. A drink.”

Liam nods and leads him towards the long line. The girls inch their way closer again, following but stopping every time Liam glares at them. An older woman standing in front of them in line with her young son glances back and recognizes them, but says nothing. She only gives Harry a gentle, reassuring smile and he seems to relax slightly with that.

After what feels like ages, but probably is only five minutes, they reach the counter and Liam quickly orders two fizzy drinks, a bag of popcorn for himself, though he intends to share, and a Kit Kat for Harry. The young guy behind the counter shows no signs of recognition, just collects their order and says the total in a dull voice.

Harry tucks his chocolate bar into the front pocket of his hoodie and picks up his drink. He pops a straw into it and grabs one for Liam before they start towards the theatre’s again.

Because the movie they are seeing is several weeks old, it’s further down the hall. Liam isn’t the slightest bit surprised when the girls continue to follow them, giggling quietly, but it still annoys the hell out of him because he can see how much it’s bothering Harry. It occurs to him that they may very well be going to the same movie, planned or not, and he can see that Harry is thinking the same thing. Even so, he starts looking for an employee to ask about checking their tickets to make sure they don’t just follow them in, but then he hears someone already talking to them and asking them in an official voice to present their tickets. They reach the door to their own theatre and Liam glances back to see what’s happening. He finds them all being escorted back down the hall, looking annoyed. Just beyond them stands the mother and her son. She gives Liam a quick wink before leading the bouncing boy into the theatre playing the latest Disney flick and Liam laughs quietly, grateful they had found a fairy godmother that night. He turns back to Harry and sees him waiting just inside the door, eyes still trepidatious.

“It’s ok, they’re gone,” Liam whispers and Harry visibly relaxes.

They head inside and find seats near the back. There are only eight other people in the theatre, all of them older couples who don’t pay them any mind and they both relax even further.

The movie itself is about a group of three housewives who take up ballroom dancing in an effort to get their husbands to pay more attention to them. But they soon find themselves feeling more competitive and the usual hilarity and hijinks follow. It wasn’t exactly groundbreaking cinema, but Harry laughs, forever a fan of chick flicks and rom coms as he was.
They both laugh loudly when Harry’s hand sneaks across to steal a handful of popcorn just as Liam’s hand is going in the bag and they end up almost holding hands. Harry shove s Liam’s hand out of the way and grabs a bunch, shoving it in his mouth with a loud crunch. Liam waggles his eyebrows at him, stretching his arms above his head and then lowering them, one circling Harry’s shoulders. This makes Harry laugh loudly again.

He settles in against Liam’s arm though, head resting on it while his feet end up on the top of the chair in front of him. Midway through the film he pulls the Kit Kat out and breaks off a piece. He hands it to Liam before breaking off another and crunching into it. When that’s gone he snuggles in closer, head now on Liam’s shoulder and hand on his knee. Liam feels that familiar urge to kiss him, to touch him and pull him close. It’s not made any better when the movie goes into a particularly romantic scene where one of the wives and her husband share a passionate moment in the back of their car after a competition. Liam can’t help but turn his head slightly, brushing his lips across Harry’s forehead. He rests them in his hair, smelling his shampoo and warmth. He feels Harry react with a soft puff of breath and his hand tightening on Liam’s knee before he turns his face upward and brings their lips together. The rest of the room then melts away.

Liam never was a romantic sort of person and didn’t really believe in the whole cosmic explosion thing, but kissing Harry really made him rethink everything he had ever believed in his life.

It’s not the same kind of intense passion from the first time they kissed, nor the frightened shyness of when Harry had done it a few months back. This time it’s sweet, gentle and soft with just enough pressure. Their mouths move together slowly, taking their time and testing it out. Harry’s hand comes up to Liam’s jaw and his touch is feather light for a moment before he holds on more, tilting Liam’s head as their tongues meet. Liam can taste the chocolate and Irn-Bru on Harry’s. It’s a sweet and tangy mixture, but so weirdly Harry. Heat starts to pool low in his belly and his hand curls around the back of Harry’s head, pulling him just that bit closer. He’s glad for the loud music in the movie when Harry’s teeth go across his bottom lip, making him moan quietly. They come back together a little more insistently, bodies moving closer together as the kissing becomes more heated.

He’s relatively certain at least one person in the theatre has seen them, but he really doesn’t care. He doesn’t care what’s happening in the movie either. All that matters is Harry in that moment. His body heat, lips, hands, panting breaths, tongue, all of him. He’s the only thing that Liam wants to think about right then and maybe forever.

The armrest digs into his side as he tries to get closer to Harry. He can feel Harry fighting against it as well, almost crawling over it and into Liam’s lap. When Harry moans into his mouth it goes straight to Liam’s groin. It’s a spark he hasn’t felt in a long while and hadn’t realized just how much he had been missing until that moment. In all the time he had been taking care of Harry, watching over him and helping him recuperate, he hadn’t had a sexual thought or moment. Showers were fast, meant only to get clean or cry when necessary, but expediency was important in order to get back to Harry to continue taking care of him.

But Harry was doing better now. He wasn’t terrified when Liam left the room anymore. He didn’t like it, but it was more because he just liked being close to Liam and not because he was scared without him. He didn’t need Liam in the same ways anymore. This shift, along with the way that Harry’s mouth was working on his, reawakens Liam’s body. It reminds him of things he’s been missing and things he very much wants to explore with Harry.

When breathing gets too difficult, he takes the chance to work his lips down Harry’s jaw. Warm breath pants over his ear as he presses kisses to Harry’s neck, one hand still just under the knot of
hair and the other sliding down his hoodie covered side. He has to stop and remind himself that
they are in public. He also remembers that he still needs to take care not to push too far too fast,
before his traveling hand lands on Harry’s thigh.

These reminders bring his mouth back up to Harry’s, knowing that going ahead and giving him a
hickey or getting more sexual wasn’t a good idea. Harry is all too happy to resume making out with
him and his own arms snake around Liam’s neck, head tilting to kiss him slowly again, savoring it.

They don’t watch the rest of the movie. They focus instead on each other. Intermittent kissing
coupled with long moments of just staring at each other, foreheads together, noses brushing. It
makes both of them feel normal. They are just another loving couple at the movies, being
affectionate with each other. Being out of the house and away from everything seemed to make it
easier on Harry. Like he really could just be anyone else, blend in with the crowd and behave like a
regular person. Any regret Liam had about this little excursion is erased.

They separate when the lights go up. They stand and head out of the theatre hand in hand, both of
them smiling softly. They don’t see the group of girls again, for which they are both grateful, and
no one pays them any mind. The crowd has thinned and is focused only on heading to their own
homes.

The air outside is a gentle kind of warm and calm, the sky is clear and full of stars. Harry looks up
at them as they head towards the car, eyes sparkling and a surge of affection goes through Liam.

They get to the car and the streetlight over it is burnt out, casting the spot in deep shadows. Liam
gallantly opens Harry’s door for him, making him giggle slightly. He turns and pulls Liam in close
with the car at his back and Liam is about to lean in to kiss him when he notices movement across
the road. In the darkness it takes him a second to recognize what he’s seeing, but then the shape
becomes clear. It’s a photographer, camera up, snapping pictures of the two of them. Liam growls
quietly, startling Harry.

“Liam? What’s wrong?” he asks. He frowns as his eyes search Liam’s face, hands still holding the
front of Liam’s hoodie.

“Get in the car, quickly,” Liam says, backing away and turning Harry, guiding him into the car.
Harry does as he’s told, but still stares at him with wide, confused eyes.

He quickly circles the car, glaring at the photographer the entire time before jumping into his own
seat, starting the engine and peeling out of the spot.

“What the hell is going on?” Harry demands, brows together angrily now.

“Photographer. Back there. He was watching us and taking a ton of pictures,” Liam tells him, his
own voice barely hiding his fury. “Someone must have tipped him off. Probably one of those
stupid girls.”

Harry goes from confused to furious himself, flopping back in his seat and rubbing his forehead.

“Heaven forbid I have a fucking normal life or do something normal,” he complains, glaring out
the window. Liam’s heart goes out to him. The night had been so good, amazing in fact, they had
walked out of that theatre so happy and now they were driving home in deplorable moods.

“Look, let’s not let it spoil the night, ok? So what if he got pictures? People know, it’s not news.
They will grow bored eventually,” Liam tries to assure him, already missing the calm, affectionate, happy Harry that had been next to him during the movie.

Harry sighs angrily, but doesn’t say anything else the rest of the ride and Liam doesn’t know what else can be said. He tries to consider what the photographer might have caught and whether any of it was that scandalous. Certainly them walking to the car wasn’t that interesting, other than they were holding hands. But when they got to the car, that moment Liam had pressed Harry back against it, that was the money shot. He’s just glad he saw the bastard before they kissed.

Anne is still up when they get home and Des is sitting in the living room watching a home renovation show. They both look startled at the grumpy expressions on Harry and Liam’s faces as they come in.

“Was the movie not any good?” Anne asks, coming out of the kitchen, dish towel in her hands.

“It was fine,” Harry replies tersely. “The jackass with the long lens outside after, not so much.”

“You’re kidding?” Des says hotly, sitting forward on the couch, brows pulling together like Harry’s.

“Nope. Liam saw the guy and we got out of there, but it’s still annoying,” Harry says grumpily, kicking off his shoes and putting them on the mat.

“Did they get any shots that would be a problem?” Anne asks carefully.

“No! We were just walking to the car. I don’t even know why that’s interesting to people,” Harry retorts, heading towards his mum, giving her a hug. He then heads over to Des to do the same. “I’m heading to bed. Goodnight.”

“Ok, night honey,” Anne says as he heads up the stairs and Liam sighs quietly.

“No, not that I can think of. We were just going to the car. It was dark,” Liam says carefully, knowing full well that it depended on how good the guy’s camera was if they would be facing more questions from Des tomorrow. “I’m gonna head up as well, make sure he’s ok.”

He bids them a good night and goes up the stairs. He closes the bedroom door quietly behind himself before unzipping his hoodie and shrugging it off, tossing it on a chair. Harry isn’t in the room, but he hears the tap running in the bathroom and heads that way. He’s already changed into his pajamas, consisting of loose pants and a t-shirt, brushing his teeth in a rather ferocious manner.

“Haz… I’m sorry. It sucks that happened tonight, but there isn’t anything we can do now. It’s not like he got anything scandalous,” Liam tries to assure him again, earning him a side-eye before Harry leans forward and spits into the sink. “I just really wanted to have a fun night out with you doing something normal.
Something I haven’t done since before the X-Factor.”

Liam walks towards him arms out and Harry turns right into them, circling his own around Liam’s waist, cheek landing on his shoulder.

“I know babe. It’s fucking annoying, but I had a great time tonight. I’m glad we did it, even if it ended that way. We shouldn’t let stupid shit get in the way of you taking steps as your Yoda put it.”

Harry laughs quietly once.

“Yes, true. Fuck the photographer. I want to do stuff more often. It’s nice to feel normal.”

“Good, that’s the spirit. I’m on board for whatever you want to do, alright?”

“I want to jump out of an airplane,” Harry replies and Liam can hear the smile in his voice.

“Ok, I’m on board for anything but that,” he deadpans as a reply and Harry laughs.

“Coward,” he retorts. “But fine, we will keep it simple for the time being.”

“Good.”

They separate and Harry heads back out to the bedroom. He crawls under the covers while Liam changes and brushes his own teeth. He slides in beside Harry, pulling him close gently and kissing his forehead as he always did nowadays. Harry leans back and looks at him, eyes a little wide and trepidatious before he leans in and kisses Liam. It’s soft and gentle, back to the shyness, and it’s as though Harry sort of thought he should do it rather than actually wanting to. Liam knows the change of scenery has altered things and lying in bed held a lot more pressure than just sitting in a movie theatre so he’s the one who breaks it, pulling back slightly.

“It’s alright Haz. Just get some sleep,” he says quietly, brushing Harry’s hair back from his face and tucking it behind his ear. A mixture of emotions cross Harry’s face from confusion to hurt to relief and annoyance. There’s a war going on inside his head and Liam tries to quiet it by kissing the tip of his nose and pulling him in to settle. “No pressure ok. I’m not in any hurry, so you don’t need to be either. Just relax. We’re ok.”

He feels Harry’s tension ease at that and a long deep sigh fills his chest.

“I know,” he whispers a moment later. “Thank you.”


“Love you too.”
Chapter 22

Liam checks the internet in the morning while Harry is in the shower. He wants to be fully prepared, but is surprised that it’s not nearly as bad as he was expecting.

*Date Night for Hazza and Liam! Former 1D boys caught out at the cinema!*

The clearest picture is the two of them walking out of the theatre hand in hand, looking perfectly normal and sweet. It turns out the broken streetlamp had worked in their favor because even though the Daily Mail still used one of the shots from when they were against the car, it’s impossible to really see what’s happening. The rest of the news sites are pretty much the same, with a few quotes from people who had also been there. All of them say pretty much the same thing that Harry and Liam had gone in, seen a movie, held hands and that’s about it. Nothing scandalous, nothing really exciting and all of the comments on the articles are people blasting the news sites for even encroaching on their private lives.

He closes his phone with a sigh of relief, happy that their night wasn’t ruined.

Harry has an appointment with Dr. Howard and Liam drops him off as usual, heading over to Sainsbury’s to do the shopping as he normally did. It seemed silly to drive all the way into London, back home and then back to London to pick Harry up, so he usually did errands while Harry was in his session.

Except this time Harry asks if they can go to a specialty bulk food shop afterwards. Evidently he needed some ingredients, but Liam can tell he’s just taking another step because avoiding stores was something he had been pretty adamant about.

“You sure Haz? It’s gonna be busy. People will be done work by that time,” Liam points out gently. He doesn’t necessarily want to talk Harry out of it, but he also wants to make sure he’s prepared.

Harry nods, face calm as he gets out of the car and heads into the clinic where the doctor’s office was.

Liam sighs quietly and watches to make sure he gets inside alright before pulling away and heading down the ring road.

He’s got half a cart full of groceries when his phone beeps and he pulls it out idly, wondering if Harry was done early or if maybe his sister needed something. He is entirely unprepared for what he gets.

*DO YOU WANT TO EXPLAIN THIS?*

It’s from Des and Liam frowns at the screen. He quickly unlocks his phone and opens the texting app, finding Des’ message with a picture right after it. A picture that makes Liam’s heart stop.

It’s from inside the theatre. It’s a particularly bright moment during the movie and a nice close up shot of him and Harry mid snog, hands all over each other. He knew someone had likely seen them, but he had mistakenly assumed they wouldn’t care or even have recognized them.
He was very, very wrong about that.

“Fuck,” he whispers out, closing his eyes and smacking his phone against his forehead in frustration. A woman walking by gives him a strange look, both for his cursing and his actions, and hurries off down the cereal aisle. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck…” he repeats angrily, looking back at the picture and growling.

He quickly opens Google, searches Harry’s name and sure enough a dozen or more articles pop up. Each with a more outlandish headline than the last, making all kinds of unsavory insinuations about them. One even claims that a witness saw Harry giving Liam a blow job in the bathroom. The general gist is that Harry is back to being a huge slag and everything he’s been through is almost completely erased.

Instantly feeling sick about how Harry is going to react to this, he hurries to the front of the store and pays for what he has. He’s not really paying attention to what he is doing, but he does notice the looks he is receiving from people as he walks by. Some are curious, some disgusted and he quickly loads his bags into the car and drives away. Harry will still be in with his doctor for another hour and Liam realizes that while he does not want to disturb his session, the doctor might be necessary to help Harry cope with this.

His phone beeps several times as he drives, but he ignores it. He hasn’t responded to Des because he’s not sure what to say. He’s decided it’s more important that he get to Harry first and make sure he’s the one to tell him before he finds out any other way.

The woman at the front reception desk looks surprised as he hurries in. His face is ashen and skin damp with nervous sweat.

“I’m looking for Dr. Howard. I need to speak with him immediately,” he tells her quickly, eyes scanning the waiting room for any doors leading to the aforementioned man.

“Sir, he’s with a patient right now, but I can schedule an appointment for you. Are you currently a patient of his?” She asks carefully, eyeing him critically. He’s grateful she has no idea who he is, but that could also make this more difficult.

“Yes, I know he’s with a patient. I need to talk to him about something regarding that particular patient. It’s an emergency, please, just ask him to come speak to me for a minute. It’s extremely important,” he begs her. She frowns at him, horrified that he would ask her to interrupt Harry’s session, but she sighs a moment later and picks up her phone and punches in a few numbers.

“Yes, Dr. Howard, there is a Mister…” she stops and looks at Liam.

“Yes, Mr. Liam Payne,” he supplies quickly.

“Yes, a Mr. Liam Payne out here. Says he needs to speak to you urgently about the patient you are currently with.” She listens for a few moments, nodding finally. “Ok, I’ll let him know.” She hangs up the phone and looks at Liam, still critical. “He’ll be right out.”

“Thank you,” Liam breathes. He turns and watches the myriad of doors expectantly, bouncing on the balls of his feet slightly. A few moments later the doctor steps out of the farthest door, closing it behind himself and coming towards Liam with a confused look on his face. Liam hurries towards him hoping to pull him into a quiet area to speak, but the doctor opens a door to another empty office and waves him in, following and closing the door.
“Liam, are you alright? What’s going on?” He asks gently, kind face full of worry as he looks at Liam’s clearly disheveled state.

“Did Harry tell you about last night?” He asks quickly, wanting to be careful not to reveal anything that Harry might have been withholding. Though he realizes a moment later that it’s a fruitless effort, the whole fucking world knows now.

“He did. Though you know I can’t discuss our sessions with you,” Dr. Howard replies carefully and Liam nods, hand waving slightly.

“Yes, I know. I just wanted to be sure. There was a photographer outside last night, but it wasn’t too bad. It was nothing major, but unfortunately it seems that things are far worse now. Someone took pictures inside the theatre. They are all over the news,” he says with anger in his voice. He pulls out his phone and opens the photo Des sent him, ignoring the furious messages that had followed it.

Dr. Howard takes his phone and examines it a moment, eyebrows flickering once.

“I am aware of your relationship and he did mention that things had progressed last night. I’m sorry your privacy was invaded and I’m sure Harry isn’t going to be pleased, but I don’t think it’s that bad. It’s not like your feelings for each other were unknown,” he replies carefully, handing the phone back to Liam.

“It’s worse than that. They are saying some really horrendous things about Harry, full out lies about him. I think that he should be told while he’s here with you. I’m hoping you can help him because this is going to be hard on him,” Liam begs quietly. He opens the list of articles and shows the doctor what he had seen. The man sighs, looking displeased himself with it all.

“It is truly unfortunate how people seem to want to demonize him. I’ve never quite understood it, but yes you’re probably right. It’s better he hear it from us and not the outside world,” he agrees, handing the phone back once more. He heads to the door and Liam follows quickly.

Harry looks up when they walk into Dr. Howard’s office. He looks mildly confused at the disruption and then shocked at Liam standing there.

“What’s going on?” He asks quickly, standing. His eyes flick from Liam to the doctor and back again rapidly.

“We have some unfortunate news and Liam wanted to be sure you heard it now, before you leave,” Dr. Howard says carefully, heading over to the chair opposite the couch. He indicates that they both should sit down as he does. “Now, we discussed last night and since Liam was there we can openly talk about it. Unfortunately, it turns out that the photographer outside wasn’t the only one there as you originally thought.”

Harry starts and sits up a little straighter. His head swivels to stare at Liam, a deep furrow between his brows.

“What the hell is he talking about?” he demands and Liam sighs angrily, pulling out his phone again, figuring it was easier to show him than tell him. He pulls up the picture Des sent and hands it over.

A flurry of emotions cross Harry’s face. From surprise to despair to anger and Liam can see the
tears building up in his eyes with a deep hurt and betrayal written there. So much for their night not being ruined. His own fury rebuilds as he watches Harry’s reaction. They had been so happy and it was such an amazing night. He could still feel Harry’s lips against his own and his warm body close, but now it was sullied by other people taking advantage for their own profit. He wishes he could remember the faces of the people in that theatre and know who they were to go after them. He wanted to make them hurt the way they were hurting Harry for no reason other than money.

Harry’s bottom lip wobbles as he tries to come up with words, tries to understand why someone would do such a thing to him and a moment later he thrusts the phone back at Liam.

“Do I even want to know what they are saying?” He spits out and Liam shakes his head. The picture was bad enough, he didn’t need to hear the rest.

“Harry I know this is difficult news, but I hope you don’t let it set you back. You have to remember, neither you nor Liam did anything wrong,” Dr. Howard says gently. Harry closes his eyes slowly, shaking his head minutely.

“It just feels like another violation. Like I can’t have anything good in my life without someone taking it away,” he says with defeat. Liam slides an arm around his shoulders, making Harry glance at him.

“I know that’s how it feels, but the only way they are going to take it away is if you let them. You have to fight that and I know it’s difficult, but you have to ignore them. You’ve managed to keep yourself free from seeing what’s being said about you before and avoided the press. This time is no different. Just stay away from it because in the end, it’s not who you are. They don’t know you. You have to remember that.”

“The only way I kept away from it was by being a hermit, staying shut in and avoiding going out,” Harry points out and Liam had to sort of agree with him. “The one time, the first time, I decide to go out and try to do something normal in public, this is what happens? It’s bullshit and so unfair. What the fuck did I do to deserve this?” He demands, voice growing angrier with each word.

“Nothing Haz, nothing. This isn’t your fault and Dr. Howard is right, you can’t let it get in your way. The best way to fight back is to ignore it and keep living your life. We will keep doing things and being normal people like you wanted last night and fuck them all,” Liam replies, squeezing him gently. He honestly believed what he was saying. They had to fight back. While he was telling Harry to do nothing but ignore them and carry on, he fully intended to fight back in his own way, but later.

Harry sighs angrily, rubbing his forehead.

“Be defiant Harry. It’s like bullying. You just have to show them it doesn’t affect you and the people who know you, who are important to you, will continue to support you. The negativity will go away eventually,” Dr. Howard adds, nodding at Liam as well.

“I know. I get what you are saying, but it’s still just so frustrating. I’ll try. I promise I’ll try,” Harry relents, body relaxing slightly.

“Right, on that note why don’t we finish up our session as normal and get back to what we were talking about?” Dr. Howard suggests, sitting up slightly. “Maybe you could sit out in the waiting room if that’s alright?” He asks Liam.
Liam nods and glances at Harry for confirmation that he was ok with that and he gets a nod in return.

“Ok, I’ll see you in a bit,” Liam assures him, giving him another quick squeeze before standing up and stepping out of the room. He closes the door quietly behind him.

He wanders back to the waiting area, choosing a plastic chair at random and flopping down into it. Two women are sitting opposite him and he notices them staring, recognizing him. Their eyes travel to the door he had come out of curiously and then back to him. He has to bite his tongue not to snap at them.

Instead he pulls out his phone, opens his twitter app and stares at the blinking cursor for a long moment. He wants to say something to defend Harry, but doesn’t think just telling everyone to fuck off will really do the trick.

You don’t know Harry. So please fuck off and stop writing bullshit stories about him…

Don’t believe everything you read. Harry is not the person that the media wants you to think he is…

To the person who invaded our privacy and took those photos, kindly go burn in hell…

He deletes those three after typing them, not feeling like they were really getting his point across. He ends up with a series of tweets, the 140 character limit forcing him to split his thoughts up, but he hopes he conveys what he needs to without sounding like an angry schoolmarm.

I will never understand why people would willingly choose to judge and write bullshit stories about someone they don’t even know.

But please know that your attention is not only unwelcome, but also very hurtful to a person who is undeserving of this kind of harassment.

Harry is one of the kindest, gentlest souls there is and has had to put up with this for far too long in his life already.

I ask that you please just respect our privacy, Harry’s recovery, and our lives. Leave us in peace to be normal people.

I don’t think that’s too much to ask.

He posts each once he’s happy with them and then closes the app, not wanting to see the flurry of activity they will no doubt bring. He opens his message app and finally reads the texts from Des. He figures he should probably respond before they get home to mitigate the furor they might be facing.

DO YOU WANT TO EXPLAIN THIS?

YOU TOLD ME NOTHING HAPPENED?
THIS DOES NOT LOOK LIKE NOTHING!

HE’S NOT READY FOR THIS LIAM!
He’s not entirely certain Des is actually angry in all of them or just forgot how to turn his caps lock off. The last one causes a streak of fury to go through him though.

He’s fine Des. We only kissed, ask him. He was happy and comfortable with everything. And NO the bathroom bit is complete bullshit!!! DID NOT HAPPEN!!

He sends the message and locks his phone. He stuffs it in his pocket though he knows full well that he will likely get a response in short order. He rubs his face angrily, elbows on his knees while he waits. He hears the sound of a camera click and looks up to find one of the women quickly putting her phone away, looking sheepish.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” He growls out, glaring at her furiously. “Did you just take a fucking picture of me? In here, of all fucking places, right now?” He shouts and the receptionist quickly hangs up her phone call, sitting forward, face worried.

The woman sinks down in her chair slightly, looking frightened of his anger. He stands suddenly, stalking over to her.

“Give me your fucking phone right now. You better not have posted that anywhere,” he demands, holding his hand out insistently.

“Sir, I’m gonna have to ask you to leave,” the receptionist says quickly. He hears her pick up the phone, asking for security to the front lobby.

The woman stares at him terrified for a moment before her friend nudges her.

“I told you not to do that. Give him your phone. Delete the fucking picture Allie. It’s not cool that you did that anyway,” she tells her friend, reaching for Allie’s purse when she doesn’t move. “Here, I’ve got it. Look, I’m deleting the pic ok? It’s gone.” She quickly moves about on the phone, holding it up to show Liam that the picture is no longer in her album and he narrows his eyes.

“If I see that fucking picture anywhere I will come after you, hard. Do you understand me?” He says with an icy tone. He stares Allie down as she shrinks further into her chair, nodding quickly. “Leave us the fuck alone.”

He turns to head back to his chair, but finds two men in black suits staring at him and he sighs loudly.

“Fine,” he growls out before either of them say anything. He turns to the receptionist. “Tell Harry I’m waiting in the car and do not let these bitches, he turns to the security guards and points at the two women. “Take any pictures of him, talk to him, nothing. You hear me?”

The security guards raise their brows at his demands, but nod a moment later.

“We pride ourselves on maintaining the privacy of our patients sir. It won’t be a problem,” the receptionist says snottily, affronted that he would think otherwise. He turns and stares at her blankly for a moment.

“Uh-huh, I sure as shit just saw how good you are at that a moment ago,” he points out hotly,
heading towards the door.

“You aren’t a patient,” she retorts, glaring right back at him.

Liam just shakes his head at her, shoving the door open roughly and stalking out into the sunshine. He storms over to the car, sitting in the driver’s seat with the air conditioning blasting on his face. His phone beeps in his pocket and he fishes it out, still feeling up for a fight and figuring if Des wants one, he’s good to go. Instead it’s Ruth, her words deflating some of his fury.

*Liam, so sorry for what they did to you two. Don’t let it get you down. You’re right, they don’t know Harry, but they also don’t know you. You both deserve happiness. Fuck the world, they can all rot. Just be happy together. That’s the best revenge.*

He closes his eyes and thumps his head back against the headrest, realizing that she is right. It’s basically what he told Harry, but it was true for him as well. He just had to ignore it, focus on Harry, their lives together and block out the rest of it.

*Thanks Roo.*

Another message comes in just as he’s replying to her. It’s from Des and it’s far more conciliatory than the first ones. He’s also figured out how to shut his caps lock off.

*Sorry for the blow up. I should have known most of the so called witness stuff was bullshit. I know you make him happy.*

He finally calms completely, glad that Des seemed to understand. Liam could see where he was coming from before with the anger and the fierce protection of his son. He knew that in the end Des wasn’t pissed with him. He was pissed with those who would try to re-victimize Harry just to sell newspapers or get more clicks.

Liam is about to reply when Des sends another one.

*Good on you for fighting back. The tweets have shamed the bastards.*

Liam didn’t doubt his tweets would get attention, he still had several million followers, but he didn’t feel like he had the energy to look at what was happening right now. Instead he sends a thanks back to Des and locks his phone, putting it down. He flops his head back again, closing his eyes and drowning out the world.

He stays that way until the passenger door opens and Harry gets in, quiet and solemn. He sits for a long moment just staring at Liam.

“You ready to go home?” Liam finally asks, wanting to break the silence and unsure of what was happening.

Harry doesn’t respond, just stares a moment longer. His eyes move to look out the windows and he watches the people passing. None of them are paying attention to the two of them at all, not that they were really able to see them anyway with the tinted windows. He takes a deep breath and turns suddenly, surging forward and grasping Liam’s face, kissing him hard. Liam doesn’t respond immediately, too surprised to, but he gives in eventually and kisses Harry back. He slides their tongues together and his fingers go into his hair to hold his head.
It doesn’t last long and they separate a few minutes later, breathing hard and pupils blown. Harry lets go and sits back, buckling his seat belt.

Liam remains flummoxed. He’s waiting to see if he will get an explanation for that or not, though he’s not sure if he wants one. Harry turns and looks at him expectantly, eyes glancing to the steering wheel and back up to his face.

“ Aren’t we going to the bulk store? I still need stuff from there,” he asks sounding entirely normal again, as though the kiss hadn’t even happened.

Liam shakes his head slightly to clear it, figuring that asking questions probably wasn’t going to get him anywhere. The best he could surmise was this was Harry’s own form of fighting back. This was him keeping control over his life and actions. He was pushing back at the judgement and rumors and bullshit by just continuing on with it.

Liam puts the car into gear and pulls away from the curb. He navigates through the late afternoon London traffic to the address Harry found on the computer that morning, neither one of them saying anything.

The parking lot is busy and it takes him a minute to find a space. Harry gets out as soon as the car is off, looking defiant as he stalks up to the door. Liam hurries to catch up, grabbing a buggy as he goes. He follows quietly as Harry finds each item on his list, seeming to relax more and more with each passing minute in the fancy market with the wooden floors. He spends a long time in the spices, sniffing each and passing them to Liam to smell. He takes in the rich, earthy, tangy odors; some smelling savory, others sweet. He loads up the cart with a variety of flours, each with a different purpose as Harry tells him. He then moves on to telling Liam about the different types of shortening and fats available and what each did. In fact, he talks pretty much the entire time. His voice goes from strained and forced to relaxed and joyous as he settles into his element. Liam manages to drown out the rest of the noise and ignores every other person in there to focus solely on Harry, giving him encouragement and asking questions.

When they have their load of ingredients they head to the checkout where the guy behind the till recognizes them, but says nothing. He just gives Liam a polite nod and smile, indicating clearly that he had seen Liam’s tweets and was respecting them. He gets this look several more times as Harry drags him from shop to shop, noticing a butcher and then a florist after Harry decided he wanted to get some potted herbs to put in the kitchen window.

With the car full, they head home feeling much better than they had only a few hours ago. Anne and Des come out to help unload, neither one saying anything. They assemble in the kitchen to put everything away before deciding that they want to order pizza for dinner, despite all of the new groceries.

Liam just wishes Harry would eat more than one slice, but he figures it was still better than before so doesn’t push it.

The evening settles in as normal, with the four of them in the living room watching TV. The new season of the Voice was on and it provides some entertainment without being potentially triggering. One of the contestants sings The Scientist and Liam inwardly grumbles. He’d hit a point where he wanted to retake control of the song because it really did belong to Harry, but it was out of his reach. It was still too popular for the record company to consider parting with the rights to it. Nothing is said directly about the pictures or scandal when the contestant is finished, aside from one of the judges making a quip about how the song was about a hidden love story coming
out of the shadows. Harry openly scoffs at that, declaring that the asshole didn’t know anything.

They head to bed when it’s done, both of them exhausted from the wild swinging emotions of the day. It’s quiet as they change and brush their teeth. Harry’s eyes keep catching Liam’s in the mirror, both of them finding themselves feeling almost shy without words to clear the awkwardness that had no place sitting between them, but had found its way there anyway. Liam can’t figure out why, he just has to assume that Harry was back to digesting what had happened, was processing it fully and had turned maudlin again because of it.

He musters himself at that thought. He feels that defiance creeping back up that told him he and Harry were better off ignoring the world entirely and doing whatever the hell they wanted because who the fuck cared what other people thought of them or said about them? He hated feeling like a social outcast for loving someone, for taking care of them and standing by them. And he really hated how people seemed to have selectively forgotten about what Harry had gone through. Those two years were erased from their minds, but not his and definitely not Harry’s.

“We did nothing wrong you know,” he says quietly, wiping his face with the towel after washing it, watching Harry in the mirror.

Harry stops, glancing up at Liam surprised before nodding, though it’s somewhat non-committal.

“I mean it Harry. Today was bullshit. Those assholes taking pictures were bullshit. None of it is your fault, or mine for that matter. We are not responsible for people taking advantage of us,” he turns towards Harry, facing him properly. Harry looks down at the counter and nods a little more forcefully.

“I know. I honestly do. I hate that it came between us today,” he admits, turning towards Liam himself. “I loved last night,” he says quietly, shrugging slightly, but eyes earnest. “I really did and I want to have more of those kinds of nights. More normal experiences with you. It’s just not gonna be easy to drown out that bullshit.”

Liam nods, sighing quietly.

“I know. Which is why I fought back. I sent out a couple tweets calling people on their shit. No idea if it did any good. I really hope it didn’t make it any worse, but I intend to keep fighting for you to have those experiences, to have a life again.”

Harry smiles softly and tilts his head to the side, looking touched.

“Thank you,” he replies quietly.

“No problem,” Liam replies and laughs quietly. “Right, let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow is another day.”

“Did you just quote James Bond?” Harry asks him, laughing.

“Not intentionally, I assure you,” Liam deadpans. He pulls Harry out of the bathroom behind him, throwing the covers back and flopping onto the bed.

Rather than walking around the bed and getting in properly, Harry crawls across him and flops down half on top of him giggling. Liam snorts and pushes back, tossing him off gently. Harry lands on his back, still laughing, while Liam plants his hands on either side of Harry’s shoulders. He
looks down at him and attempts to give him a disapproving schoolmarm expression for trying to
smush him, but it’s hard to maintain when Harry’s hand knots in the front of his shirt and pulls him
down, crashing their mouths together.

Like in the car it turns heavy quickly. The laughing stops and is replaced by panting breathes.
Liam’s arms give out and his body lands on top of Harry, one thigh slotted between Harry’s own.
His body responds faster than he could have ever expected. Harry’s hand goes through his hair,
gripping a fistful at the back almost painfully while the other pulls at handfuls of his shirt, the
sound of fabric stretching adding to the sounds in the room.

Liam loses control. He knows it the moment it happens. His body is moving as he presses into
Harry seeking heat and friction, hand going up his shirt and across his skin. Harry jolts and goes
tense, a small panicked sound coming from his throat.

Like a bucket of ice water it stops Liam dead and he backs away as fast as he can. He sits up on the
other side of the bed and watches Harry carefully, terrified he had done irreparable damage. Harry
stares back, sitting up with his back against the headboard. His eyes are wide and deer like, mouth
shiny, lips swollen.

“Sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry Harry. I got carried away,” Liam starts apologizing and Harry
shakes his head, closing his eyes slowly and running his hand through his hair.

“Stop, it’s ok. I’m the one who kissed you. I thought I was ok cuz I know it’s you, but I guess I was
wrong,” he admits, sounding angry with himself.

Relief pours over Liam and he moves closer to Harry. He sits still facing towards him, hands
landing on his knees.

“Not your fault Haz,” he tells him, determined that Harry wouldn’t shoulder this. “We need to slow
down. It’s too soon.”

Harry huffs angrily, glaring off to something on the opposite side of the room.

“I hate this,” he whispers. “Why do they still get to control me?”

Liam isn’t sure how to reply to that. The question seems to hold a much deeper meaning that he
isn’t privy to. All he can do is continue to reassure him that it’s not his fault.

“You just need more time. It’s fine, I’m ok with waiting. You don’t need to push yourself,” Liam
assures him. Harry glances at him, nodding once.

“I know you will… It’s just…” he starts and stops, glancing at Liam again frowning.

“No Harry, this isn’t your fault, alright?” Liam says clearly, forcing Harry’s eyes to meet his.

“There’s more to it… no, never mind. It’s fine,” he stumbles out and Liam frowns this time.

“What do you mean? What’s going on?” He asks and Harry shakes his head, rubbing at his eyes
before dragging his hands down his face.

“Honestly it’s fine, don’t worry about it. Just something I’m working on with my therapist,” he
says. This only serves to make more questions than answers, but Liam decides not to push it.
“You can always talk to me if you need to. You know that right?” Liam asks and Harry nods.

“Yeah I know. It’s fine. Let’s get some sleep, yeah?”

With that he shoves his feet under the covers, sliding down and settling in on the pillows. Liam and his deflating erection do the same a moment later, if only to keep Harry from seeing it.

Harry hesitates for a moment before cuddling in, resting his head on Liam’s chest and sighing quietly.
It’s a long while before either of them fall asleep.
Chapter 23

8 Months

They decide to just stay at home the next day, both of them quiet and sullen. That one day turns into a few days and then turns into a few weeks. The two of them only leave the house to go to Dr. Howard’s office. Liam continues to do the shopping and errands while Harry is in with the doctor, not going in the office himself for obvious reasons. But when Liam suggests they do some shopping together, he gets shot down. Despite his rally the day the picture was released, Harry recedes back into his shell and no amount of coaxing will persuade him to consider coming out of it.

Harry starts to seem really preoccupied, his mind wandering often. Liam will find him staring at him from across the room sometimes, face determined and unsure at the same time and he’s not sure what to make of it so he doesn’t ask.

He doesn’t bother checking his twitter or anything other than messages from his family and they smartly don’t mention anything. Though they continue to visit regularly and they provide a nice breakup to the monotony that had once again taken over the house. Even so, he still starts to go stir crazy.

He offers to take Harry for a walk one afternoon, just out through the grove of trees that Harry likes and he agrees after some hesitation. The crunch of the branches and leaves under their feet cuts through the silence between them. Harry grabs a hold of Liam’s hand just as they are leaving and holds it tightly the entire time, almost defiantly, and once again he doesn’t fight it or ask.

Just like he hasn’t fought it when Harry has found multiple other opportunities to touch him throughout the day, every day. It was entirely normal for Liam to throw an arm around Harry, for them to curl up together on the couch or to poke at each other in jest, but Harry seemed to be making an extra effort to touch Liam’s arm, hand, leg, or anywhere he could reach for seemingly no reason at all. And it was getting more and more frequent.

Harry had also progressed to going in for quick kisses when Anne isn’t looking or Des is out of the room. They are fast pecks with his eyes wide and unsure each time he does it, but he never gives Liam enough warning to stop it from happening.

Every night Liam finds himself pinned down on the bed as Harry presses in and kisses him, attempting to repeat the passion they had in the movie theatre and that one night in bed when Liam had gone too far. He goes along with it and kisses Harry back, yet he does his best to make sure it doesn’t go beyond just simple making out and he often forces Harry to slow down. Each time Harry eventually backs away and frowns deeply. It’s not directed at Liam, but in general, and he looks frustrated at something he won’t define out loud.

He does the quick kiss thing again while they are out walking, when they stop at an old wooden gate to look out over a field. Harry just turns and grabs his face and kisses him. He presses hard as though with passion, but is chaste at the same time and his lips never part. He pulls away a few moments later, turns and starts walking back towards the house. Liam has to move fast to catch up and his hand is grabbed almost immediately again.

By the time they go to bed that night he’s still not fighting it, but he sure as hell is going to finally
“Harry, what the hell is up with you?” He asks after they have settled under the covers. Harry crawls onto his chest, intent to lean down and kiss Liam clear, but he stops the moment Liam speaks.

“What do you mean?” He asks carefully, brows coming together and face still nervous.

“This, what are you up to? You’ve been acting strange for weeks,” Liam presses while gently extracting Harry from his chest. He rolls them both so they are on their sides facing each other, a slice of neutral territory between them. “I’m not against kissing you, you know that, but you’ve been kind of weird about it lately.”

Harry frowns further, looking slightly hurt. His eyes move away from Liam’s face to stare at the wall beyond his shoulder for a moment while he collects his thoughts.

“I don’t know. Sorta thought it was something people who are together do. I guess I’m wrong,” he accuses. “I’ll stop if it bothers you that much.”

“Harry, listen, I’m not bothered, but it doesn’t look to me like you are enjoying it. Please don’t think you have to because of what happened at the movie, ok? Stop pushing yourself if you aren’t ready. I don’t want you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable,” Liam assures him, hand tucking curls behind Harry’s ear as usual. It was a calming tactic that he had perfected.

Harry sighs quietly, frowning at Liam’s chest for a long moment.

“I’m just tired of feeling like this. Of feeling stuck in a loop and not being normal,” he admits and Liam finally understands.

“Harry, I know you want to be normal, I get that, but you’ve been through something that will take time for you to heal. You can’t rush it,” Liam says gently and Harry’s angry green eyes come back up to his face.

“I’m fully fucking aware of what I went through Liam. Rest assured I haven’t forgotten, but I’m tired of still feeling like an invalid. Like a weak, broken human who is terrified of his own shadow,” he retorts. “I want to move on. I want to be a complete person again. I thought you wanted to be a part of my life and to help me get better, but now you are telling me to slow down, back up and wait longer. What if I don’t want to?”

“Hey, listen to me. I’m with you through this, no matter what. But when you come at me, kiss me fast and look terrified while doing it, I’m going to question what’s happening, alright?” Liam says carefully, sensing that this might be a bit of a minefield. “I don’t want you to feel like you need to do stuff you aren’t ready for just because you are so desperate to move on. That could actually hurt you. Let’s just take our time, go on more dates and keep things easy and simple, ok?”

Harry’s face finally relaxes a bit. He nods a moment later, though he still doesn’t look happy.

“You aren’t broken Harry, ok? Please don’t look at yourself that way. What they did to you didn’t break you and it doesn’t define you,” Liam urges, forcing Harry to make eye contact with him.

Harry sighs and his jaw works as he thinks. Liam can tell there’s something he wants to say, but he’s not sure if he should or how to say it.
“Have you talked to Dr. Howard about this?” He asks, hoping that Harry has or will because Liam was a little out of his depth here.

“Yes, of course,” Harry replies, sighing through his nose again. “We’ve been trying to work out how to fix me, but so far it’s not working.”

“You aren’t broken. Stop saying that.”

“Liam, you have no idea, ok? I am broken and so far nothing I’ve tried is working since, as you say, I’m fucking terrified,” he spits out, anger returning.

It’s Liam’s turn to frown now, though this time in confusion.

“What do you mean? Nothing’s working? What’s wrong?”

Harry glances at him and then rolls onto his back, hand coming up to scratch at his forehead as he looks out the window.

“Harry?”

“My body doesn’t work properly anymore Liam. That’s the problem.”

“What do you mean…” Liam starts asking and then the bulb lights up and he finally understands. All the touching, the kissing, every night when they made out in bed with Harry initiating it, it all made sense. “Oh…” he finally says, unsure of what else to say.

“I haven’t…” Harry starts, hand waving in the air over his lower half once before returning to his forehead. “Not since before they took me.”

Liam’s mind scrambles and he remembers how fast he had been turned on the night after the movie when he had lost control. His cock came to attention at an almost embarrassingly fast rate. He was certain Harry would have felt it on his thigh, but he realizes he wasn’t feeling anything in return from Harry.

“Haz, it’s probably just too soon. I think it’s safe to say that trying to force it isn’t going to make it any better so don’t stress,” he says lamely, knowing that Harry doesn’t want to hear that.

Harry turns his head and gives him a dirty look, confirming that he did not in fact want to hear that.

“Liam, I am 25 years old. Getting a hard on is kind of just a given. So you can understand why I might be a little concerned about this issue,” he retorts, turning back to sigh angrily at the ceiling.

“And freaking out about it, putting all this pressure on yourself and trying to move too fast is not going to make it any better or easier on you. Just forget about it,” he starts, earning a deep glare that he was fully expecting. “I’m serious! Forget about it. Don’t think about it. Don’t worry about it. Just focus on other things like getting better and being more comfortable in your own skin again. Things will work themselves out. You are not broken.”

Harry grumbles quietly, still glaring at the ceiling. The silence drags on for a few minutes as the awkwardness of the topic of conversation had created a barrier between them.
“Look,” Liam starts, feeling fidgety now with neither of them talking. “Let’s go out tomorrow night. Do something fun, just you and me. Let’s forget about the world and all the shit and just have fun. Go for dinner or something.”

Harry’s head turns slowly towards him, one brow up in an almost sarcastic manner.

“Have you forgotten what happened the last time we went out to have fun?” He asks sharply.

“No, but I don’t fucking care. That’s what I mean when I say let’s forget about the world. Who gives a shit what people do or think? We can’t let other people decide how we live our lives,” Liam says bravely, knowing full well he was the one who had screamed at a woman in the doctor’s office for taking a picture and was then promptly ejected by security.

Harry sighs and laughs once. He shakes his head slowly, but it doesn’t dissuade Liam.

“Look, it’s almost Halloween and the Winkworth Arboretum has a Haunted Forest walk. It’s a bit of a drive, but why don’t we go check that out, carve a pumpkin or something?” He suggests. He doesn’t bother to mention that he only saw one ad for it on the front of the newspaper and actually didn’t know much about the event, but it did sound kind of fun. Plus, it would be dark so they could blend in. Harry liked Halloween so it seemed a good plan.

Harry turns and looks at him critically.

“Isn’t that for kids?” He asks, but then his face softens. “Does sorta sound fun though,” he admits.

“Good! It’s settled. We are going on a walk in a haunted forest tomorrow night,” Liam declares, leaving no room for argument and Harry laughs.

“Fine, let’s just get some sleep then,” he states, curling back towards Liam again. He’s clearly intent on just ending the conversation of the night, considering its embarrassing nature, and Liam lets him.

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Just after dinner the next day as the sun is starting to set, they throw on their coats, and a knitted hat on Harry, before setting off for the park area. The parking lot is packed and there are plenty of families about with kids all kitted out in their costumes. Their eyes full of excitement.

Harry’s eyes are full of nerves. They scan around rapidly for anyone watching him or noticing them before he pulls his hat down a little further to cover more of his head.

“You ok Haz? Did you change your mind?” Liam asks him just as he’s about to undo his seatbelt. Harry glances at him, eyes wide and mouth open slightly before turning back to the people. None of them are paying them any mind and he relaxes a little.

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“Yeah, I’m fine. Just more people than I thought, but it seems cool,” he replies finally, pushing the button on his own seatbelt. He pulls his hoodie up over his head as well before he gets out of the car though, tucking his hands into his coat pockets. He’s wearing jeans that look baggy on him and warm hiking boots that he hadn’t worn in years.

Anne and Des had questioned the sanity of this plan. Both of them still thinking about the furor after the movie date, but Robin tells them much the same as Liam had told Harry. They needed to
live their lives. Harry needed to get out, be free, be normal and experience life again. To hell with anyone who attempted to get in the way of that.

They walk quietly over to the entrance. Liam pulls his wallet out and fetches a £20 note, handing it over to the young girl manning the till. Her hair is dyed black, dark makeup is around her eyes and gum is smacking in her teeth. It’s clear she has not recognized them and she wouldn’t be a fan in the first place anyway. She hands back his change and picks up the hand stamp, waiting with a bored look on her face for him to proffer his hand for her to painfully press the rubber into it before she waits on Harry to do the same.

Harry is smirking as they walk away, entirely amused by her. They share a quick laugh before continuing on.

The Arboretum spans across several acres. Thousands of species of trees, shrubberies and plants are all laid out in separate gardens like the Magnolia Wood and the Winter Garden. For the moment, they are all decorated in their Halloween best. Fairy lights line branches and ghostly sheets blow gently in the wind. A path has been marked and they are handed a map just in case before they head off. It’s twilight, the sky fading from lavender to deep purple. It gives the area a mystical feel and the branches that are not lit up look like shadows.

Harry starts up the path quickly, a grin on his face as he takes it all in. Liam hurries to catch up, pulling out his phone and snapping a quick picture. Harry startles slightly at the sound, but turns and gives Liam a smirk before carrying on.

It gets dark fast, forcing them to pull out their phones to use the flashlight at times to avoid tripping, but it’s the most fun Liam’s had in years. More than once an actor dressed in Halloween garb jumps out from behind a tree, bench, or fence and yells or groans in an attempt to scare them. Every time Liam nearly jumps out of his skin while Harry just laughs, entirely unfazed.

Their hands end up together about halfway through. Partly because it kept them close in the darkened space and partly because it just felt right. No one stops them, no one says anything to them nor show any signs of recognition and Liam can see how much Harry is enjoying the freedom.

He starts to chat amicably with a couple of younger children as they pass them. The little girl dressed as a fairy princess and the boy as a frog. The two are instantly taken with Harry, his infamous charm doing its trick as usual.

“Are you a fairy from this forest?” He asks the little girl, who grins and nods her head quickly. “Did you turn your brother into a frog? That’s very clever.” She giggles quickly and the brother actually quips in with a ribbit noise, making Harry laugh out loud. “Very good! How is your hopping though?”

The boy giggles and starts jumping his way up the path and Harry applauds him, laughing again. A warmth takes hold in Liam’s chest. He felt like he had gone back in time and was watching the old Harry. The man he had known, happy, carefree, charming, witty and not a hint of fear or darkness. He wants to bottle the moment to keep forever.

“Alright, alright, you two. Fairy Godmother over here thinks it’s about time to get back to pick a pumpkin or we won’t have time to carve it before it’s time to head home,” the mother adds in, earning her two disappointed wee groans.
The little girl runs up to Harry and takes hold of his hand, starting to pull him along with them and he laughs while her mother tries to stop her.

“Madeline, stop that! You can’t just drag people away from their friends!”

“But he’s my friend. Aren’t you? What’s your name?” Madeline demands, looking up at Harry with a very serious expression and he smirks down at her before replying.

“Harry, and of course I’m your friend. But you should do as your mummy is asking. That’s what good princess fairies do,” he replies and Liam sees the mother jolt slightly. Recognition finally hits her, but she schools her face and doesn’t mention it. Madeline meanwhile, pouts quite impressively.

“Come pick a pumpkin with me Uncle Harry. We have to pick the best one!” She starts trying to pull Harry again and gets an impressive amount of speed, jolting him forward a few steps. Though it would only take a stiff wind to move Harry at this point.

“Madeline! Stop it! Harry is on a walk with his friend and it’s rude to try to take him away from it,” her mother hurries out, throwing Harry an apologetic look. “I’m sorry, she gets carried away.”

“It’s alright,” Harry assures her, voice deep and warm. “It’s the right holiday to get carried away for. Now miss Madeline,” he crouches down so he’s at eye level with the little girl. “I’m going to continue on my walk, but you go pick the best pumpkin ever and carve it up just right and I’ll come see it before I leave, deal?”

Madeline pouts again. She crosses her arms over her chest when he declares his intention to keep walking, but as he makes his suggestion she relaxes, grinning at him and nodding vigorously. Her brother issues another ribbit beside them, making Harry laugh again.

“Right, off you go. See you in a while,” he assures her. He gently scoots her towards her mother, who smiles warmly at him. She nods before taking hold of her two busy children and marching them off towards the pumpkin patch a few yards away. There were several tables set up with orange gingham table clothes and lots of overhead lights. Pumpkin innards were already covering most surfaces, but no one seemed to mind.

When they’ve gone Harry walks back over to Liam and takes his hand again. He smiles at him softly and Liam leans in to kiss him, finding himself unable to resist. He feels Harry’s smile still on his lips and the soft puff of air as he laughs at Liam’s reaction. He returns the kiss easily, lips cool from the night air but present. When they separate, Harry smirks at him again and shakes his head softly.

“Shall we carry on? Turns out I have another date tonight,” he says in a serious voice and Liam laughs, leading Harry back onto the path and they carry on.

They don’t say anything for the rest of the walk, but it’s not uncomfortable. The scenery is beautiful and the air is crisp with the scent of cinnamon, apples and wood burning in the wind.

They arrive at the pumpkin patch in due order and find Madeline and her brother, who they are introduced to as Sam, merrily ripping chunks of pumpkin guts out and tossing them on the newspaper laid out to gather the garbage.

“Harry!” Madeline squeals out, leaping off her seat to rush forward to grab his hand with her gooey
ones. He gets led back to the table where another small pumpkin sits next to hers. “I picked this one for you! It’s short and round,” she points out, shoving the vegetable at him and he laughs.

“Just like me then,” he quips and sits down in front of it. Madeline laughs loudly.

“You’re silly Harry,” she giggles out, pulling out another handful of slimy seeds.

“So I’ve been told,” he replies, eyes flicking to Liam for a moment before he picks up the pumpkin carving knife. He starts working on carving a circle around the stem to open it up for cleaning. “Liam go find a pumpkin. We need at least two for the front step,” he instructs and Liam nods dramatically, quickly setting off on his duty. The kids’ mother laughs as he goes.

He finds a tall, skinny one and snags it, figuring it was a perfect complement to Harry’s. He carries it back to the table, pulling up a seat next to Sam who is carefully separating the seeds from the stringy goo on the table. His mother quickly comes and tells him to worry about emptying the pumpkin instead of playing with the innards.

“I’m Jillian by the way,” she introduces herself, looking at her kids fondly and smiling at Liam and Harry. “Thank you for this. You’ve made it a bit more special for them. Their dad couldn’t make it tonight.”

“Not a problem,” Harry replies easily, winking at Madeline as he flicks a seed at her. She giggles and responds by lobbing a handful of mess right back at him that splats on the front of his coat before falling to his lap.

“MADELINE!” Jillian yells, hurrying over to help Harry clear away the mess. He just laughs and waves her away, quickly scooping it on to the ground and wiping the stuck seeds away.

“It’s fine. Everything is washable,” he says easily before returning to emptying his pumpkin. Liam just laughs quietly and knows that Harry truly isn’t bothered. This was the same guy who had been coated in cake and icing on more than one occasion.

“While that is fine and dandy, Madeline you cannot throw this stuff at people. It’s wet and messy and it’s not nice!” Jillian states clearly. Her eyes are on her daughter full of reprimand and Madeline shrinks slightly.

“He started it,” she points out hotly and Harry barks out a loud laugh, smacking his knee.

“She’s not wrong!” He agrees, glancing at Jillian.

“Fine, both of you, no more throwing stuff. Am I clear?” She demands in a playful, but stern voice. The two guilty parties glance at each other before looking back at Jillian and nodding dramatically.

They manage to behave themselves the rest of the time. Harry carves a silly face into his pumpkin with big googly eyes and a wide grin while Madeline attempts a cat with a little help from Uncle Harry.

Liam goes more dramatic, giving his a long face and sharp teeth, while Sam just makes a lot of holes in his. When they are done, Liam collects some of the tea light candles that were being given away free with the pumpkins and puts one in each, lighting them with the provided matches. Then they all stand back to admire their handiwork.
“Ok, I want a picture. All artists with their pumpkins,” Jillian says with a smile before catching herself and glancing at Liam and Harry nervously. “If that’s ok of course?”

Harry debates for a moment, face unsure. Liam is about to step in to say that maybe it should just be the kids when Harry finally speaks up.

“Yes! I want a picture with Harry,” Madeline cuts in, entirely unaware of the tension the request had caused. Harry relaxes and smiles softly, letting himself be led to the table by the little girl, the other two following quickly.

They each stand behind their own creation, Liam and Harry smiling nicely while Madeline and Sam grin like hyenas. Jillian takes one picture, her flash going off to indicate it and then she clears them away to take pictures of the pumpkins themselves, relieving Harry.

“Right, you two it’s time for bed so let’s collect your pumpkins. Say goodnight to Harry and Liam and get a move on,” Jillian declares a few moments later. The same groans they’d heard before accompany her request. “I mean it. You’ve got school tomorrow.”

“Can Harry come over to play tomorrow when I get home from school?” Madeline asks giving her best puppy dog eyes, full of hope. Jillian is flustered for a moment, glancing at Harry and laughing once.

“Maddy honey, he is probably a busy man. It was nice to meet him tonight and make friends, but sometimes friends are just for one night,” Jillian says gently. Madeline turns and stares at Harry in horror.

“You don’t want to be my friend anymore?” She demands, eyes wide. Harry crouches down again.

“That’s not it at all Maddy. But your mum is right. I’m busy, but you have the picture of all of us with our pumpkins and maybe we will see you again next year,” he suggests.

She immediately pouts, bottom lip wobbling.

“Make friends with my mummy on Facebook. Then we can still be friends,” Madeline suggests hopefully. Harry cocks his head to the side slightly, smiling at her gently.

“I don’t have Facebook Maddy, but maybe if your mummy gives me hers, I’ll consider joining when I feel like I’m ready,” he replies, hoping it will be enough to calm the child.

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“I don’t have Facebook Maddy, but maybe if your mummy gives me hers, I’ll consider joining when I feel like I’m ready,” he replies, hoping it will be enough to calm the child.

“That’s fine with me,” Jillian replies and Madeline finally relents.

“I’m gonna miss you,” she states before throwing her arms around Harry’s neck giving him a big hug. He returns it, looking slightly emotional himself. Like the movie, Madeline had given him a respite and a distraction. Liam could see that he was actually loathe to let it go. Her innocence was compelling, she didn’t know him, didn’t know what he had been through, her entire opinion of him was based on just this night.
“I’ll miss you too Maddy. Be a good fairy princess and listen to your mummy, ok?” He says as they part from the hug and she nods emphatically. “Right, do you need help picking up your pumpkin?”

“Nope! I’m a big girl. I can do it,” she declares, hurrying over to the table and carefully hoisting it into her arms. Liam moves fast, quickly blowing through one of the holes to extinguish the flame. Jillian gives him a grateful look, her own body leaning forward, ready to leap to do it herself.

He quickly extinguishes the rest of them and Jillian collects Sam’s pumpkin while Liam and Harry pick up their own.

They walk together to the parking lot. Liam and Jillian following the other three, talking quietly. The little family was from Chiddingfold, not far from the Arboretum. Jillian's husband, the kids' father, was in the Royal Air Force and was stationed in India at the time for training, which was why he wasn’t there.

“I don’t want them to miss anything, but it’s tough without David here. I know they miss him, so Harry was a nice distraction for Maddy. She wasn’t in the best of moods before she met him because she seems to see it as a betrayal to have fun without her dad here.”

“Well, I’m fairly certain she was a nice distraction for Harry as well. It’s something he needs right now,” Liam admits, watching as Harry and Maddy wander along ahead of them chatting. There are several pumpkin seeds stuck to the back of Harry’s coat and Liam wonders how in hell that happened. He’ll have to brush them off before Harry gets in the car or they will be embedded in the seat.

“I wasn’t sure if I could say anything. I didn’t even recognize you two at first. It wasn’t until he introduced himself that the dots connected, but I assure you I won’t tell a soul. I get the impression you both are just trying to have a life and I respect that,” Jillian says carefully and Liam nods at her.

“Thank you and yes. Unfortunately, unlike you, there are a lot of people who try to capitalize on that. It’s been really hard on Harry and hurtful to him,” he says quietly, frustration creeping into his voice.

“Yeah, I saw what happened a few weeks back. I’m sorry for that. He’s clearly not the person they try to make him out to be,” Jillian agrees. “I’m sorry for what happened to him as well. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy, but he is so undeserving of something like that,” she adds quietly so Harry doesn’t hear her.

“No, no he didn’t deserve it. Not at all,” Liam agrees. His eyes are on Harry again and his profile as he turns and smiles down at the little girl, arms holding his pumpkin carefully.

“He seems to be doing well though. He strikes me as a strong person and I’m sure having you at his side has helped a great deal,” she assures him, looking at him meaningfully. “Take it from someone who knows what it’s like to miss your partner in life. I know my situation is nothing like yours, but I have no doubt you have been very much a great help to him. It’s clear in how he looks at you.”

Liam’s cheeks heat slightly with the praise. It also warms his chest and he nods at her, happy to get the support.
They reach Jillian’s car and she opens the boot, carefully depositing Sam’s pumpkin into it. Harry and Maddy come over and he helps her put her pumpkin in as well. She shakes off any offers of assistance from her mother in favor of having Harry do it instead. When the precious cargo is settled, she ushers the two of them into the backseat. Maddy takes the chance to give Harry one more big hug before she relents and gets into her seat to get buckled in.

Jillian gives each of them a hug as well, laughing at the smears of pumpkin all over Harry before getting into her car and starting the engine. They wave as they pull away, Harry and Liam standing together and waving back until they can’t see them anymore.

They head back to their own car, putting the pumpkins in the back before Liam stops Harry and tries to get the worst of the mess off of him.

“Liam, it’s just pumpkin. It’s no big deal,” Harry huffs, swatting his hands away as they try to pull strings of innards off the front of his coat.

“Well you’ve got seeds stuck to your ass. No idea how you did that, but you are not getting in with those there,” Liam retorts, picking a seed off of Harry’s back.

Harry swipes at his bum with his hands, knocking the offending bits off before spinning dramatically for Liam to examine him to make sure he was acceptable.

“You are so fussy,” Harry laughs after they’ve got in the car as he buckles his seatbelt.

“I don’t want my car to smell like rotting pumpkin thank you very much,” Liam replies evenly and Harry laughs again.

They pull out onto the road and start heading for home, the radio playing softly and after a minute Harry’s hand finds Liam’s.

“Thank you for tonight. I really enjoyed it and there were no rogue photographers to ruin it either,” he says after a few minutes.

“I had fun as well. I’m glad we met them. They were nice people. It’s good to be reminded those exist in this world still,” Liam agrees and Harry nods emphatically.

“I really will have to consider getting a Facebook now. I’d like to keep in touch with them,” he adds after a moment.

“Will you be my friend on there?” Liam asks jokingly.

“Absolutely not,” Harry deadpans and Liam laughs.

The rest of the ride is quiet, but like the walk it’s not awkward. Harry turns up the radio when Zayn’s song comes on and they both relax.

They set the pumpkins on the front step when they get home before they call Des, Robin and Anne out to see them and much congratulations and jokes are shared around.

“The hell happened to you?” Robin asks when they get inside and the extent of the mess all over Harry becomes more visible in the light.
“I met a new friend who threw pumpkin guts at me,” Harry laughs and Liam just shakes his head.

Anne makes tea and they all gather in the kitchen. Harry tells them all about Maddy, Sam and Jillian and Liam can’t help but notice the slightly weepy smiles on his parents’ faces. They could see how happy, how easy and how comfortable he was. It was something they hadn’t seen in years and it was making them emotional.

Des pulls Liam aside as they head for the stairs to go up to bed. Anne walks ahead with Harry as they discuss how they are going to get his coat clean.

“Thank you” Des tells him. “You were right about getting him out of the house. I wasn’t sure I’d ever see him like this again. It’s the old Harry,” he whispers, throat catching a few times.

“I know. I love seeing it too, trust me,” Liam agrees.

“We need to find more things to do. Maybe we could go somewhere as a family, yours and ours. We could make a day of something,” he asks and Liam nods. He was perfectly happy to agree to anything that might keep Harry smiling like he was right now.

“Good. And thank you again, for everything,” Des says with emphasis. His eyes are intense with their gratitude as they meet Liam’s and he can only nod in response.

“What did my dad want downstairs?” Harry asks him once they are alone in the bedroom, face slightly suspicious.

“Nothing, it’s fine. He’s just happy to see you happy, that’s all,” Liam replies, being honest for the most part.

Harry’s eyes narrow slightly as he deciphers Liam’s words, but he nods a minute later. He unzips his hoodie and takes it off, depositing it into the hamper on his way to the bathroom.

“He wants all of us, my family included, to do something together and make a day somewhere. What do you think?” Liam asks. He knows he had already agreed, but he would readily back out if Harry didn’t want to.

“Yeah, that’s fine. What though?” He asks, coming out a moment later in his pajamas to add the rest of his clothes to the hamper.

“Did you want to shower before bed? You got a lot of pumpkin on you,” Liam asks, momentarily distracted. Harry gives him a long side eye.

“It was only my clothes Liam and stop bloody worrying about it. What did my dad have in mind?” He replies and redirects. Liam has to fight the urge to go sniff him. It wasn’t that he was a clean freak or germaphobe or anything, but he had a weird thing about his bed. He didn’t like foreign matter in it.

“I don’t know, he didn’t say. Christmas is coming. Something to do with that or maybe just something like tonight, a fun walk,” Liam answers. He strips down himself, sniffing his own arms and chest for pumpkin odor.

“You are literally not going to be ok unless I shower are you?” Harry asks him in a deadpan voice, standing beside the bed looking exasperated.
“I don’t like the smell of pumpkin, ok? I don’t want it in the bed. I’ll shower too,” he offers. Harry rolls his eyes and shakes his head, trudging back towards the bathroom.

“Fine, Jesus Christ Liam,” he laughs, pulling his pajamas back off again and the elastic out of his hair. “I’m going first though,” he declares before the water starts up.

Feeling better now that Harry was washing the pumpkin off, Liam waits until he’s in the shower before he slips in and grabs his pajamas. He replaces them with clean ones and throws the others in the hamper. He collects clean ones for himself along with a towel and piles it all on the counter, brushing his teeth while Harry showers.

They had become so comfortable with this. It was so normalized that for a long time he hadn’t thought about the fact that Harry was naked just a few feet away. This was mainly because thinking of Harry in that way was something he couldn’t even bear to do while he was recovering and technically he still was. Yet at the same time, the kisses they had shared had awoken that heat and desire in Liam again. Tonight he finds himself struck by the naked body on the other side of the frosted glass.

He finds his eyes traveling over there. He watches the shape of Harry’s body, rippled and barely defined through the glass as he moved about scrubbing his body down and a twinge of arousal goes through him.

Worried suddenly about what he might do, he quickly hurries out of the bathroom and takes in some clearer, dryer air. Guilt presses down on him from every side. He knew what he had just felt was completely and totally unacceptable, no matter their current relationship status. Harry trusted him and he couldn’t break that, ever. That was a guilt he couldn’t live with. He knew well enough he’d never hurt Harry or anything that drastic, but looking at him that way felt like an invasion of his privacy.

He sits down on one of the chairs and waits for his turn in the shower in the safety of the bedroom.

He hears the water turn off, the door opening and the towel moving around before Harry curses him.

“Liam, for God’s sake. I didn’t need new pajamas. I barely touched the other ones.”

“I got clean ones as well. You can’t wear the same ones every night,” Liam retorts, forcing himself to move on and forget about what had just happened. Harry didn’t know and it was best he never did.

“You’re ridiculous,” Harry replies. A moment later he comes out wearing the clean pajamas, throwing Liam a head shake before climbing under the covers.

Liam hurries around the bed and heads into the bathroom. He strips down and showers quickly, carefully keeping his thoughts clean so he didn’t have any untoward reactions. He dries off and gets dressed just as rapidly.

Flicking the bathroom light off he heads out to the bed and gets in next to Harry. He lets him cuddle in close and kisses the top of his head as it lands on his chest. He was glad that Harry didn’t seem to be intent on attempting to make out with him again. Instead, he starts to snore softly a few minutes later and Liam finally relaxes fully.
The rest of the week is more calm. Harry agrees do some errands with Liam again after therapy, enjoying the chance to be out again. Liam isn’t sure if it’s pure luck or that people are just leaving them alone because they seem to blend in with the crowd. No one stares or tries to take sneaky pictures. He hopes that they have finally reached a turning point.

A week after the pumpkin party is Halloween itself and they pick up a few bags of candy. Liam knew there were families in his neighbourhood and he wanted to be ready should trick or treaters come to call. They set their pumpkins on the porch, light the tea candles and open the gate to the driveway at dusk. For the first hour it’s quiet and a sense of disappointment settles over the house. Though no one can blame his neighbours. It would be easy for them to assume they wanted to be left alone and there could also still be some remaining displeasure from the media fiasco that had taken over just after Harry escaped.

But then the bell rings and they find a mini Batman and a Minion standing on the porch. It starts a tidal wave of kids with their parents standing back a few yards and waving in a friendly manner. The candy is all gone before 8:00, causing a slight panic until Harry pulls out his Kit Kat stash and starts doling them out. They make it with only one Kit Kat remaining at 9:30 when the bell finally stops ringing. Then they all flop down on the couch to watch a spooky movie.

The evening adds to Harry’s confidence in being out in public so a few days later when he’s due to go to his therapist, Liam suggests they go for dinner together afterwards.

“Another date?” Harry asks with a laugh as they get out of bed and start pulling clothes out for the day.

“Yes,” Liam declares, deciding that he wanted it to be one. “We can still keep it casual, but we’ve not been out for a meal yet. It would be nice. A little Italian food and some nice wine.”

Harry glances at him and laughs. Though his face is uneasy, he thinks on it while he showers, Liam staying out in the bedroom. He’d been careful about policing himself since that night. Not letting his thoughts wander and staying out of the bathroom when Harry was showering. If Harry had noticed Liam’s sudden absence when normally he would come and go from the bathroom while Harry was in the shower, he doesn’t mention it.

When he’s done and dressed with his damp hair on his shoulders, he finally gives his reply.

“Ok, let’s do dinner. But maybe keep it simple, yeah?”

Liam nods and smiles at him. He gives him a quick peck before heading into the bathroom to ready for the day himself.

“Go make some tea and breakfast. I’ll be down in a few minutes,” he says as he gets into the bathroom, pulling out a towel.

He’d always let Harry shower first. Initially because he needed help, then because he took a lot
longer and finally because it just seemed the polite thing to do. Now it was so he could gently get
Harry to go downstairs to do something else, like bake or make tea or see what his mum wanted.
This gave Liam some alone time in the bathroom. Being able to release the sexual tension he had
been fighting made it a lot easier to control his actions and mind. Harry hadn’t been jumping on
him and kissing him anymore. Though they did still have the odd moment, but it was short-lived
and often chaste in nature. But this didn’t mean that the desire it had awakened had left Liam.

Once again, if Harry has noticed this change in their routine, he’s not saying anything about it.
Which Liam thought was very polite of him.

He waits until the bedroom door closes, indicating that Harry had left, and then he closes the
bathroom door behind himself as well. He wanted to be sure of privacy before stripping down and
turning the water on. His body was already trained in this new found daily ritual, so by the time
he’s stepped in under the hot water he’s half hard. He makes quick work of his hair before working
the soap over his body, his cock coming to full attention by then. He strokes himself rapidly,
knowing that time wasn’t on his side. He comes a few minutes later, a panting breath leaving his
mouth as the water washes away the end result.

Feeling better and less tense, he finishes showering and readies for the day. Harry hands him tea
and a plate of pancakes when he comes down, a gentle smile on his lips. Liam tries not to decipher
it into a knowing look because that would be uncomfortable to say the least. Touring together they
had all seen each other in a variety of embarrassing and downright mortifying situations, both alone
and with other people. That was no different with him and Harry, but things felt different now.
Particularly since Harry’s confession about the problem he was having. He’d said no more about it
and Liam sincerely hoped he had realized he was pushing himself too much. He hoped Harry was
taking the proper time to heal and focus on other things.

Just after lunch they head to London. Liam does some shopping while he’s in session and they hit
the spice shop when he’s finished. The mixture of the items in the bags make the car smell rich
and delicious.

“Where are you taking me for our dinner date?” Harry asks him when the car is loaded with their
bags.

“The Spaghetti House,” he replies easily, earning a laugh from Harry. “Hey! I like that place and
you wanted casual. They have good food, nice wine and it’s not too big.”

Harry nods a moment later and gets in the car.

“At least I know we aren’t underdressed,” he points out with a smirk and Liam laughs.

The restaurant is surprisingly busy for a Tuesday night and he can feel Harry’s tension as they pull
up. The night was unseasonably warm so the patio was actually full, but there are empty tables
inside. Still, he wasn’t going to force Harry if he was uncomfortable.

“Do you want to go somewhere else? Or we can just grab a pizza and go home,” he suggests. Harry
glances at him and then back at the restaurant, determination crossing his features.

“No, this is fine. We will just ask for a table in a corner or something,” he says carefully,
unbuckling his seat belt and opening the door.

Liam follows him and they walk side by side up to the door. Harry keeps his face down as he
tended to do, letting his hair act as a curtain until they are off the street.

The restaurant is warm and the air is spicy, rich and inviting. The atmosphere is comfortable with warm red tones everywhere. Even though there are a lot of people, it isn’t overly noisy.

The hostess’ eyes pop the second they land on Liam, but she maintains professionalism, for the time being at least.

“Table for two?” She asks politely.

“Yes, please. In a quiet corner if possible,” Liam replies, Harry fidgeting beside him. Her eyes slide over to him and widen even further. It’s a moment before she moves, collecting two menus and scanning the board for what is available.

“Oh, sure, no problem. Follow me,” she instructs before she hurries off, stumbling slightly as she glances back at Harry again.

Harry follows behind Liam, hiding slightly, and she takes them near the back of the restaurant, a comfortable half circle shaped booth that provided some privacy.

Liam thanks her and they sit down awkwardly. He opens his menu for lack of anything better to do and starts scanning the options. A few catch his interest and he also has a look at the wine list.

“Anything look good to you?” He asks Harry idly, but he doesn’t get a reply. He looks up to find Harry looking around with wide eyes, menu still closed in front of him. “Haz, you ok?” He asks carefully, putting a hand on one of Harry’s arms, making him jump in surprise.

“What? Sorry, I was just…” he says in a splintered tone. His eyes go back to the restaurant, the tables they could see and the waiters and waitresses buzzing around with trays.

“Are you ok? Do you want to go?” Liam asks again.

“No, no, we don’t need to go. It’s just kinda overwhelming I guess. Been a long time,” he admits. He looks back at Liam with a quick nervous smile before he finally opens his menu, looking it over quickly. “You’ve been here before, what do you recommend?”

Liam scans the menu again himself. It had been a long time since he’d been here, but he also knows how particular Harry was now when it came to food. So he tries to find something he will be amendable to.

“Um, do you want pasta? Pizza? A sandwich?” He asks. Harry glances at him and then back at the menu, shrugging.

“Pasta I guess. I mean, it is an Italian restaurant,” he points out.

“Oh, well the Ravioli Alla Norma is really good. It’s got aubergines in the sauce,” he suggests, and Harry nods immediately.

“Oh, I’ll have that,” he replies, closing his menu and setting it down.

A waiter comes up and looks them over, a knowing expression on his face. Liam suspects the hostess has been busy telling everyone she worked with who was there.
“Hi, I’m Philip and I’ll be your server tonight. Can I start you guys off with a drink?” He asks in an overly friendly tone and Harry’s brows come together slightly.

“Oh, we will have two glasses of this,” Liam replies, pointing to a white wine on the list. “And I think we are ready to order as well, if that’s alright.”

Philip makes a face that tells Liam that it’s not alright because if they are ordering already, they will be leaving faster. But frankly, Liam doesn’t much care for Philip’s feelings on the subject.

“Sure,” he replies in a faux cheerful tone. “What can I get for you?” He asks Harry directly, startling him slightly. He looks to Liam for help.

“I don’t remember what it was called,” he says quietly.

“That’s fine. He is going to have the Ravioli Alla Norma and I am going with the Spaghetti Bolognese,” Liam tells Philip, handing him the menus with a warning look.

“Any starters?” Philip asks hopefully while jotting down their order.

“No, thank you,” Liam replies, dismissing the younger man.

As soon as he’s gone, Harry lets out a shaky breath.

“Are you really ok?” Liam asks him, taking his hand under the table gently.

“Yeah, I am. I just hate that we are still being recognized, as silly as that sounds, but it just overwhelms me when it happens,” he admits.

“I know, it’s frustrating,” he agrees. “It’s not silly though, don’t worry. Being recognized before, back in the day, was fine because we put ourselves out there and knew the stakes. But now it’s hard to get people to realize that we aren’t the same people with the same lifestyle or career. I keep hoping the more we go out in public, the more we prove we are just like anyone else and deserve to be treated as such. But it’s gonna take time.”

“I just feel kinda bad. I never had a problem with it before really because it was fun, meeting new people and the whole fame thing. So long as people were polite. It’s hard to change things I guess. I don’t want to be rude. I just wish they would leave me alone,” Harry says quietly, eyes trailing out into the restaurant again.

The table next to theirs appears to be some sort of office celebration. All of the diners are wearing some variation of a suit and not paying any attention to Liam and Harry. The hostess however keeps taking every opportunity she can get to peek around the barrier separating the front entrance of the restaurant to spy on them. The rest of the waiters and other restaurant staff seem to be making an effort to pass by their table as well and anger pulses in Liam’s chest.

Philip returns a few minutes later with their drinks as well as two glasses of water.

“Here you go. Good choice on the wine, it’s one of my favorites. I’ll be back in a few with your bread,” he says smoothly and Liam rolls his eyes. Every other time he’d been there, the waiter brought the bread with the wine, instead of making extra trips. This prick even takes an extra moment to smile at Harry, who just stares back at him blankly in response.
“Ok, he’s annoying,” Harry says after he’s gone and they both laugh. “I would have no problem being rude to him except he’ll probably spit in our food.”

“Wait until he’s brought it,” Liam replies and Harry snorts. “Anyway, just ignore them. How was therapy today?”

Harry glances at him. He laughs quietly at the not so subtle change of subject and shrugs.

“IT was fine Liam,” he replies politely.

“Yeah, but you never really say much about it. Do you think you are making progress?” He asks carefully. He didn’t want to pry or push Harry, but he had never offered any commentary on how he was doing with Dr. Howard or how long he would have to go to him.

“I’m sitting here in a restaurant with you, something that we can both agree would have been unheard of a few months ago. So yes, clearly I’m making progress,” Harry replies with a laugh. “Don’t worry. I am making the most of the opportunity with the doctor. I know it’s what’s best for me and he does help me. He’s easy to talk to and doesn’t make stupid suggestions or just placate me. So that’s good.”

Liam squeezes his hand under the table and smiles at him.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. And yes, I have noticed that you are doing better. I just wanted to make sure you were ok with everything.”

“I’m fine. You’re like an Italian grandmother, feeding me and fussing over me,” Harry replies with a laugh.

“Hey! Someone has to do it and it’s only because I care,” Liam retorts, reaching out and pinching Harry’s cheek in retaliation, like a grandmother would.

Philip, of course, chooses to return with their bread at that moment and awkwardly laughs while he sets it down. Both of them turn and lift one brow at him.

“Thank you Philip.” Harry says with a touch of sarcasm. The younger man smiles and backs away, still eyeing them oddly.

As soon as he’s out of earshot they crack up laughing. Liam grabs one of the breadsticks and shoves it at Harry.

“Mangia! Mangia!”

“Hey!” Harry replies, dodging the crusty weapon and seizing one of his own. He smacks Liam’s as though they were swords and not bread.

The volume of their laughter increases as they swat at each other, bread crumbs flying everywhere. It only ends when Liam’s dueling sword breaks in half from a particularly brutal swipe by Harry. He’s forced to admit defeat and holds up his white napkin. When Harry finally nods and grants him mercy, he shoves what’s left of the handle end in his mouth. Harry snorts and starts laughing again.

“Oh my God, look at the fucking mess we made!” He declares as he looks down at all of the crumbs on the table and floor, not to mention all over themselves.
“Philip can clean it up,” Liam retorts and Harry laughs again.

The moment of frivolity relaxes Harry completely and Liam is glad for it. That was the point of these dates. For Harry to get the chance to have a life, be normal and the extra bonus for Liam was that they got some time alone together.

It takes them a moment to realize that several people at nearby tables are staring at them oddly, having heard and witnessed their epic battle, and Harry snorts quietly.

“At least they aren’t looking at me for the usual recent reasons. Makes a nice change.”

“Yup, true enough,” Liam agrees and snags another break stick, handing it to Harry. “Eat that one.”

Harry snorts again and shakes his head.

“Yes Nona,” he deadpans and bites the end off.

There is another minute of laughing when Liam is forced to pick bread crumbs out of his wine, but he drinks it anyway and savors the crisp, sharp flavor and warmth in his throat. He didn’t use to be big into wine, usually was happy with just a pint, but he’d found he had a taste for it in the last two years when Ruth had dragged him out to eat or to her house where she always had a bottle open.

“Righhhtttt….” Philip says, starting off cheerful and fading to confused when he sees the mess on the table. Harry laughs quietly, tucking his head down. “Um, yeah, so I have one Ravioli Alla Norma here,” he continues, trying to remain professional as he sets it down in front of Harry with a flourish. “And one Spag Bol,” he places Liam’s down and the smell is enough to make his mouth water. He hadn’t had a good spaghetti bolognese in forever.

“Thank you,” they both reply in unison, making them smirk.

“Can I interest you in some freshly grated parmesan?” Philip asks Harry, leaning over the table towards him and Harry immediately leans away, eyes widening.

“No… no thank you,” he replies and the waiter looks disappointed. He turns and offers it to Liam with a little less grace and Liam declines as well.

“Anything else I can get for you?” He presses one more time. Liam half wonders if he wants an invite to sit down with them.

“No, we are fine, thank you,” he answers. The other man finally takes his leave, heading towards the hostess stand to no doubt update her on the goings on at their table.

“I would say don’t leave him a tip, but I’m not that much of an asshole,” Harry says quietly and Liam laughs once.

They start eating quietly and Liam savors the rich, slightly sweet tomato sauce full of beef and onions. Harry pokes at his for a moment, cutting up the ravioli into smaller pieces and arranging them slightly before he finally eats a piece, chewing slowly and looking around while he does so. Liam’s plate is clean before Harry has even eaten two of the small raviolis and he can only shake his head in frustration.
“Harry, that is going to be cold if you don’t start eating,” he points out gently. Harry glances at him and then back down to his plate.

“I know, I just… it takes me a while, you know that. My stomach needs time to adjust,” he retorts, spearing a piece of aubergine with his fork and putting it in his mouth.

“I know that you spend a lot of time poking at your food and never really eating it. I get that you can’t eat much, but you do need to make more of an effort. You’ve barely gained any weight,” Liam says gently. Their last visit with Dr. Mercer had been a tad tense because of this issue. She had given them a plan that included how much weight she wanted him to gain each week, the amount of calories he needed to be taking in, the whole nine yards. Liam can’t think of a single day they actually met the goal.

“I’m aware Liam, but I’m just never hungry really. It makes it difficult and I don’t like forcing it,” he says quietly, smearing some sauce on another quarter of a ravioli and poking at it. He looks up and notices Liam’s empty plate and immediately starts trying to push his towards Liam. “Here, try some. I won’t be able to eat it all anyway.”

Liam gently pushes it back. He didn’t want to make Harry uncomfortable, but he did want him to get healthier.

“I’ve tried it before so I know what it’s like. Just eat some more, please.”

Harry sighs loudly but picks up another piece and eats it, still chewing slowly and wasting time between each bite watching the rest of the people nearby. He continues this process through a couple more full raviolis. He manages to eat about a third of his portion, but then he sets his fork down.

Liam bites his tongue to say more because Harry knew all of it already. He had eaten more than he usually did at meals, so he had to chalk this one up as a win.

As if sensing the lowered forks, Philip arrives at the table with a big smile and quickly collects Liam’s plate and looks at Harry’s.

“Did you want to take that home with you?” He asks politely.

“Sure,” Harry replies quietly. Liam knows full well it’ll likely end up being either himself or Des who eats it in the end, but again, it wasn’t worth mentioning. He wasn’t actually out to make Harry feel bad.

“Great! I’ll grab a take away container. Can I interest either of you in some dessert?” Philip replies happily, overjoyed at being asked to do something by Harry Styles.

“No, I think we’re good. Just the check when you bring back the container,” Liam answers. Philip deflates, taking the dishes and walking away.

“I think you just broke his heart,” Harry stage whispers and they both laugh quietly. “But thank you for this. I know you are making an effort to help me and I want you to know I appreciate it and I had fun. Though we might be banned for life when they realize how much of a mess we made.”

“I would like to think they would use a warning system,” Liam retorts and they both laugh. “You’re welcome though. I’m glad you enjoyed it. Next time you pick the restaurant,” he says
gently, squeezing Harry’s hand again.

Philip comes back with the container and hands it directly to Harry with a smile while handing the check to Liam with a much falser one. Evidently he blamed Liam for getting in the way of him and Harry bonding and they both laugh quietly as he goes and fetches the credit card reader. Despite Philip’s ridiculous attitude, Liam leaves him a nice tip. The guy did work hard for his money after all.

They slide out of their booth carefully, crumbs falling off of them as they go and dotting the carpet. Both of them giggle and snort about it while the table full of suits stare at them with scorn.

They almost make it to the door when someone stops them.

“Harry?” The hostess says meekly, standing just in front of her desk. Liam notices her cell phone in her hand and is stunned that she has the gall to attempt this. “Could I have a picture with you? I’ve been a fan for so long and never thought I’d ever meet you,” she asks carefully. While Liam might believe her words, her tone indicates that she fully expects that Harry will acquiesce. Harry always did in the past. No matter if he knew the person was a stalker or an asshole who was saying shit about him everywhere. He would never say no because at the end of the day he saw it as part of his job. He never wanted to make a fan feel unworthy.

Liam steps forward carefully and uses one arm to usher Harry towards the door. He figures it would be best if he was the bad guy at the end of the day, relinquishing Harry from having to respond, but he does anyway.

“While I appreciate that you have been a fan, I would think you would know that there are boundaries and I am no longer a public commodity. So I’m sorry, but no,” he says firmly, leaving her no room for argument. “Have a good night.” He adds and turns towards the door. He pulls Liam along with him and they hurry out into the cool night air.

They are quiet until they get into the car.

“I’m sure her version of how that just went will be vastly different than the truth when she posts it online and blasts me for not giving her what she wanted,” Harry mutters out, voice full of annoyance.

“Probably,” Liam agrees. “But fuck her. Fuck Philip as well for that matter.”

“I get the distinct impression Philip did want me to fuck him. Sorry that I disappointed both of them,” Harry says sarcastically and Liam laughs.

“Yes well, Philip will just have to accept that you are with me and get over it.”

Harry hums in agreement and fiddles with the radio, finding a station playing an old Arctic Monkeys song.

When they get home, Anne and Robin ask for a rundown of how it went. They are always worried there will be a repeat of the movie incident and while they are incensed that the girl thought it perfectly acceptable to approach Harry, they are glad to hear that otherwise they had fun.

Then they head up to bed and begin their usual routine.

“Oh by the way, Gemma wants to take me Christmas shopping tomorrow,” Harry says casually
while they are in the bathroom. Liam’s mouth is full of toothpaste as he looks up in surprise. “I said ok. I mean, she and I usually tried to go shopping for mum together. It’s kind of a tradition and it won’t be for long,” Harry adds, sounding a lot like he was still convincing himself.

“You should go,” Liam agrees with him after rinsing his mouth. “It’ll be fun. I know Ruth plans to take me shopping too. So I’ll text her and maybe she and I can go do our own tomorrow as well.”

“Ok, that sounds like a plan. Maybe we can drive up to London together and you can drop me off at Gemma’s?” Harry asks, eyes still a little unsure.

“Yup, that works. Maybe we can all go to dinner together after,” he suggests and Harry nods.

“Let’s avoid Philip though,” he quips with a smirk and Liam laughs. “Also, make sure you don’t go to the same shops as us, since I need to get your present too.”

“You don’t have to get me anything Harry,” Liam says gently, turning towards him and leaning his hip against the counter. “But I’m not gonna say no either,” he adds with his own smirk. Harry laughs and puts his towel down, turning towards Liam himself and coming closer.

“Oh, I see. Alright, what are you asking Santa for this year then?” He asks. He cocks his head to the side, crosses his arms over his chest and leans his hip on the counter like Liam, leaving only a few inches between them.

Liam scrunches his mouth up, looking up to the ceiling as though in deep thought and he hears Harry chuckle.

“World peace,” he replies finally, voice dead serious. Harry smiles and shakes his head.

“Be real Liam. What do you want?”

Liam actually does go serious then, looking into Harry’s green eyes.

“I kinda feel like I already got what I wanted this year,” he admits softly. His hand comes up to gently brush Harry’s cheek and the smirk on the other man’s face fades.

“You wanted a broken mess of a human being?” He asks with a note of sarcasm.

“Nooooo,” Liam drags out, voice deep. “And that is not what I see in front of me either.”

Harry blinks and looks down. It was emotional knowing that despite it all Liam still wanted him and still loved him. He steps forward a moment later and slides his arms around Liam’s waist, leaning on him, cheek on his shoulder.

“Pretty sure I don’t need to ask for anything for Christmas for the rest of my life now,” Liam says quietly as he wraps his own arms around Harry’s back and Harry huffs a quiet laugh.

“Now now, don’t be dramatic,” he points out in a deadpan voice before it thickens slightly. “But thank you for that. For making me feel like I’m worthy of you.”

Liam turns and kisses his forehead, squeezing him gently. Harry’s head comes back up, their eyes meeting again for a moment before he leans in and kisses Liam, lips firm and assured. Liam immediately relaxes into it, hand threading into Harry’s hair.
It is languid and slow for a long time. Harry’s toothpaste is sweet on his tongue and his jaw is
sharp under Liam’s hand. He knows he should probably make sure it doesn’t go too far, but he also
doesn’t want to stop.

Harry’s the first to move, hands holding on to Liam’s waist as he starts to back out of the bathroom
towards the bed, pulling him along. Liam follows easily, unable to come up with a reason not to.
Harry sits, still pulling Liam along with him as he lays on his back and Liam slots between his legs.
It just felt so natural to do so. Harry’s knee comes up, caging Liam in and their kisses deepen
significantly, becoming more erotic and the sound of it fills the room, coupling with their panting
breaths. Liam’s body responds enthusiastically, cock hardening and pressing into Harry’s hip. His
own hips start to move slowly, trying to find friction and he moans into Harry’s mouth at the
sensation. Harry’s hands tighten in his hair in a filthy way sending a shock wave down his spine.

Liam’s hips continue to move of their own volition, his body taking over where his mind was now
faltering in a fog of desire and need and Harry. He feels Harry’s body moving as well, his other leg
coming up to wrap around Liam’s, pulling him closer and Liam moans again. He takes a break
from Harry’s lips to work his way down his jaw and neck. His tongue tastes the sweat on his skin
and his lips land everywhere they can. Harry pants in his ear, a soft moan coming from his throat.

Harry only tolerates the break from kissing for so long, grasping Liam’s hair and pulling his head
back up before reclaiming his lips with almost brutal force. His body starts to move more
erratically, hips pressing up into Liam’s in jolting thrusts. Liam has to grab his hip with one hand to
slow him down, a hole in the fog forming. He pulls out of Harry’s grip on his head, looking down
at him and trying to assess what was going on. Harry issues a noise of frustration, hand rubbing his
face.

“Hey, you ok? What’s wrong?” Liam asks carefully, trying to ignore the persistent throb between
his legs.

Harry covers his eyes for a moment, rubbing at them and grumbling again.

“I’m still broken apparently,” he says angrily, legs dropping back down to the bed. Liam takes that
as his cue to get off of him and rolls to the side, but still looks over him.

“You aren’t broken. It’s gonna take time and this is probably still way too fast,” Liam tries to
reassure him. “I should know better,” he adds, angry with himself for getting carried away again.
At least Harry wasn’t scared this time. Just pissed off.

Harry sighs loudly and angrily. He glares at the ceiling with his jaw tight and Liam can see unshed
tears in his eyes.

“Haz, don’t be upset ok? It’s fine. I know it’s frustrating, but you clearly are just not ready yet and
you shouldn’t be pushing yourself.”

“I haven’t been Liam!” He retorts loudly before realizing they could be heard. “I haven’t been. I
have been trying to just relax, not think about it, work on getting better with Dr. Howard and taking
my time with you, but it’s made no difference.” He goes quiet for a moment. He huffs again angrily
before turning and rolling towards Liam. His hands land on Liam’s chest, not pushing, but pressing
and feeling the body underneath his t-shirt. “I want you. Right now, I do. I know I do, but
somehow my body is not cooperating. It’s not connecting with what my mind wants. It’s so
frustrating and so scary because I don’t know if it ever will get better.”

Liam presses his own hand over Harry’s on his chest and looks him in the eye.

“It will. I promise you it will. You just can’t force things sometimes. No matter what you think you want. Maybe it’s just not enough right now, but don’t just write yourself off alright? Because I haven’t.”

Harry sighs and glances down, clearly noting that Liam still had a pretty insistent situation going on.

“Do you want me to…” he starts and Liam cuts him off.

“No. I’m fine,” he replies quickly. It felt like it would be very, very wrong to let Harry finish him off considering the situation.

“But…”

“No, Harry, let’s just get some sleep.”

“You’re planning on sleeping like that?”

“I’ll be fine, don’t worry about it.” A flash of hurt crosses Harry’s face and Liam realizes that while he was trying to protect Harry, it might appear that he was also rejecting him. “Listen, it wouldn’t be right. I wouldn’t feel right about it. It’s not cuz I don’t want you because obviously I do, but I just don’t feel like it would be a good idea.”

Harry glances at him and nods, understanding.

“If you need to go deal with it, that’s fine. I’ll listen to some music or something,” he offers and mortification rolls over Liam. He really did not feel comfortable with the idea of Harry knowing what he was doing in the bathroom. Though he already suspected Harry was on to him when it came to the private showers, but that was left unsaid and he still had plausible deniability there. This time, he would be fully aware of exactly what Liam was up to and he cringes at the thought. Thankfully, his embarrassment is enough to cause his erection to start to deflate and he shakes his head at Harry, pulling the covers up over both of them.

“Just go to sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow,” he tells him. He swears he sees Harry roll his eyes, but he let’s the subject drop.

“You never did tell me what you want for Christmas,” he points out, settling on Liam’s chest when he rolls onto his back.

“I told you, I already got it,” Liam points out, fingers trailing through Harry’s hair.

“Liam, stop it. There has to be something you want,” Harry retorts and Liam can’t help but laugh at his determination.

“Honestly Haz I have no idea. I haven’t really thought about it. I have no idea what has even been happening in the world for the past year. Surprise me if you are so determined to get me something,” he relents finally. Harry huffs in frustration, but seems to accept that he really doesn’t
“Fine.”

“What do you want?” Liam asks, deciding to turn the tables.

“A cat.” Harry replies easily and Liam laughs.

“Somehow I don’t think Watson would be ok with that,” he points out.

“Watson would be fine. Though the cat might not like him cuz he’s so big,” Harry argues, voice muffled by Liam’s t-shirt.

“True. Well I will take that into consideration when I’m shopping tomorrow,” Liam replies with a laugh. They are quiet for a long while, both of them contemplative and Liam hopes Harry isn’t still beating himself up over his body not cooperating. He had to understand why it was happening. Liam knew he did, but he also could understand his frustration. He vows to be more careful and to not let them go too far again in the future. Not until he was sure Harry was ready. He’d already vowed the same after the last time and had broken it, but he’s determined not to do it again.

“I got what I wanted too you know,” Harry says some time later as Liam was finally starting to doze, his cock finally calmed down. He hums in reply, not sure what Harry is referring to. “I got you.”

Liam smiles at the ceiling. There's a pulse of joy in his chest as Harry starts to snore.
They’re up early the next morning, both hurrying to get ready. Harry goes downstairs to let Liam shower alone without any prompting and Liam knows without a doubt that Harry has sussed out what he’s doing. It’s embarrassing, but at the same time necessary, especially after last night.

They manage to get out the door at 7:30, since Gemma had insisted they get to the shops right when they open to maximize their time. Harry doesn’t seem surprised by this, apparently it was normal so Liam hadn’t questioned it.

Gemma is already waiting outside her flat when they get there at 8:30, smiling and waving. She’s wearing comfortable shoes and a warm coat. Her hair, currently dyed a soft rose colour, is knotted on top of her head and she has a sturdy purse on her shoulder. Clearly the woman meant business when it came to Christmas shopping.

Liam gets out and greets her with a hug. He then gives Harry a good squeeze, promising to be back by 5:00 so they could all go get dinner. Harry looks a little apprehensive about Liam leaving him, but he musters himself, determined to carry on living a normal life. He and Gemma depart down the street, heading towards Selfridges as their first plan of attack. Liam watches them until they disappear around the corner. Harry looks quite gorgeous in his black knee length pea coat and dark jeans with black boots, his hair knotted on his head just like his sister. They make quite the glamorous pair without even trying and it makes Liam laugh.

He heads to Ruth’s after, grabbing her a coffee along the way and she leaps into the car as soon as he arrives, gathering him up in a hug immediately.

“BROTHER! It’s about fucking time. Ooohhh is that a cappuccino?” She grabs the cup and takes a long swig before continuing. “Right, where are we starting first? I know that we are making an effort to avoid bumping into Harry so we don’t potentially ruin surprises, so where did they go first?”

“They are at Selfridges. So I thought we would start at Fenwick, get mum some of that soap she likes,” he replies easily, turning the radio up a little to hear Nick Grimshaw’s show.

“I mean it’s been what, over two bloody months since we first heard it? What is taking so long? Why no official announcement?” Nick is going on loudly and Liam feels his interest pique, curious as to who he’s railing against now. “You know what? I’m gonna call him. I’ve got his number. Let’s find out what he’s up to and when we can expect a proper recording because let’s be honest, that song was bloody fantastic.”

There is the sound of telephone numbers being pushed, clearly a soundbite but it gets the impression across, and seconds later the audience is treated to a ringing sound as they wait for the caller to pick up.

“Nick?” Harry’s voice comes over the radio and Liam slams on the brakes, nearly causing a collision.

“What the fuck?” He starts, staring at the radio in shock.

“Is this not planned? You should move Liam. We’re gonna get hit. You’re in the middle of the
road!” Ruth says quickly, head swiveling as the car behind them honks loudly.

He quickly squeals the tires and pulls into a carpark just as Nick starts talking again.

“HARRY! So good to hear your voice. How have you been mate?”

“Liam, is this planned? What is happening right now?” Ruth asks him again and he stares at her wide eyed as he shakes his head.

“NO FUCK! NO THIS WAS NOT PLANNED! SHIT!” He starts yelling, scrambling to get his phone out of his pocket to text Harry, then realizing that Harry won’t see it because he’s talking on his phone. So he starts texting Gemma as fast as his shaking hands will allow.

GEMMA HE’S ON LIVE RADIO! TELL HIM TO HANG UP IMMEDIATELY!!!!

“Uh, good. I’ve been good,” Harry answers Nick, sounding confused.

“Fantastic mate. Look, I’ve got a question, yeah? You went on Corden a few months back, gave us all that amazing reunion of One Direction in Carpool Karaoke and then sang a bloody fantastic song and we’ve heard nothing else from you. So what’s the deal mate? You got an album in the works? The world wants to know because if it’s anything like that song, then wow!” Nick continues, and fury rips through Liam as Gemma replies.

WHAT??! SHIT!!!!! I’M IN THE LADIES!!!

“Uh… what?” Harry says uneasily. Liam can hear the fear creeping into his voice and the sounds of people talking around him at the store. There’s a weird level of excitement as they start to realize that it’s Harry, that he’s talking to Nick Grimshaw and that it’s all happening live.

Liam throws the car into reverse, peeling out of the parking lot while throwing his phone at Ruth. He tells her to keep texting Gemma while he drives as fast as he can to the store.

“Come on Harry! We are all so happy you are getting back into music, but you have been keeping us waiting for so long. I know you like being mysterious and all, but this is just out of control mate,” Nick teases. “By the way, so glad to see you out and about with Liam. Happy you are moving on, though I hear you two made quite the mess with some breadsticks last night. What was that all about? Not as fun as copping off in a movie theatre I bet, but like a true rock star you told a fan off. Can’t say I’m surprised!”

“Nick, what are you doing… why are you doing this?” Comes Harry’s panicked reply. His voice crackles and seconds later there are some shuffling noises and then a click.

“Gemma says she hung up the call, but there is a ton of people crowding around them. She’s trying to get the staff to let them go in the back, but they aren’t budging,” Ruth says beside him, fingers moving quickly as she types a reply.

“Harry? Harry where did you go mate? I seem to have lost him. Well, let’s throw to a quick commercial and I’ll give it another try when we come back!” Nick promises and an ad for some Christmas special starts up.

“FUCK!” Liam yells, slamming his hand on the steering wheel as they hit yet another red light.
“LIAM! Stop. Focus on driving. I’ll tell her to get outside, the Oxford Street entrance,” she says, still typing and Liam guns it the second the light turns green, tires squealing on the pavement again.

While he liked the city of London, one of the reasons he had chosen to live in Surrey was because the traffic was a hell of a lot lighter.

What feels like ages later, they finally make it to Oxford Street and he roars up to the entrance. He throws the car in park, rips his seatbelt off and jumps out, not even caring that he’s blocking an entire lane of the narrow street.

“LIAM! Shit!” Ruth yells, already mouthing apologies to the people behind them. He ignores all of them in favor of getting inside because he can see the mob through the window. Nick’s call had opened the floodgates. Suddenly Harry was no longer untouchable and people didn’t feel it necessary to keep their distance when he had just been on the radio.

He pushes and shoves his way through the throngs of people, jumping up and down several times in a desperate effort to find Harry. The aisles were packed, both with people hunting for Harry and just regular Christmas shoppers. He goes up and down the aisles as fast as he can. The glass cosmetics counters stunt his progress several times and he curses not bringing his phone with him to text Harry to ask his whereabouts.

When he hears some excited screaming coming from the jewelry section he turns abruptly and nearly knocks a woman over. She complains loudly, but he just mutters an apology and starts running in the direction of the sound. A particularly thick group is assembled around a couple of display cases and when Liam jumps up again to see, he spots Harry and Gemma cowering in the middle, only a few feet of glass between them and the crowd. A furious retail worker is yelling at the people to back up before they knock everything over. Cellphones are in the air everywhere recording, taking pictures and face timing friends and family over finding Harry Styles in Selfridges.

Liam growls loudly and dives in. He shoves and pushes with little care as to what injury he might cause because he had zero sympathy for any of them at the moment. All he knew was Harry’s terrified face staring out at them with wide eyes, a reminder of so long ago when he would forget where he was, and Liam prays they haven’t set him back.

He finally hits the glass case with impressive force, knocking the wind out of his lungs and bruising his hips, but he barely stops before he jumps over it. A chorus of voices shout his name as they realize who he is, but he ignores them as he grabs Harry. He pulls him in for a tight hug, doing his best to hide him with his arms from all of the prying eyes. Harry clings to him and buries his face in Liam’s chest, shaking like a leaf and panting in short panicked breaths.

“Where the fuck is security?” Liam demands at the retail worker, who gives him a dirty look.

“On their way. Why the hell didn’t he come with a security guard himself, doing a phone interview with Nick Grimshaw here in the store. He had to know this would happen,” she spits back, crossing her arms over her chest.

“As a matter of fact he didn’t because he didn’t fucking plan that interview. He was ambushed,” Liam growls back at her. She backs up a few inches, looking slightly shamed. Harry whimpers and tightens his hold at Liam’s yelling. Gemma tries her best to cover him from the back, but they both knew at this point it was too late. This was so far out of control that they were at a loss as to what
to do. She keeps texting on her phone, looking for help from anywhere, and a moment later she looks a little relieved.

“Ruth called the police. They are here and are coming in to break this up. I told her where we were so she could tell them,” she says and resumes blocking Harry.

The cacophony of noise is a level that Liam hasn’t heard since the last show they did as a band in an arena. The flashes from cameras are damn near blinding, so he closes his eyes and tucks his face down into Harry’s hair. He has no doubt someone will take a picture of that and it’ll be on the Daily Mail in ten minutes, but he doesn’t care. He feels despondent then at how something like this could happen and that Harry was being treated as a zoo exhibit again. Someone who called him his friend doing something like this to him, unwittingly or not.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! YOU ARE TRESPASSING ON PRIVATE PROPERTY! PLEASE EVACUATE THE AREA IMMEDIATELY!”

They both start at the sound of a bullhorn filling the space suddenly. The crowd also jolts and starts looking around in surprise.

“THIS IS THE POLICE! LEAVE IMMEDIATELY!”

Relief pours through Liam as he recognizes the voice of Detective Warner, the original detective on Harry’s case. She must have heard what was happening, heard the call come in and came to help knowing that Harry trusted her.

The crowd starts to move slowly at first, all grumbling and throwing forlorn looks at Harry. They are disappointed at not getting a piece of him, but they speed up when actual officers in uniform start infiltrating the horde.

When there is a space, the detective comes up to the glass case nearest them and smiles at Liam gently.

“Ok, let’s get you guys out of here;” she says, offering a hand to Gemma to help her climb over.

“Haz, let’s go,” Liam says gently in his ear, nudging him and starting to lead him towards the cases. He still looks petrified and is clinging on to Liam in desperation, eyes wide as he looks around.

“Ok Harry, let’s get you over the case,” Detective Warner says. He looks at her, nodding when he recognizes her and he tentatively accepts her hand to help guide him over. Liam gently lifts him and he drops onto his feet on the other side. He immediately turns and waits panicked for Liam to follow. Liam hurries across and is relatively certain he hears glass cracking when his shoe hits the case, but he doesn’t care. He just quickly gathers Harry up again and they follow the detective through the store and out the door to where Ruth is still waiting with the car. Her shoulders sag in relief when she spots them, though once she sees Harry’s face she becomes sympathetic and opens the back door quickly so they can get in.

“I’ll let you get away with the parking infraction this time Mr. Payne,” Detective Warner says with a smile before he gets in the back beside Harry. Gemma jumps in the front with Ruth.

“Thank you,” he tells her before closing the door. He slides towards Harry and wraps his arms around him.
Ruth doesn’t even ask where they are going, she just starts driving. They leave the crowds of people and the police cars with their lights going behind them. They are just at the outskirts of the city when Gemma explodes.

“What the fuck was that? What in hell just happened? Who was that on the phone and why were you on the radio?” She spins in her seat looking at Harry and Liam.

“Nick Grimshaw,” Liam supplies, voice full of venom. “He just fucking ambushed him. Called him live on his radio show and didn’t even tell Harry he was on air.”

“I’ll kill him!” She screeches out, gritting her teeth in anger.

“Why would he do this to me?” Harry asks quietly. “What was he trying to do? It doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t know babe, I don’t. But he is in deep shit, I’ll tell you that,” Liam replies.

“Not to upset anyone or anything, but in Nick’s defense I don’t think he knew Harry was standing in the middle of Selfridges when he called,” Ruth says carefully. Liam turns to glare at her in the rear view mirror as she steers the car on to the M4 highway, rushing past slower cars.

“It doesn’t fucking matter where Harry was. He still called him out of the blue, put him on air live and started grilling him and questioning him about shit he has no business talking about,” Liam spits.

“Liam! I get it. He shouldn’t have done it at all, but he had no control over the people in the store who decided it was open season on Harry again,” she replies. She was unfazed by his anger having grown up with him after all.

“His calling was what started it! They saw Harry standing there talking to him, knew he was live on air, clearly assumed that Harry was coming back into the limelight and thought they could hound him. So yes, he is the cause of this,” Liam replies.

“Ok Liam, alright,” Ruth finally acquiesces. She focuses on the road while Liam glares out the window, noticing that they were getting close to Heathrow and the area where Harry had been held.

“Can we pull over?” Harry asks quietly, sitting up suddenly. “I think I’m gonna be sick.” He says with a slightly choked sound at the end.

“Oh shit, ok, hold on,” Ruth says quickly. She throws the indicator on and aims for the shoulder while Harry quickly slides towards the door, grabbing the handle to be ready. His other hand goes over his mouth and Liam rubs his back gently, unsure of what else to do.

Ruth comes to a jolting stop beside a pile of brushes and trees at the side of the road. Harry shoves the door open and jumps out of the car. He only makes it to the edge of the greenery before vomiting beside them, coughing roughly. Liam follows him quickly, rubbing his back again and trying to shield him from view of passing cars. Gemma joins them seconds later, handing Harry some tissues and water.

Harry coughs and spits, wiping his mouth with the tissues and breathing hard for a few moments.
“You alright?” Gemma asks him. He nods once, rubbing his forehead and standing up again.

“Sorry,” he quietly apologizes, looking a bit sheepish.

“It’s fine Harry. You can’t help it,” Liam tells him, not happy with the grayish tinge to his face.

Harry nods and pours some of the water in his mouth, rinsing it and spitting it out. He does this twice before turning back to the car.

“Do you want to wait a minute and get some air?” Gemma asks him as he slides back into the back seat, but he shakes his head.

“No, best we keep going before this gets publicly documented as well. Once was bad enough,” he points out. Liam rolls his eyes and nods as well. He was still stunned that a paparazzi had thought photographing Harry while he was sick on the side of a highway in LA was perfectly reasonable.

Liam and Gemma get back in the car as well and Ruth turns around looking at Harry with uneasy, appraising eyes.

“Are you ok? Sorry, I can’t really handle that kind of thing,” she asks him, looking ashamed she hadn’t helped and Harry waves her off.

“No worries, it’s fine. I’m alright now. We can keep going,” he tells her, sipping at a new bottle of water to settle his stomach.

Harry’s phone dings several times as they start moving again and Liam grabs it first, wanting to police who talked to him and who didn’t from now on. He finds several texts from Nick.

HARRY I AM SO SORRY!!! DIDN’T KNOW YOU WERE OUT SHOPPING!!!

Just wanted to catch up!! Been missing you mate!!! That song is a fucking smash and I just wanted to hear from you what was up with that!!!

I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have surprised you like that. I am truly, truly sorry!!!

Liam growls under his breath and starts typing a reply. Harry watches him with his brows up, but says nothing.

This is Liam. Lose this number immediately. Do not contact him again, talk about him again, or even think about him again, am I clear? You have NO FUCKING IDEA what you have done!! So just FUCK OFF!!!

“Ruth’s right. I hate what he did, but I don’t think he intended for this,” Harry says quietly, reading what Liam wrote and frowning slightly. “He just doesn’t think sometimes, but he knows he fucked up.”

“He had no right Harry, none. I don’t care how great he thinks the song was, what he just did is unforgivable,” Liam points out and Harry nods.

“I’m not disagreeing Liam, but I don’t think he intended for what happened at the store. Like Ruth said, he didn’t know where I was at the time. He should have checked obviously and he probably
should have gotten my permission before putting me on air, but I don’t think he was being intentionally malicious.”

Liam sighs loudly and angrily, still remembering Harry’s terror when he had found him in the store. It was hard not to blame Nick for that, but he could see Harry’s point.

“I didn’t realize people were still talking about it,” Harry says a few minutes later, looking out the window. “It was so many months ago.”

“Uh yeah, it’s kinda been a big deal. I know you two avoid seeing the news and social media like the plague, but there has been a ton of speculation about you making a comeback, One Direction getting back together and all kinds of shit,” Ruth tells him, turning on to the M25. A plane on its way to Heathrow roars overhead.

“What?” Harry says with a squeak. “I’m not doing anything. I’m not coming back. That was my goodbye.”

“Yeaaaahhhhh they didn’t get that message Harry. I hoped eventually they would, but people love you, they are still big fans and that song reignited a lot of hopes. After the movie theatre pictures, people started to wonder and question what you were doing. There were a lot of calls to back off and leave you alone, especially after Liam’s tweets, but I guess hearing you on Nick’s show, whether you wanted to be or not, must have sorta brought back the hope. They probably thought the whole thing was planned.”

Liam sits dumbfounded. He really had been avoiding paying attention and the movie fiasco was the last time he had even looked on the internet.

At the mention of Liam’s tweets, Harry turns and looks at him sharply.

“What tweets?” He demands.

“It was nothing. After the movie thing I told people to back off. It’s no big deal,” Liam tells him and Harry narrows his eyes.

“Oh right. I remember you saying something, but I never saw them. Show me,” he demands again, pointing at Liam’s phone.

Knowing that denying him would not deter him, Liam picks up his phone and unlocks it with a sigh, opening his Twitter app and handing it to Harry.

Harry reads them over looking slightly surprised, but he looks up at Liam and nods, smiling softly in appreciation for the kindness he had spoken of Harry with.

“You have like five million responses to these. Did you look at any of them?” Harry taps on one of them and starts scrolling through, eyes widening as he sees all of the messages and replies.

“No, I didn’t bother. I said what needed to be said and I kinda forgot about them truthfully,” Liam admits. It was so long ago now, he wasn’t worried about it. Clearly, he should have been.

“I can see what Ruth is referring to,” Harry mutters. He makes a face at some of the negative comments by trolls who were just being shits, then carries on scrolling. He sighs loudly after a minute, handing the phone back to Liam. “Clearly, I’m going to have to explain myself because I
doubt this is going away. As much as I might wish it would.”

“No, you don’t have to Harry. The whole point is that people should just be respecting you. The media and all of them should just back off and leave you alone out of consideration. I don’t get why people can’t understand that,” Liam says sternly, not wanting Harry to put himself in a position he didn’t want to be in.

“Liam, while the whole Oscar thing was a great idea at the time and so was Corden, I thought, clearly I misjudged how doing that shit would be seen. How can people be expected to just leave me alone when I keep suddenly appearing and then buggering off again demanding to be left in peace? I’m throwing some weird signals, so it’s about time I ended it properly and said what needs to be said,” he replies, leaning against Liam. “Which is ironic for me since I spent the last part of my career trying to keep my thoughts to myself and not commenting on my life publicly.”

“What do you want to do?” Liam asks him. He’s still worried this might backfire, but he could see Harry’s point.

“Dunno,” he replies.

“Keep it simple,” Gemma supplies. “Not a series of tweets like Liam did, since he’s already done that. Maybe a short letter thanking everyone for their support, explaining that Corden was your farewell tour and that you want to just have a private, quiet life now and have no plans for a career in show business in the future. Ask people politely to just leave you alone. It can’t hurt.”

“Where would I post it though? Do I even have social media accounts anymore?” He asks, glancing down at his phone.

“As far as I know,” Liam replies, frowning slightly as he tries to remember what happened where that was concerned while Harry was missing. He knows that Anne took care of Harry’s house and Des took care of his finances by securing his accounts while they considered what to do with his fortune and investments when they thought he was dead.

“I don’t think anyone did anything to them,” Gemma adds, thinking it over herself. “Honestly, none of us even thought about them truthfully.”

“Ok, well then if I still have an Instagram, I’ll post it there,” Harry decides. He relaxes again and Liam sighs quietly.

“Only if you’re sure Harry. And make sure you are comfortable with what you say,” he presses gently.

“I will. You can proofread it first,” Harry offers and Liam nods.

The car is quiet the rest of the ride home. Harry leans on Liam, sipping at his water periodically and he eventually stops shaking. They keep the radio off because no one particularly wants to hear anything right now, but when they pull up to the house and find Anne, Robin and Des standing on the front porch, they know that it’s bad.

“Harry!” Anne yells the second he comes into view. She pulls his door open and encircles him in a hug immediately. She damn near punches Liam in the face in the process. “Honey, are you ok?”

“Mum, relax. Yes I’m ok. I’m home,” he replies. He hugs her back and then nudges her so he can
get out of the car.

“Sweetheart you don’t look well,” she points out gently, looking at his still grey face and messy hair falling loose from the elastic holding it.

“Yes, well, I puked. It's how I handle things it seems, but I’m fine now. I just want to get inside and clean up a bit,” he replies. He waits for Liam to get out of the car as well before he takes his arm and starts towards the house.

“Do you want some tea?” She asks, taking his other arm.

“I think we could all use some tea,” Gemma points out. “With a shot of something strong in it after that.”

“What in fuck happened? Because the TV is telling us all sorts and the videos and pictures look horrific,” Robin asks, appraising Harry with worried eyes as he passes.

“Nick Grimshaw happened,” Gemma spits out, following Anne to the kitchen while Liam leads Harry upstairs to clean up and get changed.

Harry sags with relief when they get to the bedroom. He’s happy to be out of the conversation downstairs, happy to be home and exhausted by the entire experience.

“Um… I think I’m gonna have a quick shower. There were a lot of people touching me and I just feel like I need one,” he says after considering his pajamas folded on the bed.

“Sure, whatever you need Haz,” Liam says gently, squeezing his shoulders once before helping him take his coat off.

He hangs it on a hanger and puts it on the back of the door to be taken to the cleaners while Harry takes his boots and socks off. He disappears into the bathroom and the water starts up. Liam slumps down onto the bed, rubbing his face with his hands.

So much for a fun day out reigniting a long tradition for Harry with Gemma. He feels frustrated about the entirety of it. He could see Harry’s point, that the big reveal at the Oscars and the Corden thing could have easily been misconstrued. Especially since Harry had never explained those occurrences, though the Oscars was pretty self-explanatory. But it all still seemed so unfair. How could people not be just a bit more sympathetic and understanding?

His phone beeps in his pocket and he pulls it out, seeing a message from Louis. He hadn’t talked to Louis or even Niall and Zayn in a long while. After Corden they hadn’t kept in touch because the three of them were busy with new albums and Louis was spending more time with Freddie. Liam had assured them he would let them know of any changes with Harry.

He hated now that he hadn’t made more of an effort.

Louis’ message is short and simple. It’s a quick question and it twinges something in Liam, a worry in his gut.

*Louis: Is Harry ok?*

He quickly types in a reply, taking the chance to apologize for the radio silence for the last few
Liam: Yes, he’s fine now and we’re home. Sorry I haven’t texted sooner, just been busy with helping Harry. He’s doing a lot better now. Therapist is really helping.

He watches as Louis reads his response and then as the three little dots come up indicating that he is typing a reply.

Louis: I know you have been taking care of him, have seen the pictures. About when were you two going to say something to us about that?

Liam’s breath catches in his throat and suddenly it all makes sense. He hadn’t said a word to Louis or Niall after the pictures surfaced of him and Harry kissing during the movie. They hadn’t said a word about their relationship to them at all. They had only told their families under the strictest of confidence to keep it from becoming too public, though his feelings for Harry were already known. But he’d never discussed it with any of them.

Liam: I’m so sorry Lou. We were going to talk to you guys about it when we were ready. We didn’t know someone would take pictures of us and we didn’t even plan that to happen really. And don’t believe what was written. None of it is true.

The water shuts off in the bathroom and the shower door squeaks open as Harry steps out and starts toweling off.

Niall: What is true then? When did this start? We know you admitted having feelings for Harry during the trial, but you never said anything after. Do you not think that this might be a really fucking bad idea considering what he’s been through Liam?

Liam startles with the realization that he isn’t talking to just Louis when Niall’s message comes in and he notices that Zayn’s contact has been added as well. Louis had set up a group chat to finally talk about this. He isn’t that surprised, though feels that perhaps there could have been a better time.

Harry pads out into the bedroom in his pajamas, pulling a comb through his wet hair. He looks at Liam sitting on the bed with his phone in his hand curiously and then apprehensively.

“What’s going on? Are you seeing what they are saying online?” He asks as he comes around to sit next to Liam.

Liam hands over his phone as his answer and watches Harry’s brows move as he reads through the few messages, noticing like Liam did that it was a four person conversation.

“Shit… I never even thought to… I guess I sorta assumed they knew,” he says brokenly and he looks at Liam with wide eyes. “We have to tell them the truth… Why am I not part of the chat group?”

Liam nods and takes the phone back. Harry grabs his while Liam adds him in to the group so he can make his own comments.

Liam: It started a few months before the hiatus and it wasn’t a big deal. We didn’t talk about it and didn’t even know how we really felt about each other until he came home. I’m sorry we didn’t say anything sooner, but we were still figuring things out.
He waits for a reply from the others and notices Harry furiously typing next to him, deep furrow between his brow. Liam curiously waits to see what he’s going to say.

Harry: First a favor, no conversations about me without me present. Second, I am capable of knowing my own mind and am fully aware of what I went through Niall. Don’t just assume that Liam is taking advantage of me or that I’m some weak person. We are both adults and both made a decision together. My feelings for him existed long before we even stopped touring, but I was never sure how to go about it and evidently neither was he. I’m sorry that you all had to find out this way, but it was never our intention, clearly, and I don’t think it’s fair for you to hold it against us or to not speak to us for so long. Yes, arguably we should have spoken to you the minute those pictures became public, but honestly we were a little more focused on the fact that they had been taken at all and were made public in the first place. There was no reason for you not to reach out. I’m sorry if you feel uncomfortable with our relationship, or think it might change your opinion of either of us, but there is nothing we can do about that.

Liam’s eyebrows about go over the top of his head when the huge paragraph pops up and Harry sits beside him, huffing once in anger as he glares at his phone.

“Um… you might have wanted to… I mean… you kinda just went after them there…” Liam tries. Harry turns and gives him a stern look.

“Yes I did. Louis fucking starts a chat group and excludes me to talk about my relationship with you after blanking us for weeks, and yes I noticed, but I hadn’t figured out why until now. I hadn’t put the two things together, but you think I shouldn’t be upset?” Harry points out, frowning deeply. “Sorry, I’ve already been betrayed by one person I thought was a friend today. I’m not having it again.”

Liam raises his hands in surrender, leaning away slightly from Harry’s fury.

“Ok, ok. I get it and I agree, but we could have given them a chance to explain. You’re just assuming they are uncomfortable with us when none of them have said that. I think they just feel betrayed that we didn’t tell them sooner. I doubt they are even that surprised honestly,” Liam says carefully and Harry relaxes slightly.

“Ok yeah, maybe I shouldn’t have gone there at the end. I do know them better than that. I just hate when people think I’m some damaged person and I can’t think for myself or that I’m easily led. I’m still me for fuck’s sake. Yes, I’m a little broken and beaten, but I’m still me,” Harry grumbles out, gesturing with his hands before staring down at his phone again.

Liam leans over and bumps their shoulders together before moving in closer to press a kiss to Harry’s temple, smelling the scent of fresh soap and shampoo still stuck to his skin.

“I know you are Haz. And so do they. I think they are just a little pissed cuz they feel left out. I mean, you’re pissed at them for not talking to us, but we did the same thing. It’s just a big misunderstanding all the way around,” Liam tells him, squeezing his shoulder while both of their phones beep.

Louis: You of all fucking people should know I have no problem with you and Liam being together. Would have just been nice to be told and given the opportunity to be happy for you without finding out from some trashy tabloid.
Niall: We are ok with it Harry, geez. We just want to make sure you are! Sucks that you got outed like that, but it’s not like we are surprised. I mean, Liam already admitted having feelings for you at the trial. That’s why I was concerned you weren’t in the same place cuz you haven’t said anything yourself.

Louis: Also, I thought I had added you. Don’t know why it didn’t work. Wasn’t done intentionally.

Zayn: Ok what is the big deal? I fucking figured this out ages ago. Did you two really not know?

Harry snorts at Zayn’s comment. “I had a feeling he had already clued in. Typical Zayn, just says nothing.”

Louis: We knew Liam had feelings, though you didn’t bother to actually talk to us about that Liam. What the hell? But neither of us were aware of what Harry was feeling.

Liam: We talked to our families after the trial and told them the truth. Somehow we just didn’t get to talking to you guys about it and for that we are sorry. Being mostly cut off from the world has made us forget things.

Niall: Nick’s an arsehole btw. Can’t believe he fucking did that today. What are you gonna do?

Harry: Gonna write a letter to post on Instagram and make it clear that I am backing away from the whole fame thing for now, focusing on myself and my family, and that there are no future plans right now.

Louis: Are there really no future plans? Cuz that song was sick man and you seemed so happy and into it on Corden. Like back in your element kind of thing. I find it hard to believe you could walk away from that so easily.

Harry: It’s not easily and it’s not without regret. But I knew what I was doing when I went into that and you guys knew what I was doing. I won’t say never, but I don’t see myself doing that or anything else for at least the next year or more.

Zayn: Don’t push it mate and don’t be forced into it either. Do what’s right for you. Be selfish, you’ve earned it.

Louis: What’s your plan Liam?

Liam: Dunno. I wasn’t really working on anything before and I’m an outcast with most record companies right now so even if I wanted to, it’s not like anyone would bring me on anyway.

Niall: Weren’t you producing with Julian?

Liam: Yup, did a few songs. He left the door open, I’ll see.

“You were producing?” Harry asks, looking surprised. “Isn’t Julian a producer?”

“Yup, but he had a young kid, up and coming, who he thought would be better off working with me since I have a more similar sound,” he answers. Harry already knew about what had happened with the record company and his old manager. He had agreed with Liam on his decision to walk away.
“Did you not like doing it?” Harry asks. He glances down at his phone as the conversation turns towards Zayn’s difficulties in finding a producer himself since none of them seemed to see his vision.

“I… yeah…” Liam starts, rubbing a hand through his hair and frowning at the carpet as he decides how to answer. Truthfully, he hadn’t really thought much about it. It felt like something that had happened ten years ago instead of just ten months ago. “I mean, it was fun I guess. It was nice to work with someone talented and help them hone their sound, you know, work out the kinks. The album did really well, but I honestly haven’t even thought about it since then.”

The night the album was released, the party, that had been the night Harry showed up at his house. Two drastically different events. It was almost dizzying to think about.

“Well, for what it’s worth, if you want to do it again I won’t get in the way,” Harry says softly, squeezing Liam’s thigh as both of their phones beep.

Zayn: You know Payne, you could just produce my album. I loved what you did with that kid and you know me, know what I like.

Harry snorts a quiet laugh. “It’s like serendipity.”

Liam thinks on it for a moment, not sure how to answer because it was a lot to take on. He still felt uneasy about leaving Harry for any extended period of time and today had proven that his feelings weren’t without merit, but he also happened to have a studio at home.

Liam: Let me think about it.

Zayn: Don’t think too long. I’ll send you something I’ve worked on later. Maybe it’ll help you decide.

Niall: When you posting the letter Harry?

Harry: When I’ve written it. Probably should get on that sooner rather than later since I’m sure the tabloids are currently a cesspool.

Louis: It’s a little shite right now, but most people are on your side.

Harry: Still, I just want to finish it.

Niall: Understood mate.

Harry sighs deeply next to him. He flips his phone in his hands for a few minutes while the chat group goes quiet, everyone returning to whatever they had been doing before since the discussion was resolved. It was like that with them. Once something was aired, they didn’t dwell. They just got over it and moved on. It was how they had survived so many years on the road together.

“Right, I’m gonna work on writing this letter thing,” Harry finally says. He gets up and grabs Liam’s iPad before settling back on the bed against the pillows, Liam still sitting on the end of the bed.

When he’s sure that Harry is engrossed in what he’s doing, brows furrowed as he concentrates and fingers tapping the screen, Liam unlocks his phone again and checks out the headlines.
Not surprisingly, they are the top story on the Daily Mail with a particularly clear, close up shot of Liam holding Harry like a small child in the shop. Hands wave in the air around them and Gemma glares out at the crowd. The headline is ridiculous, as per, labeling Liam as Harry’s protective boyfriend and wondering if this will set back his upcoming return to the music business. There are plenty of accounts from fans saying how terrified Harry was. Many of them are outright lies about him yelling at them or lashing out. It gets worse as the article goes on. There are side boxes with descriptions of PTSD and reminders of the horrific abuse Harry endured breaking up the text and they are mixed with a never-ending series of pictures of Harry cornered like a wounded animal, eyes wide and terrified before Liam had arrived.

The Sun is no better, focusing more on their relationship and wondering if Harry was there to buy wedding rings for an upcoming ceremony.

Other news outlets are more sympathetic. Some even call Nick out on surprising Harry like that on air and how much danger it put him in.

Closing his phone with a sigh, he gets up and walks around the bed to sit next to Harry. He drapes an arm around his shoulders and leans his head back with his eyes closed. He does want to know what he’s writing, but also wants to be respectful. He assumes Harry will show him when he’s done, so he will wait.

He dozes for an hour, the sound of Harry’s fingers tapping the screen lulling him into relaxation, and he’s only jolted from the revelry when Anne arrives bearing two mugs of tea for them.

“How you doing honey?” She asks Harry as she hands him his. She then passes Liam’s over before sitting down on the side of the bed, squeezing Harry’s knee.

Harry takes a sip of his tea and sighs softly, setting it down on the side table.

“Ok. Just working on writing this letter. I want to get it done and get it out there. Hopefully it will put an end to all of this shit. I’m worried it won’t work though and I don’t exactly want to offend people.”

“Don’t worry about offending people Harry, just be honest,” Liam tells him, squeezing his shoulder. Harry glances at him with sad, green eyes. “I’m sure it will work, but it might take a little time.”

“Exactly, Liam is right. Just tell the truth and if it’s your words they can’t argue with you,” Anne adds, nodding encouragingly.

Harry hums noncommittally, looking down at the few paragraphs he has and rubs at his face.

“I’m almost wondering if I should record it as a video rather than posting a letter. I mean, I spent years having everything I said being twisted and turned against me. At least with a video I can show people I mean what I’m saying.”

“Only if you feel comfortable doing that,” Anne says immediately. “Don’t do anything you think will be upsetting to you because you have to come first.”

“I know mum, relax,” Harry says with a quiet laugh. “I already did Corden. This won’t be a big stretch. Let’s be honest.”
“True,” she admits, rubbing his knee again. “Just… do what’s best for you though. You don’t owe any of these people anything. Remember that.”

Harry nods, though Liam isn’t entirely sure he agrees with her and isn’t just doing so for the sake of saving himself from further discussion.

“Ok, good. Do you want anything to eat?” She asks hopefully and he immediately shakes his head.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s a good idea yet. I’ll just stick with the tea,” he replies. His eyes go back down to the screen and she sags slightly.

“Ok, well just let me know if you want anything,” she offers and he nods.

With that she gets up and leaves. She throws Liam a worried look as she goes and they settle back into silence aside from Harry’s fingers tapping the screen.

It takes him almost two hours before he finally sits back and nods once, as though agreeing with himself that he was done.

“All done?” Liam asks. He shuffles his legs and stretches, rubbing his eyes since he had started dozing again.

“Yes, think so. But is it gonna look weird if I sit and read something off a screen?” He asks.

“Honestly?” Liam asks and Harry turns and looks at him with a slight frown, nodding. “It might. I agree with your mum, you might be best just posting it as a letter. It’s still your words. People don’t actually need to hear you saying them really. I don’t think anyway.”

Harry turns away from him, looking down at what he has written and chewing on his bottom lip as he thinks.

“No, I think I want to do it as a video. I’ll just stand this up so I can see it. I think it’s the right way to do it,” he says with another nod, settling the matter.

This leads to a ten minute long discussion on where he should sit to do it. Harry felt the bedroom was a bit of a weird location and so they move into the office. He doesn’t like sitting behind the desk because he thinks it’s too official looking so instead he sits on the couch, elbows on his knees. The iPad is propped up on the table and Liam gets out his camera. He sets it on a pile of books beside the iPad so it can’t be seen, but Harry is centre in the frame, only his shoulders and upper back visible.

“No, I think I want to do it as a video. I’ll just stand this up so I can see it. I think it’s the right way to do it,” he says with another nod, settling the matter.

“Ok, you sure about this?” He asks Harry again. He’s already asked about twenty times with Harry getting more exasperated and he gets a stern look. “Ok, well I’ll just hit record and you can do your thing. If you mess up just start over. We can edit it to just include the best take.”

Harry nods, looking more nervous. His hands quickly tuck his hair behind his ears before he pulls his sleeves down to cover them.

Liam waits for another moment before hitting the button, sitting as quietly as he can behind the camera watching Harry, trepidation all over his face.
“Um, hi, um, I guess it’s time I set the record straight…. no, ugh, I don’t want to start like that,” he stops and rubs his face with his hands. Liam sits forward ready to stop the camera, but Harry quickly shakes his head at him. “No, leave it, it’s fine. I’ll start again.”

He takes a deep breath, tucks his hair behind his ears again and fists his hands on his knees, doing his best to focus.

“Ok,” he says once, taking another deep breath. He closes his eyes for it before opening them and schooling his face. “Um, hi, everyone. I think I should maybe clear some things up because today has shown me that stuff is getting out of hand. That is partially my fault, I know that, so here goes,” he stops and nods at the camera, glancing down at the iPad quickly. “Um, to say that these last few months have been easy would be a lie. It’s not been easy. It’s been grueling and hard and I have struggled. I can admit that. I never thought this would be easy. Hell, I never thought I would still be alive right now, sitting here,” he waves a hand slightly. His eyes glance around the office and land on Liam. “But I am. I am here,” he says, voice quiet but intense. “And I’m happy I am. I’m grateful that somehow I was given the chance to keep going and no matter how many times I may have wanted to give up, I didn’t, because I knew that fighting was the way to actually win… Um. I’m rambling… sorry,” he laughs once nervously, hand going through his hair. “So, yeah, um, the point here is that I know I have been doing some things that maybe have given everyone the wrong idea that I’m planning something, but the truth is I’m not… There is no grand plan. There is no ulterior motive or surprise coming. I honestly just did what I felt I needed to at the time. And I’m sorry for any confusion I’ve caused, but… what I did, the song, going to LA, it wasn’t a new beginning for me. It was an end. It was a good bye to that past life, to who I used to be, because he’s gone,” he says so quietly Liam isn’t sure it’ll be picked up. His eyes are so intense as they look at the camera. It’s clear he’s gone off script, but he’s also more sure of what he’s saying so Liam doesn’t stop him. “I am a new person now. Moulded and built from broken pieces and glue, um, but I have accepted it and saying goodbye to the old Harry was my first step in being who I am now. The first step to starting over, finding a new life, rebuilding and maybe even finding happiness again. I get now that maybe I should have given this explanation back in August rather than letting it go on, but I didn’t know I had caused any confusion. Even so, I’m sorry and it was not my intention. All I ask now is to just be left alone in peace. I can’t start again and I can’t rebuild if I feel like I’m constantly being tracked and hounded and being pulled back. I’m not ashamed of my past life or of who I was, please don’t think that. But I also don’t need the reminders. I just want to be me now. To be able to go to a store without chaos or being afraid of what might happen or of a camera popping up out of a bush. I just want to be a normal person. Someone who goes to dinner and movies and shops and takes walks in parks and does so anonymously. Without fear or concern. I need this, more than anything, I need this. So I ask you please, just give me this.” He goes quiet for a moment considering the camera, hands knitting together in front of him. “And I want to say thank you. To all of you who have supported me, who have stood by me, defended me, shown me incredible kindness and stuck by me through it all. I don’t know that I will ever be able to truly show you the full extent of my gratitude,” he stops again, eyes getting a little wet. “I have been truly blessed to have been given the opportunities I was so many years ago and I so wish things had gone differently in my life, but I can’t change it. No matter how badly I want to,” he closes his eyes and shakes his head slightly. “No matter how much I want to turn back time and make a different decision. A split second moment that changed it all, but I’ve come to terms with the fact that I can’t. All I can do is move forward, take each day as it comes at me and I don’t know what the future holds, I really don’t. I don’t want to promise anything and say I’ll be back, that I’ll do music or something again when I just honestly don’t know. I don’t want to lead people on or make promises I can’t keep, so I won’t. I’ll just say thank you. I love you all. It’s been an amazing ride, but I need to step away from public life for now.” He stops again, taking another deep breath and wipes his palms on his pants. “Ok, so that is what I needed to say and I would ask that everyone not be quite so hard on Nick Grimshaw. I don’t think he actually meant any harm in
what he did and clearly I’m ok. I’m home safe and sound, so don’t go after him please,” he smiles softly and nods at the camera. “Thank you. Take care of yourselves and each other.”

He finishes with an awkward little wave and then he waits a few moments before nodding at Liam who leans forward and pushes stop on the camera.

“Do you want to do another take?” Liam asks and Harry shakes his head immediately.

“No, that was hard enough. I don’t think I kept to anything I wrote, but whatever. I just hope I don’t come across as narcissistic,” he says with a grimace.

“I don’t think so. You told the truth, asked them for peace and space and all we can do now is hope they respect that.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Harry says with a sigh, standing up and heading back into the bedroom. Liam follows behind him with the camera in hand.

They load the file onto the laptop and Liam edits out his first attempt. They sit and watch it a few times, Harry chewing on his lip and playing with his cuffs, but after some consideration he decides to just go with it.

There are a few hiccups since he forgot his Instagram password and is forced to reset it to a new one. This means he needs to also remember the password to the email he hasn’t used in years, causing another fumble, but he gets it all in the end and the video is quietly posted.

Liam wonders if he should share it on his twitter to call attention to it in some way and make sure Harry’s message gets heard, but he opts against it. He knows people will see it, that it’ll be dissected, digested and discussed at length, but that was the goal. They just have to hope the message will be received and understood.

Their entire days worth of plans scuppered, they all pile into the living room to watch cheesy Christmas movies for the rest of the afternoon. Harry wraps up in a blanket and cuddles against Liam. He knows that Harry isn’t really admitting just how shaken up he is by what happened, but he doesn’t press it either.

Ruth and Gemma offer to make dinner and they throw together some soup and sandwiches. Harry picks at his, but Liam doesn’t push it considering he had been sick earlier in the day.

They go to bed early, knowing that they had to head back to London again the next day for Harry’s therapy appointment. There is trepidation on his face the next morning.

“Do you want me to call Dr. Howard and see if he will come here?” Liam offers. Harry considers it for a moment and then shakes his head.

“No, I need to carry on. Hopefully my video got the point across and we won’t be dealing with any more problems. Maybe we can finish the shopping after with our sisters? Since we didn’t get to yesterday.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard Haz. We can do the shopping trip another time. In a few weeks maybe. There’s no hurry,” Liam says gently, sitting in front of him on the bed. He was currently sitting with his back to the headboard, knees tucked up under his chin protectively and hands in his sleeves as usual.
“No, in a few weeks it’ll be Christmas and it will be too late. I want to go. It was fun until all that happened yesterday,” he says, voice still unsure despite his words. “I’ll call Gemma. Maybe she and Ruth can meet us at the doctor’s office. We can do dinner after as well, like we were planning.”

“Are you just testing if the video worked? Because there are easier ways you know,” Liam points out and Harry shakes his head again.

“No, I’m doing what I want to do. Like I said I would. Yesterday doesn’t change anything. I still want to rebuild my life and find some normalcy. I refuse to let one set back stop that,” he retorts, brows furrowed in annoyance and Liam backs down.

“Ok, fine. If you want to then that’s fine by me, but promise me you will talk to Dr. Howard about what happened yesterday and listen to what he suggests.”

Harry huffs at him in anger, but nods a minute later, giving the wall a dirty look.

“Ok, I’ll call Ruth. You call Gemma and then we will head out,” Liam concedes, knowing that Harry was being stubborn and he wouldn’t change his mind.

The girls are pretty surprised by this turn of events, having returned home via a ride from Thomas the night before because they had assumed the plans were done with. They agree to meet them at the doctor’s though. Both of them question the sanity of the plan, but they acquiesce when Harry insists.

Liam is fairly certain that Gemma asks Harry about the video as their quiet phone conversation in the bedroom lasts far longer than his and Ruth’s, but Harry says nothing when he emerges and is still determined despite his quivering hands.

The London traffic is as boisterous as always and they make it to the doctor’s in the nick of time. Liam drops Harry off and heads across the street for a coffee, still feeling unwelcome in the office after the last time he had been in there. When he sees Gemma and Ruth arrive, he joins them on the sidewalk.

“That video he did was good. He got his point across,” Ruth offers as they wait. “But I do wonder if he’s testing whether it worked or not rather quickly.”

“I said that and I got shut down. He’s determined to resume a normal life. Even though he’s clearly still shaken by yesterday. But you know Harry, I couldn’t convince him,” Liam says with a sigh. Gemma’s brow flickers and she nods.

“Me either, I tried. I do know I’m not leaving him alone today and I will be monitoring his phone calls very closely.”

“I blocked Nick’s number and the radio station’s number this morning while he was in shower, along with several others,” Liam admits. He refused to take any chances at there being a repeat event.

“Probably a good plan since my brother has already forgiven that creep for what he did,” Gemma grumbles and Liam hums in agreement.
Harry rounds the corner and heads towards the glass doors, looking surprised to see all of them standing outside. Liam notes that his hands are still in his sleeves, meaning he was still nervous.

“Why is everyone out here? They have a waiting room you know,” he points out when he reaches them, eyes flicking up and down the sidewalk a few times at the other people about.

“We just got here,” Ruth supplies and the other two nod.

“Right. You ready to go?” Gemma asks Harry and he nods once, eyes flicking to Liam. “You sure about this?” She asks him, voice leaving no room for any lies.

“Yes, I told you I want to do this. So let’s go,” he tells her, meeting her gaze head on and Liam almost laughs at their similarities.

He nudges Gemma and they set off down the street to the car, Liam and Ruth following.

In his absolute determination to carry on as if the day before hadn’t happened, Harry had insisted they return to the scene of the crime. So he and Gemma were off to Selfridges again, but this time Liam and Ruth were going to Marks & Spencer, which was just across the street.

They find a space in a car park a few blocks away and start the rest of the trek on foot. The drive had been quiet and tense and the walk isn’t much better. Harry huddles in on himself and flinches away when people get too close to him. Ruth tries to distract them all by pointing out all of the lovely Christmas decorations on the streets and in shop windows, but they all remain tightly wound and on high alert for anyone looking at them too long or any cameras pointing their way.

They reach Selfridges and Harry stares at the door with an uneasy expression for a few moments before turning and giving Liam a hug. He promises to see him later and then he and Gemma head inside. She grabs his arm quickly, making sure they don’t get separated and Ruth takes Liam’s, pulling him down the street to their own stop.

“Come on Liam. He will be ok. Let’s go get our shopping done and then we will all be back together again,” she urges him. He relents when he loses sight of Harry and Gemma through the glass doors.

They meander through the store, picking up odds and ends and discussing ideas for gifts they still need to get. Liam texts Harry continuously, checking in on him and Harry responds that he’s fine each time.

When they’ve done the gamut of Marks & Spencer, they head over to Selfridges themselves. They check to find out where Harry and Gemma are in the store and go to the other side.

Liam picks up a lovely leather handbag for his mum and a bottle of her favorite perfume. He gets Nicola a new watch with a sparkly platinum band and diamonds on each hour. He orders his dad a new set of golf clubs and when Ruth isn’t looking, he gets her a lovely pair of emerald earrings and a matching necklace. He looks for things for Harry, but finds himself unable to settle on anything. Everything just seems to not be enough, like no gift will ever adequately express how he feels about Harry. He eyes the Gucci section as they pass it, and though he sees plenty of things the old Harry would have loved, he’s fairly certain Harry now would not be nearly as interested. He lived most days now in jeans and a sweatshirt. He decides all he can do is keep an eye and ear on what Harry seemed interested in in the coming weeks.
Arms laden with bags they check in with Harry and Gemma again, letting them know they are finished and moments later the two of them come down the aisle giggling, their own hands full of carrier bags.

“Success?” Liam asks them, smiling now that Harry was back where he could see him again.

“Yup. Got pretty much everything we planned on getting,” Gemma says happily.

“And some stuff we hadn’t planned on getting, but that’s ok,” Harry chimes in, laughing quietly at what was clearly a shared joke between him and his sister.

“Wonderful! Where do you guys want to go for dinner?” Ruth asks and the other three all shrug. “Ok, come on, we have to find somewhere we can go.”

“What about MEATliquor? It’s on the way to the car,” Liam suggests and since no one else had any suggestions, they all just nod.

The restaurant is loud, the air scented with fried food and ale as they come in the door. Immediately eyes are on them, but Liam watches as one by one each person turns away and schools their expression, acting like they aren’t even there. A tiny little prick of hope starts in his chest that the video had worked, and that people would start respecting Harry now.

A bubbly hostess comes up to the stand and smiles at them warmly. Her eyes do not linger either and she politely leads them to a booth near one of the circular windows with the word ‘liquor’ lit up in neon red filling it. Red is a prominent color all around the restaurant. It’s known for it’s loud music, American style food and graffiti laden walls. It’s dim but warm and Liam can feel Harry settling beside him.

They order a round of pints, cheeseburgers and fries. Though Gemma goes for the Dead Hippie burger because the name makes her laugh.

It’s relaxed, it’s calm and it’s exactly what Harry had been hoping for. It makes Liam happy to see him smile. He prods Ruth about what she got Liam for Christmas and about where they should put the tree in Liam’s house.

People still glance their way and their eyes find them, but they always look away as soon as possible. Soon it’s like they have blended in and are no longer recognizable faces, but simply patrons of the restaurant like everyone else.

Harry makes it through half of his burger and most of his fries, a true accomplishment, and he groans about being full as they walk to the car.

They drop the girls off at their respective homes with long, tight hugs given at each before it’s just the two of them again driving home from London in far better moods than the day before.

Harry turns the radio on. An old White Stripes song is playing and he immediately starts singing along, goading Liam into it as well. Liam is struck by how much it feels like he’s gone back in time. Seeing Harry so happy, laughing and smiling and trying to get Liam to play silly games like they used to do while on the road in the tour bus.

It makes his throat feel tight and eyes a little wet because he realizes then just how much he has missed this. He never held it against Harry, the changes and the time gone, for obvious reasons, but
getting this moment back and these reminders was a heady feeling.

“What are you getting all emotional about over there?” Harry asks him. The Rolling Stones are now pounding out of the radio and Harry turns the volume down.

“I’m not getting emotional,” Liam protests, though it sounds weak. “I’m just thinking how much this reminds me of old times. Remember how you and I would be awake on the bus and everyone else was out cold? You would always do this, make me play these games, and Niall would get mad because we’d keep waking him up laughing.”

“I remember that,” Harry says with a laugh. “And I never MADE you play the games Liam. You wanted to, but you never wanted to admit it because it would go against your gangsta reputation.”

“Pffft, I do not have a gangsta reputation,” Liam retorts, though he laughs a moment later.

“No, you didn’t. You never did, but you damn well tried to get one,” Harry laughs. “I miss that though. I’m glad we got to do it again tonight. It was good. Today was good. Even though I now have a stomachache.”

“Good, I’m glad you enjoyed today,” Liam agrees, squeezing his hand. “And I have Alka Seltzer at home.”

Harry laughs again and turns the radio back up, Ed Sheeran filling the car. Harry nods his head and smiles softly.

When they get home, they each scurry off to hide their bags from snooping eyes. Liam makes the promised Alka Seltzer drink and they collapse into bed, Harry starting to snore almost immediately. For the first time in a long while Liam actually feels truly at ease, happy and hopeful.
Ten Months

Two weeks before Christmas they go out as a group to find a tree. Somehow it had been decided that Liam’s house was Christmas central and both of their families crowd in to the living room to help set the tree up and decorate it. Poor Watson so is overwhelmed by all of the people and noise that he scampers upstairs to hide in the bedroom. Christmas carols belt out over the speakers and everyone talks and laughs loudly.

The finished product is quite the exquisite thing and many pictures are taken of the tree alone and then of groups of them in front of it.

It feels good to properly celebrate Christmas again. Liam had been pulled in by Ruth over the last few years, but the specter of sadness had never really left him during those events, no matter how hard he tried. There was a sense of something missing that was now filled.

With that in mind, they decide to throw a party. They invite the guys and their families, as well as their own extended families to come celebrate. Liam knows it will be a much different event than the last time Harry’s family had come to his house to see him and he is glad Harry was getting a chance to see them in a much better mindset.

Harry bakes up a storm over the next few days, filling the house with the scent of gingerbread and cinnamon. Tray upon tray of cookies, macaroons, fritters and carefully sculpted houses cover every inch of counter space in the kitchen. Anne joins him and cooks up a couple of hams and turkeys and every side dish you could think of. Soon there is enough food to feed an army spread through the lower level of the house.

The Selley’s arrive first. All of them coming into the house tentatively, but when Harry greets them warmly and fetches them glasses of cider they relax. Louis arrives with his siblings, step-dad and Freddie in tow. All of them are ecstatic to see Harry happy and smiling and Louis gives Liam a long tight hug.

Liam’s family arrives in a clatter of noise. Their arms are laden with more food and they joke about inviting the neighbors round just to help clear some of it away.

Niall and his family, along with Zayn with his, are the last to arrive. Almost immediately Zayn corners Liam about producing his next record.

He had been thinking about it, with a great deal of goading from Harry and the guys on the group chat, but he hadn’t given an answer yet. He leads Zayn off to a quieter corner to express his concerns about going back to work so soon. Mainly that he’s worried that Harry still needs him full time.

“You’re being ridiculous Liam, look at him,” Zayn points out, hand waving at Harry who is currently kneeling on the floor with Freddie. Both of them are piling blocks into towers that tip over almost immediately, making them both laugh.

“He has good days and bad days Zayn. Yes, he’s getting better, but I mean, he was gone for two years. It’s gonna take a while for him to recover,” Liam points out hotly.
“So you are making up for lost time?” Zayn replies, one brow up. “I’m not stealing you from him. We can do it here in your studio if you want so you are still in the same house with him. I think you actually need to do this mate because as much as you are trying to make a normal life for Harry, you need to do that for yourself as well.”

Liam sighs loudly. He hated to admit that Zayn was probably right, but he still felt guilty for even considering himself at the moment.

“What does Harry think you should do?” Zayn asks him, probably already knowing the answer.

“He thinks I should do it,” Liam admits.

“Exactly. He’s ok. He wants you to have a life too, just as much as you want one for him. Both of you need to start moving forward. Things are good and they are going to keep getting better. Stop looking for the next disaster to be coming.”

And so it was settled. They agree to get started first thing in the New Year, figuring that the holidays were just too much of a distraction.

Harry looks genuinely happy when they tell him later on in the evening, grinning at both of them and asking Zayn questions about the songs he’s written. His cheeks are slightly flushed, likely from the two cups of cider he’s managed to get through, but he’s not drunk by any means. He’s just happy, calm and settled. A far cry from a few months back and it eases any leftover tension in his family from the last time they were there with him.

After they have all cleared out, just the two of them and Harry’s parents remaining behind, they all work together to clean up. They pick up dishes and wrap up the still impressive amount of leftover food. They had tried to beg upon people to take some with them, but it hadn’t even made a dent.

Exhausted, but still jovial, they head up to bed after two in the morning. Harry hums jingle bells as he brushes his teeth and Liam laughs softly beside him.

“What?” Harry asks him, rinsing his mouth, but keeping an eye on Liam in the mirror.

“Nothing. Just good to see you happy and having a good time,” Liam replies easily.

“Well I am. It’s kinda nice to just be you know, happy. Spending time with people I care about and maybe forgetting for a little while. Just feeling like everything is as it’s always been.”

“Yeah, I get it, I do,” Liam admits. That’s what it had felt like too. As though nothing had happened, Harry had never disappeared and their lives were intermingled the entire time.

Harry finishes drying his hands with the towel, wiping up any splatters around the sink and neatly folding it. Liam just tosses his beside his own sink, knowing full well Harry will give him a stink eye and reach over to fix it. But this time Liam stops him and blocks his path. Harry frowns at him.

“Leave it. It’s my towel. I’ve put it how I want it so leave it,” Liam states evenly, hiding the laugh that was threatening to bubble up.

“Why can’t you just fold it nicely? Clean up after yourself?” Harry demands. His brows are still pulled together as his eyes land on the towel and then back on Liam’s face.
“Because it’s my towel. Why does it bother you so much?”

For years he’d watched Harry clean up after everyone else. It was adorable and strange at the same time. While Liam had appreciated it for the most part, and had even done his best to pitch in at times, it was still fun to rib Harry about it. And he had for as long as he’d known him.

“Because…it doesn’t bother me…it’s just, why can’t you just…” Harry stumbles out before stopping. He sighs loudly then suddenly steps forward and kisses Liam. His tongue meets Liam’s immediately and his body presses flush up against him, pushing Liam back into the counter.

It’s a good distraction. Liam forgets what they were talking about immediately as Harry’s lips move on his and his body heat is a force against him. He forgets until he feels Harry’s arms slide around his waist, hands never landing on his back and instead reaching behind Liam to snag the towel. Liam is quick though, a product of his sports background, and he quickly grabs Harry’s waist. He pushes him away from the counter, following so he can press Harry’s back against the opposite wall, and puts a few feet of distance between them and the towel. Harry grumbles into his mouth before pulling away from the kiss to laugh.

“Dammit, just let me fold it!” He demands while laughing. The sound is musical in the bathroom and Liam can’t help but grin.

“No! It’s the principle! Just leave it!”

Harry huffs out angrily, though it’s half-hearted because he’s still laughing and he groans at the end.

“Fine. If you want to live in a pig sty, fine. But you keep your mess on your side of the counter.”

“No! It’s the principle! Just leave it!”

Harry responds easily and eagerly, the cider making him more relaxed. His arms snake around Liam’s neck this time, long fingers threading their way into his hair. Liam’s own hands move around to Harry’s back, grazing along the top of his pajama pants before he catches himself and moves them up. He’s not forgotten the promise he made to never get carried away again, but the way Harry is kissing him is making it damn difficult to even think, let alone police himself.

They kiss for longer than Liam had intended. Both of them forgetting that they were supposed to be sleeping because this felt like a much better idea.

Liam’s body responds on cue. The exhilaration of kissing Harry still as strong as the first time and he breaks his promise again by pressing into Harry’s body, still up against the wall. His hips buck slightly as he slots a thigh between Harry’s.

Harry groans into his mouth at the movement and his legs open easily to him. His own hips push in against Liam’s and they set up a rhythm with soft groans and wet kisses filling the space.

It doesn’t take long for Liam to get close to the edge. Touching Harry and feeling his body against his, as well as his lips, tongue, hands, all of it was so very overwhelming and he feels oversensitive. It’s as though it is the first time he’s had sex. And it is his first time in theory, at least with another man, but having not been with anyone in so many years his body feels deprived and desperate. He
can’t help the more erratic movements his hips make and his cock is pressed insistently into Harry’s hip, pajama pants embarrassingly dampened with pre-cum.

He knows he’s supposed to be remembering something. That there’s some reason this shouldn’t be happening, but it was so hard to think when he could feel Harry’s body against his. His hands tugging his hair then sliding down his neck and back. His lips wet and swollen against his own and his teeth nipping whenever they get the chance, throat vibrating with each moan.

Liam presses impossibly closer, breath coming in short panting gasps, and Harry matches the rhythm of his hips. That’s when Liam’s notices it.

Harry is hard.

It’s perhaps not nearly as insistent as Liam’s own, but it’s still there and it is bumping Liam’s. The feeling is erotic and exhilarating, making him moan even louder. He feels relief on Harry’s behalf and a distinct increase in his own arousal at having caused it. It’s also a strange sensation. It’s the first time he’s ever been in this situation with another man, but he’s not anxious about it. Knowing that it’s Harry he feels completely sure and certain that this is what he wants. That Harry is who he wants.

Harry’s fingers find the hem of Liam’s shirt. They slide underneath and up his sides, pulling the fabric with them. Liam doesn’t even hesitate. He breaks the kiss just long enough to yank the shirt over his head and tosses it to the side before reclaiming Harry’s mouth. His hips retake their position bucking and pressing, finding friction. He can feel himself getting close, embarrassingly so, considering that they haven’t even taken their pants off yet.

He contemplates trying to slow down. To pull back so he can catch his breath and take the edge off, but Harry suddenly wraps his fingers around Liam’s ass and pulls him in sharply, head going back with a moan. He exposes his throat and the sudden and distinct increase in pressure, the sound and the heat all combine rapidly and Liam comes with a shout. It echoes in the small space.

He rides it and enjoys it for a long as his own self-consciousness will let him. Then his cheeks start to heat up. He knows Harry is aware of what just happened. He can feel his tension and his panting breathes in his ear since Liam resolutely refuses to remove his face from Harry’s shoulder to risk looking him in the eye.

“Li? You ok?” Harry finally asks, voice only a little bit amused. Liam is grateful that he’s not laughing.

“Yup, dandy,” Liam replies with a squeaky voice. He’s fighting Harry’s attempts to get him to look at his face.

“Liam relax. It’s ok,” Harry says in a soothing voice. Liam can’t help but cringe because right now, he would beg to differ. Especially since he can feel his cum sliding down his pant leg. “Liam honestly, it’s alright… it was kinda hot actually. Good to know I’ve still got it and can do that to someone.”

That brings Liam up short. Harry’s voice is still husky from his own arousal and Liam finally leans back and faces him properly. Harry smirks at him for a moment before nibbling on his swollen bottom lip and Liam’s cock make a valiant effort to come back to life. Not knowing what to say and his mind refocusing on Harry’s mouth, he leans in and kisses him again. He moves slower and takes his time, keeping it languid, but still just a little filthy. Harry responds immediately. His body
presses back into Liam’s and he’s reminded that one of them hasn’t finished yet. He starts trying to think of things he can do to get Harry there, if he wants to. A little voice in the back of his mind reminds him that Harry had been drinking that night and his inhibitions have been lowered due to that fact. The last thing he wants to do is push him or make him do something he might regret or feel panicked by in the morning when sobriety resumes its hold. At the same time, Harry’s hips continue to move. It’s clear he’s relaxed and comfortable in the situation, so Liam decides the best course of action is to just bloody well ask.

He pulls away from the kiss again, hand coming up to run through Harry’s hair and their breaths intermingle between them.

“What do you want me to do? What do you want right now?” He asks and one of Harry’s eyebrows goes up in a saucy manner.

“You.” He answers simply before laughing once. Then his expression becomes more nervous and unsure and Liam prepares for things to come to a halt. “I don’t know. I want you. I just don’t really know how I guess. Just keep touching me and kissing me. I like that. I’m ok with that.”

Liam nods, watching Harry carefully to assess the truth of his words. He considers the possibilities and vetos several immediately for multiple reasons. Instead, he does as Harry says and kisses and touches him. His hands roaming gently and carefully, but also with purpose. They slide down Harry’s sides, up his back and through his hair. He lets Harry set his own rhythm with his hips, only reaching down to help lift one of his thighs to change the angle when he thinks it will help. Harry pants against his lips with soft breathy moans coming from his throat, but Liam senses the frustration when it starts to set in. While it had been embarrassingly fast for Liam to come, Harry was having the opposite problem and he couldn’t get there.

In a split second decision, Liam’s releases Harry’s leg and he moves his hand between them, pressing it against Harry’s flannel covered cock. He wraps around it slightly, stroking and squeezing gently and Harry lets out a surprised moan, head dropping back again. Liam seizes the opportunity and starts pressing kisses down his throat, licking and sucking, but not enough to leave marks. He carefully avoids the scars, instead focusing on the sensitive skin just under his ear.

Harry’s hips pick up, fucking into Liam’s hand with more force and his mouth releases a litany of sounds. Each one is punctuated by a thrust and Liam feels heady with the power, the ability and the chance to give him this. To let him feel this again.

Harry comes with a jolt and a long keening sound. His body spasms suddenly before Liam feels the damp warmth against his hand. He carries on pressing soft kisses to Harry’s jaw while he rides through it. The spasms slowly turn to shudders and then those green eyes are on his, full of a thousand emotions. He looks almost overwhelmed with it all.

“You ok Haz?” Liam asks him carefully, tucking hair behind his ear comfortingly. A trickle of fear goes down his back as Harry continues to be quiet, looking stunned. “Harry? Talk to me. You ok? Was that too much?”

Dread washes over Liam and he immediately goes to step back and give Harry space, but he’s stopped by firm hands landing on his waist and pulling him back.

“No, no, stop, don’t go, I’m ok, I’m just… I…” Harry finally says, voice rough and quiet. His eyes search Liam’s face for a moment before going over his shoulder. His brow furrows as he thinks, processes and tries to sort through the mess in his head. “I had forgotten what that was like. Maybe
even secretly didn’t think I would ever feel it again. No matter how much I tried to fight that thought.”

Liam’s mouth opens and closes a few times as he tries to come up with a response that isn’t just empty sounding platitudes. He really didn’t know what to say because he had never known such a dilemma. He couldn’t even imagine thinking that intimacy with another person was just no longer an option. Not just sexual intimacy, but the connection, the sharing of thoughts, lives, physical and emotional. To him it was a given, something he assumed he would find someday in a partner. With Harry.

But to hear that Harry had actually been fearful of it never happening, of never feeling sexual pleasure again and never connecting with someone on that plane again, that was a painful thought.

“It’s ok. You don’t have to say anything,” Harry says eventually. His eyes come back to Liam’s, looking calmer. “Thank you. For not giving up on me and for not leaving me. I don’t know what I would have done if you had if I’m honest.”

Liam’s throat tightens slightly because never in a million years would he have considered it. He spent two years pining. He was full of pain and loss when Harry was gone. Getting him back was such a relief that he would have accepted anything and got more than he ever expected.

“You do not have to thank me. It was never a question for me,” he says gently. His fingers tuck an errant curl behind Harry’s ear before he leans in and kisses him softly. Harry leans into him as well, humming quietly before laughing.

“While this is wonderful post-sex existential conversation, and as much as I’m enjoying it, I think I’d like to get cleaned up now,” he says with another laugh and Liam nods enthusiastically. His pants were stuck to his legs, cold and damp. He was itching to get them off.

Giggling, and following one more quick kiss, they separate to find clean pants and damp washcloths. They change and clean up with their backs to each other because it felt the tiniest bit awkward. However, as soon as they are under the covers of the bed and cuddled up to each other, they both relax.

“I hope to God my parents did not hear that,” Harry mumbles out from Liam’s chest not long after they get into bed. Liam huffs a breathy laugh.

“Your father will kill me if he did,” he replies in a deadpan voice. Harry raises his head and looks at him.

“Yes, he’s ok with us now though. Why would he kill you?” Harry asks, brows furrowed.

“Yes, he’s ok with us so long as he thinks we aren’t having sex. We haven’t been until tonight,” Liam points out and Harry considers it before shrugging.

“He’ll get used to it,” he replies before putting his head down on Liam’s chest again.

“I don’t know about that, but I guess we will find out in the morning.”

Harry grunts in response and starts to snore a few moments later. Liam laughs, but he prays that Harry doesn’t have any regrets in the morning.
They are shy and awkward around each other for the first few minutes of the morning. That strange newness to their relationship makes them tip toe around. Harry is the first to break it, waiting until Liam is finished brushing his teeth before pulling him in for a long snog against the bathroom counter.

“We are idiots you know,” he says breathily when they finally break apart. His hair is a bird’s nest on his head and his pajamas rumpled. But his eyes are clear and his lips red and shiny.

“I’m inclined to agree, but in what regard?” Liam replies with a laugh and Harry grins at him for a moment.

“All those years, in the band, fucking touring around all that time together and we fucking wasted it. We could have been together, been getting up to all sorts and instead we danced around each other. Then when we finally kissed, we spent the next year refusing to talk about it.”

“Fair. Though I wasn’t aware of my feelings for you until after that kiss. But it’s fine. We can make up for lost time,” Liam points out, hearing the deeper meaning there. There were also two extra years they needed to make up for by just being together.

Harry smiles softly and nods, resting his forehead against Liam’s before leaning in to kiss him gently again. Liam savors it. The feel of his lips, the taste of his toothpaste and his skin soft under his fingers. Harry’s sigh fills the space.

“Boys?” Anne calls up the stairs and they both laugh.

“Yes mum,” Harry replies, yelling out the bathroom door.

“Breakfast is ready and you should see outside!” She exclaims. They both look at each other before hurrying out to the bedroom to look out the window.

The ground and every surface is coated in at least a foot of white, sparkling snow. It’s all clean and crisp looking and Harry grins immediately.

“Can we go out there?” He asks Liam eagerly like a child would and Liam can’t help but laugh.

“Of course. And you don’t actually have to ask my permission Haz. You are a grown man,” he points out. Harry stops laughing for a second, realization crossing his face before he takes off, hurrying towards the closet and pulling out his winter boots and coat. “Ok, I’m gonna recommend that maybe we should have breakfast first.”

“I’ll eat, I promise. I just want to go out right now, just for a minute, in case it starts to melt,” Harry huffs out while tugging the garments on. He adds a well-worn thick toque on his head and grabs a pair of mittens.

Not knowing what else to do Liam follows suit, chasing after Harry down the stairs and heading to the front closet for his own winter wear. He hurries to get it on as Harry goes straight out the door and stands marveling in the middle of the patio. He crunches the snow under his feet and looks up at the sky as more flakes start to fall.

“Harry! You will catch your death out there! Get in here!” Anne cries out, hurrying towards the
door. Liam stops her.

“Give him a minute. I’ll go keep an eye on him,” he assures her and she considers him before nodding. “We will make sure he has some tea as soon as he comes in.”

She nods again and heads into the kitchen, adding more water to the kettle while watching Harry out the window.

Liam steps out the door. The cold air blasts in his face and he makes his way over to Harry, looking around the yard himself. The woods behind the house are particularly lovely looking. The branches are all low and laden with snow and icicles. It gives the space an ethereal appearance.

One minute he is standing and enjoying the scenery and the next he’s wiping snow off the side of his face to the sound of Harry’s giggling. He turns and finds Harry standing a few feet away with another snowball in his mitten covered hands at the ready, a big silly grin on his face. Liam lifts one brow at him.

“Excuse me?” He asks in a serious tone and Harry gives him a defiant look.

He starts considering his options. He knows if he moves and bends to get his own weapon he’s going to get nailed again, but he also couldn’t just stand there and wait it out either. He’s just starting to prep himself for the next hit in order to retrieve some snow himself when another snowball hits him the back and another familiar giggle fills the space.

He turns and finds Gemma standing just outside the door, laughing just like her brother with a big floppy hat on her head as well. Liam immediately feels ganged up on.

“This is not fair you know, two against one,” he points out hotly while mentally calculating his odds of getting behind the swing before one of them manages to get him square in the face.

“Oh come on Liam. You were an all-star runner, an athlete, surely you can take on the two of us,” Gemma replies with a smirk.

“That was before your brother started baking every day. Safe to say I’m no longer in top form,” he replies and they both laugh.

No one sees the person who throws it before it happens, but suddenly a snowball comes flying over the top of the swing in a high arc and hits it’s mark right on Gemma’s shoulder. It makes her shriek, both in surprise and from the cold.

“Don’t worry Liam, we’ve got your back,” Louis says from his hiding place. Only the top of his head and his eyes are visible. Seconds later, Niall’s hair and eyes pop up as well.

Liam takes the chance and bolts, hurrying to take cover while Harry let’s his rip. He manages a glancing blow off of Liam’s shoulder before he’s safely taken cover.

Clearly feeling exposed, the two Styles siblings quickly scamper behind the built in barbecue. The stone wall on either side gives them an impenetrable barricade.

Seconds later, the air between the two camps fills with flying snowballs. The sound of their laughter echoes off of the white blanket and it doesn’t take long before Anne, Robin and Des take notice inside.
“HEY! What are you doing out here? Harry, you should not be getting cold and wet darling. Come in and get warmed up,” Anne hollers from the door. She turns to the two men for support, but they both look at her amused for a moment before hurrying past her. They are both dressed for the weather and their intent is clear as they each pick a side. Robin goes with Harry and Gemma while Des decides he likes Liam’s team’s odds better. Then there is talk of strategy and ambushes.

“Oh for crying out loud,” Anne yells out again a few minutes later. Her own coat and boots are now on as she comes storming out the back door and heads straight for Team Barbecue with a stern expression on her face. Harry stares at her with trepidation, worried she will force him back inside, but instead she takes up a position beside him and throws the other side a dirty look. “I’m not about to leave them shorthanded,” she points out and everyone laughs.

The fight resumes and the thuds of the weapons hitting the ground and furniture are only tempered by the squeals and laughter. Turns out Anne has one hell of a mean throwing arm and Niall’s forehead is a casualty of it. Liam manages to get his revenge on Gemma by knocking her hat clear off.

When the cold and the dampness finally truly sets in, they all trudge inside declaring a truce for the time being. There is discussion of finding sleds later, but breakfast becomes a priority.

Tea and hot chocolate is quickly made and they all gather around the island in the kitchen eating leftover cookies and pastries from the party the night before.

“When did you two get here?” Liam asks Louis and Niall before turning to Gemma. “You too? None of you stayed here last night.” Mentioning the night previous brings back a wash of memories of him and Harry in the bathroom and his cheeks heat slightly. His eyes dart to Des to try to gauge his mood and whether he had heard them or not.

Des doesn’t even notice his glance. He just stuffs the macaroon he’s holding into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully and sipping tea to wash it down. Relief washes through him.

“Well hello to you too Liam,” Louis says with a laugh. “We came to drop off gifts since it’s Christmas in two days and we probably won’t see you on the day. No idea why in hell Gemma is here though.”

“I’m here for the holiday. You know that,” Gemma points out hotly and Liam blushes again. He had forgotten entirely about the agreement. His mind was still lost in thoughts of Harry all the time.

“Right, right, sorry. Just wasn't expecting to see you throwing snowballs on my back patio suddenly,” he says sheepishly. Harry laughs quietly beside him, bumping his shoulder.

“I would think you were glad to see us since we saved your arse,” Niall points out with a smirk and Liam narrows his eyes at him.

“I could have taken them, eventually,” he replies hotly and everyone laughs.

“You’re welcome,” Louis deadpans.

After breakfast, Liam and Harry go upstairs to shower and change. They take the chance to make out for a few minutes between each task, but don’t take it too far with so many ears about. Liam
enjoys it. He loves the way Harry wraps himself around him, kisses him with abandon and fills the space with his soft breaths and hums of pleasure. It also serves to build a level of sexual frustration that he hasn’t had in a long while. This means that he’s more than happy when Louis and Niall finally leave and it’s time for bed that night. He knows he shouldn’t have too many expectations because he still had to be mindful of what Harry wanted and was comfortable with, but he finds out right quick the second they are finished brushing their teeth.

Harry is against him immediately, not even worrying about Liam’s discarded towel as he pulls his t-shirt up and off. His mouth insistent against Liam’s. His hands roam over his bared back and chest easily. Liam holds onto Harry’s hips while rolling his own, making both of them moan. Having been half hard all day it takes mere moments for him to be fully at attention. It’s even better when he feels Harry’s against his own. Exhilaration runs through him that even while sober Harry’s body was cooperating. Which meant he must feel completely at ease and safe with Liam.

They only spend a few moments in the bathroom before Harry is tugging him out to the bedroom. He falls onto his back on the bed and pulls Liam with him. He lets Liam slot between his legs and his hips push up insistently. The moment Liam starts moving, rolling his own hips to create a rhythm and find desperately needed friction, Harry’s legs come up to cage him in. But he tenses suddenly and his body freezes.

Liam stops moving and pulls back immediately, finding Harry’s wide eyes staring up at him.

“Haz, you ok? What’s wrong?” He asks, lifting up even further trying to give him space.

Harry breathes out with a whoosh, hands landing on his forehead and eyes closing while his legs drop back down to the bed.

“Fuck, sorry. Just my mind fucking with me as usual,” he replies, sounding angry. “So stupid,” he whispers a few moments later.

“Hey relax, no you aren’t. It’s not your fault. Maybe we are still going too fast,” he suggests, pushing up to get off of Harry and put a halt to things despite the ache between his legs.

“No, stop, don’t.” Harry says quickly, grabbing his arms. “Dammit, I want this. Fuck, I want you and I was fine. Just a stupid flashback. I’m fine, honestly.”

Liam stares at his face and tries to measure the truth there. He can see Harry fighting his trepidation, but desire is still present there as well. Liam can still feel his erection pressing against his own. It creates a strange dilemma because clearly physically Harry wanted to continue, it was his brain that was causing the problem. Liam starts trying to figure out what might have set him off and caused the flashback when he realizes that perhaps their position had a lot to do with it. There was only one way to find out if that was the case.

He quickly gets ahold of Harry, earning him a surprised noise as he rolls to the side and onto his own back. He pulls Harry with him so he’s now on top, straddling Liam. Harry stares down at him for a moment with wide, surprised eyes before he smirks. He understood what Liam was up to and his bottom lip gets captured by his teeth as the desire starts to win again.

Liam’s cock jumps watching Harry bite his lip and he knows Harry felt it with the way his brow flickers. He leans down and captures Liam’s mouth again at the same time as he grinds down with his hips. Liam feels strongly that he cannot be held responsible for the noise he makes or its volume, but Harry huffs a laugh into his mouth anyway. He grinds again and starts rocking his
hips, flattening himself against Liam as much as possible in order to press his own cock into Liam’s abdomen.

Liam’s hands travel down Harry’s sides, fingers finding their way just under the hem of his shirt to touch the soft warm skin there before sliding down his thighs and back up. He finally settles on his ass, feeling the muscle working as he thrusts against Liam. Harry moans into his mouth when he squeezes slightly, the sound sending a jolt of electricity down Liam’s spine.

When breathing becomes difficult, Harry pulls away from the kiss and presses his forehead against Liam’s. He pants loudly with each movement and Liam can’t help the way his own hips are now jutting upward, desperate for more. He feels the familiar burn and the heat pooling in his belly that tells him he’s close. He’s grateful he’s lasted far longer this time despite the buildup all day, but at the same time he doesn’t want this to end. Harry just looks so lovely above him. His eyes slipping closed frequently with the sensations, his lashes a fan across his cheeks, hair a shroud around him, mouth open and slack and lips dark and wet.

Harry’s movements become more erratic the closer they get. His head tilts back and his mouth opens wider as he moans once before jolting. His body tenses as he comes, a shout filling the space and Liam can feel his body shuddering with it. His muscles flicker under Liam’s hands and he can feel the warmth on his abdomen from Harry’s release. Only a few seconds later Liam follows, thrusting upward a few times to press against Harry and to feel him against his cock while he soaks his own pants.

Harry flops down onto him after, breathing hard into Liam’s neck and body limp. Liam’s arms splay out on the bed as well. The comforting surge of chemicals fill his body and make him feel completely at ease and happy.

Then Harry giggles in his ear.

“What?” Liam asks breathily.

“I seriously doubt no one heard that,” he replies a moment later, laughing even harder.

Liam considers it. The sound he had made coupled with Harry’s shout when he had climaxed and yeah, it was probably a guarantee that at least one person in the house will have heard what they were up to. Heat fills his cheeks immediately, his post orgasm bliss quickly becoming embarrassment.

Harry pushes himself up onto his elbows to look down at Liam. He sees the blush and gives him a gentle, slightly pitying smile.

“Relax Li, it’s fine. They’re the ones who wanted to stay here, remember?” He points out, completely unfazed that it was his own parents and sister who probably heard.

“Yeah, but I’m still gonna have to sit at the dinner table with them,” he points out with a slightly squeaky voice. Harry laughs once and kisses him quickly.

“Chill Liam. The one who’s closest is Gemma and if she heard anything she will not say a word. If she’s sleeping then I doubt she heard anything. You’ve heard her snore. She can sleep through a hurricane,” Harry assures him, but Liam absolutely does not feel any better.

He hums noncommittally and Harry laughs again, leaning down to kiss him, This time he takes a
little longer to savor it and Liam’s hands snake around his back, pulling him a little closer. They take their time, relaxing into it and being languid until they start to feel uncomfortable in their own mess. So they get up to go into the bathroom to clean up and change.

“We really might want to consider taking our pants off next time,” Harry says with a laugh as he ties the drawstring on the clean pair he’s just put on. “Would save on the laundry.”

Liam just suddenly feels extremely glad he’s the one who does their laundry because he absolutely does not want Anne finding their soiled pajama pants.

The next morning Liam does his very best to avoid eye contact with everyone else in the house except for Harry, who smirks at him every time. So he then starts avoiding Harry’s eyes as well.

He fails however, and inadvertently gets a knowing look from Gemma that makes his cheeks burn hot. He quickly excuses himself to do a load of washing until they have cooled down. He reminds himself that what he and Harry are doing is perfectly normal, healthy and they are in a relationship together. But he also really wasn’t much of an exhibitionist.

Gemma corners him in the hallway just as everyone is heading up to bed. Harry follows his mum into her room to discuss something privately, sending a spike of fear through Liam’s body. It’s nothing compared to the terror he gets when Gemma stares him down though.

“So I heard something funny last night and I checked it out because I was concerned something was wrong, but I’m so glad for what you are doing for him,” she says quietly and conspiratorially. Liam feels faint from embarrassment.

His mouth wobbles uselessly as he tries to think of something to say before he finally squeaks out the word ‘sorry’, phrasing it as a question. He then thinks that maybe he should just play dumb. He’s especially concerned about her checking up on things, horrified at what she might have seen.

“His Christmas present silly. He’s going to love it!” She whispers with a laugh and he stares at her confused. “Downstairs, in the wine cellar. I found the bag. Well I kicked it actually, accidentally of course, but I was looking for some wines for Christmas dinner cuz I couldn’t sleep and I found the bag. I just think it’s so amazing Liam. He’s going to be so happy!”

Liam stops moving for a second and stops breathing while he processes her words before sagging with relief. She was downstairs. She hadn’t heard anything of what they were up to the night before. He bends over and rests his hands on his knees, breathing hard and wiping the fine sheen of sweat off of his forehead while she looks at him concerned.

“Are you alright? What’s wrong Liam?”

“Liam? You ok?” Harry asks behind her, both of them staring at him with matching expressions of concern. He waves them off.

“Fine, fine, just got a little light headed. It’s nothing,” he replies, standing back up and rolling his shoulders slightly while they both continue to stare at him. “Let’s just get to bed yeah? It’s Christmas Eve tomorrow. We want to be well rested,” he says dumbly. Harry’s mouth becomes a smirk while Gemma just looks confused.

“Ok…” she says a moment later, turning to hug Harry. She wishes him a good night before saying the same to Liam and heads down the hall. She throws one more confused look at him over her
shoulder.

Harry pulls him into the bedroom and closes the door behind them, turning and looking at him with one brow up.

“The hell was that?” He asks pointedly.

“What, uh, what did your mum want to talk about?” Liam asks by way of reply and Harry gives him a look.

“To talk about Gemma’s present. You know my mum. She bought six different colors of the same thing because she couldn’t choose and she wanted my opinion. Now what the hell just happened with you and Gemma there?”

“She, uh, she told me she heard something last night and I thought, that, you know, she meant…”

“You thought she meant she had heard us having sex,” Harry replies, voice even. “You do know my sister would never just corner you and say something about it right? And would you relax? She didn’t hear anything. She was downstairs picking wine or something. More likely she was hiding presents around the house. She does that every year. So you need to stop worrying.”

“Yes, I know that now Harry! I’m sorry. It just doesn’t make me comfortable that someone could hear us,” Liam retorts and Harry tilts his head to the side, regarding him carefully.

“Are you saying you want to stop until after they have left?” He asks while walking towards Liam and pressing up against him. His hands are on Liam’s waist pulling him in. “Or, that we should just be quieter?”

“The second one. Definitely the second one,” Liam replies earnestly and Harry laughs, leaning in to kiss him.

They forget to take their pants off again, or maybe Liam worries that Harry isn’t ready for that yet and doesn’t push it. But it leads to another dash to the bathroom afterward to change and clean up, both of them giggling. They do manage to be quiet however. Moans and gasps are swallowed by kisses. Harry gets on top again, resuming the same position they had the night before.

There is a sense of contentment that Liam feels afterward when they are curled up in bed with Harry snoring softly on his chest. It’s one that he hadn’t felt in a long while. He still can’t help marveling over the events of this year and the changes he had encountered in his life. All of which were for the better. For the first time in three years he feels excited for the future and therefore, feels a touch weepy. He’s glad Harry sleeps through it.
Chapter 27

Christmas Eve finds the house full again. Both of their families descend to celebrate and just before dusk they all pile into cars and go into London to tour around looking at the lights. The whole city is filled with them. All of the shops are festooned with a different theme and Liam’s favorite part is watching Harry’s reaction to them all. His face is almost childlike as they walk the streets. They are all bundled up in plenty of layers as their boots crunch in the snow on the sidewalk. Watching Harry’s glee, his eyes darting around to see everything and not miss a thing, makes Liam feel even better about the surprise he has at home.

As a last minute decision, he had commissioned a local company to come and decorate his own house while they were out. So as they walk around London, there is a small army of people coating every surface of the outside of his house, including all surrounding trees, shrubbery and every other available space with a variety of decorations.

As they turn down his street he can already see the glow and he can’t help but laugh quietly, earning him a strange look from Harry. Ruth, Thomas and Gemma sit in the backseat looking at him oddly as well. At least until they too see it. Then there is a chorus of gasps in the car as the gate starts to open, revealing it all. Lights are dripping everywhere: Off the trees in long icicles and from the eaves in sweeping curtains. There are brilliant whites and blues with spotlights shining on lush, thick green wreathes placed between the windows, each with red velvet bows and twinkling red decorations. The fountain has been turned into a skating rink with statues of polar bears skating across it and blue twinkling lights are all around it like snow in the sun. Two huge candy cane statues stand guard at the bottom of the steps while two life-size nutcrackers guard either side of the front door. And there is a massive lit up wreath in the centre of it.

“Oh my God Liam,” Harry breathes beside him. He leans forward to look out the windshield, trying to take it all in. His eyes wide and sparkling.

“Jesus Christ Liam, you didn’t do this by halves did you?” Ruth points out from the back. Her voice is only slightly admonishing as she too marvels at the sight.

They all pile out while the other cars pull up and spill their occupants as well. There is a rise in chatter as they explore and take it all in. Harry stands next to Liam, eyes twinkling as he looks up at the giant Santa with his sleigh and reindeer on the roof. He laughs quietly.

“This is pretty incredible Liam. How in hell did you even pull this off?”

“I hired some people. I wanted to surprise you,” Liam replies easily, happy that it worked. Ever since Halloween he had decided to make sure every holiday was special for Harry, since he had missed so many. Christmas was especially a big deal.

Harry takes Liam’s hand with his warm, mitten covered one and turns to smile at him softly.

“Come on, let’s go look.” Liam says as he starts to lead Harry across the driveway. Harry grins at him and follows easily. They take their time looking at all of the lights and marveling at the intricacy of some of the decorations. Liam makes a mental note to hire the same company next year.

They end up spending over two hours outside checking it all out. They take pictures and group
photos and at least twice a bout of caroling breaks out. It is intentionally sung badly, making them all double over in hyst...s, coats and assorted sundries, intent on making a big pot of hot chocolate to warm up with. Gemma suggests they watch a Christmas movie and a debate starts about which one.

Harry and Liam are the last to come to the door since they take their time. They don’t notice it at first when they come up the steps, but then Ruth is there pointing up at the mantle above the door with a cheeky smirk. Liam finally spots the mistletoe planted there, a red ribbon bow holding it in place and Harry laughs beside him.

“You know the rule,” Ruth says in a serious tone. Liam notes the rest of the people in the hallway turning to look their way. The discussion of a movie is forgotten for the moment as they all smirk at the two men on the front porch.

“I think they want us to kiss,” Harry leans in and stage whispers at him. Liam laughs and nods at him dramatically.

“It would seem so. I don’t think we are going to be allowed inside until we do,” he replies in the same manner.

“We better get at it then cuz I’m bloody cold,” Harry whispers back and Liam dutifully turns to face him. Harry’s grinning face is already looking at him with his cheeks rosy from the cold and his eyes twinkling in the light. There is no way Liam could resist that.

He leans in and kisses Harry softly. He wants to keep it clean, considering their entire families were bloody well watching, but it still lingers longer than would probably be considered polite, neither one willing to break it first. It takes Ruth clearing her throat loudly to finally separate them. She shakes her head at them and laughs, grabbing their hands and pulling them in the door. No one says anything about it, but the warmth from that kiss remains in Liam’s belly for the rest of the evening.

They pile into the living room, mugs of hot chocolate in hand and a plate of biscuits on the table. Blankets and pillows are distributed to make everyone comfortable and National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation becomes the clear winner in the movie selection.

Liam and Harry curl up together on their favorite chair. Harry’s back is to Liam’s chest and a blanket covers the both of them. As the movie goes on, they find more and more ways to touch each other under the covers. Harry’s hands on Liam’s thighs, sliding up further and further while Liam wraps his hands around Harry’s waist, fingers finding their way under his layers of shirts to touch his warm skin. This makes Harry press back into him, a soft sigh escaping his lips that only Liam hears.

By the time they get upstairs, having spent close to an hour saying good night to everyone, they are both pent up messes of sexual frustration. The instant the door is closed Harry is on Liam. He presses him against the wall with a loud thump as his lips crash into Liam’s, moaning into his mouth almost immediately. His hips press insistently and Liam knows they need to quiet down and get away from the door fast.

Reaching down and wrapping his hands around Harry’s thighs he lifts him, forcing Harry to wrap his legs around Liam and he carries him over to the bed, setting him down gently. He intends to roll them so Harry is on top again, but Harry stops him and yanks Liam down to resume kissing him. His legs tighten their hold, pressing their bodies together, and his hips push up. Liam starts to
move without even thinking, desperation taking over as his own hips start thrusting into Harry’s. He wants so badly to feel him and to slide their erections together, but the other times they had been in this situation they were wearing loose pajama pants. This time they are both wearing jeans. Jeans that were extremely restrictive, kept Liam from feeling any part of Harry’s body and were frankly starting to hurt because of their tight nature.

He stops kissing Harry and pushes himself up onto his hands, looking down at him. They both speak at the same time, talking in unison.

“Pants off.”

A beat later they both laugh, but Liam starts scrambling to get off of Harry. He yanks at his belt and quickly undoes the fly of his jeans before pushing them down. Harry does the same from the bed. Seeing Harry doing such a thing makes Liam’s cock jump and a spike of arousal goes down his spine.

Jeans removed and tossed to the side, though socks remaining, Liam steps forward fully intending to resume their previous position when Harry stops him. He sits at the edge of the bed and pulls Liam in to stand between his knees. His hands trail up inside Liam’s t-shirt, pushing the fabric up while he looks up at Liam with a face that had the serious potential of making Liam come right then and there.

“Take your shirt off,” Harry instructs and Liam quickly obeys. He moans softly when Harry leans in and starts pressing kisses to his stomach. He trails around his belly button and down to the course hair just visible above his boxers. His hands land on Liam’s thighs and squeeze slightly before sliding up. They start to disappear into his boxers at the same time that Harry presses a kiss to Liam’s cock, hard and held against his hip by the elastic material.

“Harry…” Liam starts, worry quickly coming over him that they were moving too fast. It was one thing to rut together and get each other off while still fully clothed, but this was a massive step and he didn’t want Harry to be pressured or think that this was only about what Liam wanted. But Harry cuts him off by looking up at him and that jolt goes down Liam’s spine again.

“I’m fine Liam. I will stop if I’m not ok,” he tells him clearly, holding eye contact to make sure Liam knew he was telling the truth. “I want to make you feel good.”

“It’s not just about me Harry,” Liam points out, still feeling uneasy despite his body’s eager acquiescence to this idea.

“I know,” Harry replies with a smirk. “And I fully expect you will return the favor.”

That brings Liam up short. He had no qualms with giving Harry a blow job. It’s just that he’d never done it before and he was suddenly feeling quite self-conscious that he would do a terrible job.

Then a more sinister thought crosses his mind. While he had never done this before, he remembers Harry telling him that he had never been with another man himself before those two bastards attacked him. In fact, they had been pretty pleased to be Harry’s first gay experience so Harry’s knowledge of giving blow jobs had come from them forcing him to learn.

Harry immediately notes the change in his face and his hands drop back down while unease begins crossing his own features. A slightly sick feeling settles into Liam’s gut. He’s not stupid and he knows full well that if they were to have a sexual relationship he would never be the first one that
Harry would experience it with. That decision was taken away from Harry and therefore Liam by
extension. There were no positions, no sex acts or shared things in bed that Harry probably wasn’t
already familiar with because he had been forced to perform them.

Harry sighs softly, hands dropping away completely as his face goes down. Hurt and sadness cross
his features and Liam’s heart breaks. Harry had been just fine a few minutes ago and was ready to
be with Liam this way. Then Liam had gone and ruined it.

“You know, in all this time I thought you didn’t see me as disgusting or tainted by them. Clearly I
was wrong,” Harry says quietly and sadly. Liam drops down onto his knees in front of him
immediately.

“Listen to me. I do not see you that way, I don’t. I promise you that,” Liam says with a slightly
thick throat. Harry’s eyes flick up to meet his, but leave again almost immediately as shame crosses
his face. Liam quickly takes ahold of it, cradling his cheeks gently. “I hate what they took away
from us. That’s not on you. It’s not your fault and you are still perfect to me in every way Haz. I
love you. That has not changed and I still want you in every way.”

“Just not in this way,” Harry replies with a slightly sarcastic tone, one brow going up.

“Yes in this way. Most definitely in this way,” Liam says quickly, hating himself more and more
with each passing second. “I’m sorry. This is on me. I let my stupid brain get in the way because of
something so ridiculous.” He shakes his head and looks down, hands dropping to land on Harry’s
shoulders.


“I… I’ve never done this. I’ve never gone down on a guy before. I was thinking that and was
honestly worrying that I would be terrible at it because of my inexperience,” he admits, realizing
that he needed to be truthful with Harry as that was the basis of any good, healthy relationship. But
then he looks back up and sees the penny drop in Harry’s eyes. His jaw tightens and his eyes
narrow in anger.

“And you know I have done it, right? That’s what you think? You think I was going to take my
ample learning experiences to show you a good time Liam?” He spits sarcastically, hands shoving
Liam back. “Because I’d hate to break this to you, but I haven’t actually properly done it either.
There is a big fucking difference between doing it consensually with the intent of actually
pleasuring your partner, something I wanted to do with you for the first time I might add, and
having someone just shove their dick in your mouth against your will.”

Liam falls back and lands on his ass as Harry gives him one final push. He stands and storms off
into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. Scrambling, Liam manages to get onto his feet
and he hurries over to the door, knocking on it.

“When he gets no response he knocks again.

“Harry? Please just tell me you are ok in there baby. I just need to know you are ok,” Liam pleads,
pressing his ear against the wood. He hears Harry sniffle and realizes he’s crying. His hand scrambles to find the handle, turning it with a prayer that he hasn’t locked the door and he’s relieved when it swings open. Harry is sitting on the floor in the corner, knees under his chin and face stricken. Liam’s heart shatters this time.

He crosses the room quickly and lands on his knees next to Harry, pulling him in to his chest quickly and shushing him. He apologizes repeatedly and kisses the top of his head. He holds him tight despite Harry’s initial attempts to push him away. He grumbles angrily before he finally relents and sags into Liam.

“I’m so sorry babe. I really fucked up. This is not your fault and I don’t want you thinking any less of yourself,” he says into the hair below his chin and Harry swallows loudly.

“This isn’t going to work if you are thinking about what they did to me every time we have sex,” Harry points out with a thick voice.

“I know. You are one hundred percent right. I need to get over my bullshit and only listen to you. I need to trust that you know what is best for you and not question it,” Liam admits. That was how this started. A worry that Harry wasn’t ready and Liam assuming he wasn’t ready. Perhaps in the past Harry had been pushing himself too much and Liam had cautioned him, but it was clear Harry was becoming more confident and Liam needed to leave the past in the past and trust Harry’s own mind. “I’m sorry. I was being selfish. I shouldn’t have even let my head go down that road. Not when you looked so beautiful and incredible at that moment.”

Harry tenses slightly. His head comes up a bit as he frowns at Liam, cheeks still tear stained.

“Wait, is that your problem? That someone else was with me before you?” He accuses, face now incredulous. “You literally just don’t want to share me?”

“I… no… I mean… I guess a little, but not like that. I just hate that they took something from you that should have been you and I…” Liam stutters out. He’s fully aware that he sounds like a complete and utter fucking idiot now and he can feel his cheeks getting hot with embarrassment over his own stupidity.

Harry stares at him incredulously for a few more moments. His mouth opens slightly before he rolls his eyes and closes them slowly.

“You are such a fucking idiot,” he says finally, voice deadpan.

“I sorta assumed you knew that already,” Liam points out and despite himself, Harry snorts a laugh.

“Jesus Christ Liam,” he says with a sigh, wiping his cheeks with his sleeves. “They haven’t taken anything from us. As far as I’m concerned, if it’s not consensual then it doesn’t really count. How could I have truly experienced something if it was painful or terrifying? Yes, I know, I really do know, that there are things they did to me and took from me that I can never get back. But I have been trying to believe that they don’t really count. That what they did to me doesn’t count and that it only counts when it’s consensual. It’d be kinda nice if you could feel the same.”

“Fair. That’s completely fair and actually, I like that. That’s a really great way to look at it,” Liam agrees, hand coming up to tuck Harry’s hair behind his ear. He meant it too. It made complete sense to him.
“Good, because it’s how I’ve been managing and coping and it would be really helpful not to have those beliefs shaken,” Harry says sternly, holding eye contact.

“Agreed,” Liam says with a nod. “I’m sorry. I really am and I promise you it won’t happen again.”

“Ok, good,” Harry replies, sagging with relief and sighing loudly. “Safe to say the mood has been effectively killed tonight. Probably for the best with so many people in the house.”

“Yeah, I know it has, sorry,” Liam says quietly, arm around Harry’s shoulders pulling him close again. He leans in to kiss his temple lovingly. “Why don’t we just get to bed? It’ll be a busy day tomorrow.”

“Ok,” Harry says softly and resigned. They get up from the floor and mechanically get ready for bed individually.

Liam refuses to let a gulf open up between them though and he’s determined to right his wrong. He pulls Harry in to a tight cuddle the moment they are under the covers. Harry is tense for a few minutes at first before he gives in and relaxes.

“I love you,” Liam says quietly, kissing the top of Harry’s head.

“I love you too,” Harry replies. “Even if you are an idiot.”

“One of us had to be. To balance the relationship,” Liam answers and Harry snorts. “Get some sleep. It’s Christmas tomorrow.”

***

It takes forever for either of them to fall asleep, but eventually they do. Liam is woken first, by Ruth as planned. He prays that they can put last night behind them and start fresh today. He really hopes his gift for Harry kicks that off nicely.

He and Ruth sneak downstairs to get the bags from the wine cellar while they wait for the text to come in from Nicola, who was coming with the main part of the gift from London.

While Ruth waits for her downstairs, Liam goes up to the bedroom and tip toes around setting a few things up. He keeps one eye perpetually on Harry to make sure he doesn’t wake. Each time he so much as snuffles or moves a foot Liam hurries over and soothes him, but he knows it’s only a matter of time before Harry notices he’s not in bed and wakes up looking for him.

When Ruth and Nicola tap once on the door he hurries over and accepts the bundle from them, smirking at them as he closes the door again. Both of them scowl that they wouldn’t get to see Harry’s first reaction, but Liam knows they won’t leave and will be through the door as soon as they know the surprise is done.

He carefully opens the little crate and pulls the tiny ball of grey fur out. He slides a pre-tied red ribbon bow onto its fuzzy neck before tip toeing over to the bed and putting the kitten down on the end. As predicted, Harry starts to reach for Liam on the bed. His brows furrow before he speaks, clearly still half asleep.

“Liam?” He slurs out, voice deep and thick with sleep.
Liam says nothing, but Harry does get a reply in the form of a tiny squeaky mew from the kitten, who starts ambling his way up the bed on his tiny feet. Harry’s eyes pop open immediately as the kitten reaches the top of the bed. It mews again in his face and he goes from looking entirely confused to overjoyed in a split second. He starts to sit up and gently scoops the kitten up as he does, cradling it against his chest.

“Oh my God,” he says finally, looking up at Liam with a face full of wonder.

“Merry Christmas Haz,” Liam replies and Harry’s face splits in two with a wide grin as he looks back down at his gift. The kitten looks up at him stretching a fuzzy grey paw up to swat at Harry’s nose, making him giggle.

“Hi darling,” Harry says with a laugh. His fingers tickle the kitten under his chin before he gently bites one, licking it a moment later. “I cannot believe you got me a kitten,” he adds, looking back up at Liam and laughing, shaking his head slowly.

“You said you wanted a cat,” Liam points out and Harry laughs harder before nodding.

“Yes, yes I did. Thank you for remembering. I don’t believe I was actually being serious at that moment, but I’m glad you took it seriously because I love him! He’s perfect. Now I just have to pick the perfect name for him.”

Liam rounds the bed and sits down next to Harry, tickling behind one of the kittens ears, which earns him a loud purr.

“Can we come in yet?” Come two voices from outside the door and Harry looks up surprised.

“My co-conspirators,” Liam supplies as an answer before turning towards the door. “Yup, safe now.”

The door opens quickly and Ruth and Nicola hurry in, followed closely by Gemma and Anne who both have curious faces.

“We heard something going on,” Anne says and Gemma squeals when she sees the little fur ball in Harry’s hands. “Oh he’s adorable Harry! What are you going to call him?”

Gemma is on the bed quickly, hands reaching for the kitten. Harry sets him down to let him wander towards her as she wiggles her fingers on the blanket, making the kitten pounce.

“I was just trying to think of one. I’m leaning towards Fitzy,” Harry replies.

“Oh! That’s cute! I love that name Fitzy,” Gemma agrees nodding quickly, her hair bouncing around her face. “Come here Fitzy. Auntie Gemma wants a cuddle. I couldn’t wait to meet you,” she declares as she scoops him up and lets him nuzzle into her neck, purring again. They all laugh quietly.

“You knew about him?” Harry accuses playfully and she smirks, glancing at Liam.

“I found the supplies the other day in the wine cellar and figured it out,” she admits, kissing Fitzy’s head.
The mention of supplies makes Harry look around the room and he finally notices the array of toys and a scratching post dotted everywhere. Along with a little litter box now sitting in the bathroom.

“When in hell did you do all of this?” He asks Liam, looking surprised.

“This morning while you were sleeping. I can be quiet when I need to be,” Liam says with a wink and Harry laughs.

Anne comes over to the bed as well, picking up a little toy mouse on her way and dangling it in front of Fitzy who swipes at it while Gemma holds him steady.

“Ok, Nan’s turn for a cuddle,” Anne says with a laugh, holding her hands out and Gemma passes him over.

He gets a cuddle and kiss from everyone in the room and before long the rest of the household slowly wakes and comes in to see what all the noise is and they all enjoy watching Fitzy as he chases a ribbon toy around the bed.

The moment that gets them all concerned, but then laughing the most, is when Winston comes in. He takes one look at the kitten and hunkers down in fear, despite the massive size difference between them.

Fitzy takes the Great Dane in stride though, sauntering over and getting right up in Winston’s face. Liam hovers close just in case, but then the dog’s tail starts to wag happily and within minutes Fitzy is sitting on Winston’s back, both of them completely at ease with each other.

With that settled, everyone puts on their dressing gowns and slippers and they head downstairs to the pile of gifts under the tree and for some breakfast. They decide to eat first and Harry serves out a portion of kitten food for Fitzy, who they decide will eat his meals above where Winston’s nose can reach. It means using the counter and that they will have to lift the little guy up and down and watch him closely until he’s big enough to jump. But it was better than having the dog eat his food.

Soon the house is filled with the smell of bacon, eggs, pancakes, sausages and coffee. They all sit around the kitchen and living room to eat, laughing and talking loudly. Liam surveys the scene with some emotion in his throat, especially every time he looks at Harry. Once again he was awed by the amount of changes this one year had brought. Now as he sat with his family, Harry’s family and Harry he felt so complete and satisfied in his life that he couldn’t remember feeling anything else.

Harry notices his face after a while and comes over to him with a soft smirk on his lips, tilting his head to the side.

“And why are you getting all wobbly over here?” He asks quietly, hand finding Liam’s.

“Just happy, that’s all,” Liam replies honestly and Harry smiles at him. Despite their argument and issues the night before, he knows they will get past it. They already were for the most part and he vows to only look forward from now on. Like Harry had asked him to.

“Oh, let’s open presents!” Ruth shouts suddenly. They both turn and laugh at her before Harry leads Liam into the living room, scooping Fitzy up on his way and setting him on his lap when they are both settled in the chair.
The room fills quickly with the sound of wrapping paper tearing along with plenty of laughter and chatter. Liam loses track of who got what from whom, but he does get a pretty awesome Batman necklace from Ruth and a limited edition box set of the entire Harry Potter series from Nicola. Harry gets a lot of clothes, a rather frightening amount of them actually, from everyone except Liam. All of them seem to think he needs more things that actually fit him rather than hang off of him. But he does also get some more personal items like framed photos of the entire family from different events and a painting that Gemma did herself, all with a mind to help him feel more at home at Liam’s.

At some point Fitzy ends up with a little blue bow on the top of his head, a moment he sleeps right through, and Liam can’t help but take a picture. He makes sure Harry is fully a part of it as well, which earns him a shy glance, but he smiles all the same.

As the gift giving starts to finish up, he gets a few nervous glances from Harry that he can’t decipher. Not until Harry suddenly gets up, passing the kitten to Gemma to continue napping in her arms while taking Liam’s hand and pulling him towards the stairs. That’s when he gets a hint that something is coming.

Harry leads him upstairs to the office. The rest of the families follow, quietly giggling or asking in hushed whispers what was going on. They hang back while Liam is stopped in front of a very large box, one that is taller than him and just a bit wider with a big red ribbon on it.

He looks at Harry questioningly and gets a grin in response.

“Merry Christmas Liam,” he says with a laugh. “Open it!”

A flurry of nerves and excitement go through him as he pulls the ribbons on the bow. It unravels and the box pieces fall away, having only been held in place by the fabric. A large glass case is revealed that contains a very authentic and extraordinarily accurate full Batman suit of armor complete with mask, held suspended on a frame.

Liam can’t even speak for a few minutes as he is so completely blown away at seeing such an incredible thing, and in his office no less. Then he notices the little plaque announcing that it was actually a real, official movie worn suit used by Christian Bale in the 2005 Batman Begins production.

Jaw lowering to the floor he turns and stares at Harry in shock, getting a laugh in return.

“It helps that I kinda know the guy who directed that particular movie,” Harry points out and Liam laughs once himself. He’s still blown away by how fucking cool the suit is and even more so that it is now standing in his office and it’s his. There is definitely a part of him that wants to try it on.

“Ok, so it’s been set in the wires and stand so they do not recommend you try to get it out and put it on, but I can tell by your face that you really want to so I’m sure we can figure it out,” Harry says, one brow up.

He’s not wrong. Liam really really really wants to put it on but he also doesn’t want to potentially damage it, so he decides to leave it and to admire it from afar. It might end up being a bit of a daily struggle and he might just have to get the head piece out, if nothing else, but he will try to behave himself in regards to the rest of it.

Not able to contain himself anymore he turns and pulls Harry into a tight hug. Harry squeaks in
surprise before laughing and hugging him back.

“I take it you like it?” He asks and Liam hugs him a little tighter.

“It’s awesome! I can’t believe you got this for me!” Liam replies, voice almost vibrating with his happiness and excitement. “Thank you! Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome! But maybe let me breathe a little bit.” Harry says into his ear and Liam realizes just how tight he’s holding him and lets him go. Harry stumbles slightly, but is still laughing.

“That is actually really fucking cool,” Gemma says behind them. She hands Fitzy back over to Harry who immediately starts snuggling with the little ball of grey fur. He nuzzles his nose on his head, earning him a loud purr.

“How in hell did you get something this big in here without me noticing?” Liam asks bewildered. He hadn’t even heard anything going on in the office, even though they had been busy the last few days. Yet it seemed to him that this sort of thing might take a little work to get together.

“Same way you snuck a kitten in without me knowing,” Harry laughs. “I had help.” He turns and grins at Des and Robin who both give him a thumbs up and Liam laughs.

“Ok, pictures!” Anne announces, pulling out her phone. Several are taken of Liam with the suit, Harry then joining him and then about a hundred more of Fitzy, just because.

Afterwards there is a grand clean up in the living room. The mountain of wrapping paper is all tucked into bags for recycling and gifts are put away while Anne and Harry get started on Christmas dinner in the kitchen.

The house starts to fill with the scent of Christmas ham as those who are still in their pajamas hurry upstairs to shower and change. The afternoon is spent playing board games and watching Christmas movies. A lot of laughs fill the air and Liam eats more than he has in years, feeling like he will explode if he breathes in too much. Harry laughs at him as he flops back in the chair and undoes the top button on his pants. He had been pleased to see Harry eat more than normal at dinner, though it is still a daily struggle. It seemed that when he was happy, calm and distracted he tended to indulge more.

They head up to bed late after having bid a goodnight to his family and most of Harry’s. Gemma, Ruth and Nicola have all made plans to hit the shops for Boxing Day, but Harry and Liam begged them off. While it had been fun for the one day, neither was particularly interested in the insanity the holiday tended to produce.

Liam can’t help but poke his head into the office before going in the bedroom, just to see the suit one more time. He then follows Harry in while Fitzy ambles up the bed on his short little kitten legs. Liam gently scoops him up and puts him in a big round cushiony bed bought specifically for him since their bed was quite high. Fitzy looks a little stunned by this shift, but quickly decides he likes his bed and starts kneading it with his paws before curling up in a ball.

Satisfied, Liam heads into the bathroom to brush his teeth. Harry looks up at him as he comes in, mouth full of toothpaste and cheeks still flushed from the happy day. It makes Liam smile immediately.

“What?” Harry asks as soon as he’s rinsed his mouth.
“Nothing, just, that was probably the best Christmas I’ve had in a really long time,” he replies quietly, squeezing a stripe of toothpaste onto his own brush and starting to clean his teeth.

Harry considers it for a moment, smiling softly while he folds his towel neatly.

“Oh, me too. I mean, it was even better than ones we had before… you know,” he says, waving his hand and Liam nods. “Thank you. I know you have been making an effort to make holidays fun for me and it’s working and I do appreciate it.”

Liam rinses his mouth and wipes it with his own towel, tossing it beside the sink with a quick smirk at Harry.

“You’re welcome. It’s been good for me too really. It makes me happy to see you so happy,” he answers while turning and pulling Harry in to him, hands on his waist. Harry’s hands immediately go around his shoulders. The kiss is soft, gentle, but still sends a thrill down Liam’s spine.

Harry hums into his mouth and presses in a little closer. Their hands start to explore each other a little more and an idea crosses Liam’s mind. A way to make it up to Harry after last night’s disastrous attempt at having sex. He’s not entirely sure if Harry will be ok with it, but he knows that he really wants to make Harry feel good.

He travels down Harry’s jaw, placing soft kisses to the sensitive skin and Harry hums again. It’s a little louder this time and his hands in the back of Liam’s shirt tighten. Liam’s own hands travel down Harry’s sides, not attempting to get beneath his clothes, but feeling the curves and lines before landing on his hips, bracing him while Liam lowers himself down onto his knees. He hears Harry’s sharp intake of breath, a combination of surprise, desire and nerves.

“Li…” Harry starts, looking concerned and slightly confused.

“I want to make you feel good,” Liam says quietly. He looks up at Harry whose eyebrows flicker quickly and Liam remembers Harry saying the same thing to him last night. He prepares to be shot down on principle alone. “I want you Harry. Always have and that’s never changed. I still see you the same way.”

Harry’s bottom lip wobbles slightly with that, face becoming slightly emotional, but he nods a moment later. He still looks nervous, but his half hard cock starting to get his pants tells Liam that he’s still on board. He knows he doesn’t need to remind Harry that he will stop without question or judgement if he tells him to. So instead he focuses on the plaid flannel covered bulge in front of him, pressing soft kisses to it, testing himself before mouthing at it more. He wraps his lips around it and he can feel Harry getting harder. His breathing a little louder in the room.

It’s a strange sensation to feel the hardened length beneath the fabric. The scent of laundry detergent fills his nose and bits of fluff get into his mouth distracting him, so he decides it’s time to get the pants out of the way. He looks up at Harry to get approval as his hands travel to his waistband. His fingers dip inside and start to pull them down, but immediately Harry looks nervous. Liam knows how self-conscious he is about his body now and even though Liam has seen him naked, several times since he arrived there, it’s always been in more of a caretaker type position and not a sexual one.

Harry hiding his body wasn’t just because he didn’t feel sexy, but also because he didn’t like to feel exposed and vulnerable. He’d told Liam this once and now they were faced with a strange
dilemma. Once again, Liam kicks himself for fucking it all up last night because Harry had been so much more comfortable in his skin then. He had felt desired and it had given him confidence, but Liam’s reaction had shaken that and now he looked scared of exposing himself.

So he considers Harry’s pants. They were actually Liam’s, but he’d let Harry have them because he seemed to like them. They are simple green plaid flannel with an elastic waist, but also a drawstring and a button fly if pulling them down was too much effort for having a wee.

Then it hits him, the buttons. He could leave Harry’s pants on and just get his cock out, but hopefully keep him feeling comfortable and covered enough.

He releases the waistband and Harry looks equal parts relieved and disappointed before his eyebrows go up when Liam reaches for the first one. He waits for approval and Harry nods once, bottom lip immediately going between his teeth and Liam’s own cock twitches at that.

He makes short work of the buttons, suddenly feeling a bit more eager and he carefully gets Harry’s cock out. And then a slight panic goes through his chest when he realizes just how big he actually is. It had long been a thing that was just known that Harry was well endowed. Mostly because Harry pranced around nude all the time, but this was the first time Liam had been exposed to it while he was erect, and it was right in front of his nose at that.

Swallowing hard, he reminds himself why he is doing this and that he actually really does want to do it. There is nothing to fear but fear itself, or something like that.

Licking his lips he leans in and wraps his lips around the tip. Harry gasps above him and he starts pressing forward slowly, sliding the thick cock into his mouth bit by bit. Liam feels the weight of it on his tongue and gives himself time to adjust as he goes. He’s not entirely sure what he was expecting, but he finds it’s actually quite enjoyable. He especially likes the reactions from above him, including the soft moans and curses as Liam starts to pull off, sucking as he goes. He repeats this a few times, setting up a rhythm. He’s fully aware that he’s barely getting a third of the way down which is a bit disappointing, but he knows he’s not going to be deep throating on his first time out. He tries to remember what worked for him when he was on the receiving end and he remembers that it was always nice when the person giving used their hand to cover the rest of the ground their mouth wasn’t getting to. So he wraps his fingers around Harry and slides his hand in rhythm with his mouth, meeting his fingers and squeezing slightly as he did. This causes the volume in the room to go up. At least he did know what to do with his hand since he had been using the same hand on his own cock for years. He considered himself a bit of an expert really in that department and had been getting plenty of practice in the shower in the mornings lately.

Once he’s comfortable with his movements, he remembers to add in his tongue. He swipes it across the tip as he pulls back and Harry’s hips jut forward at the sensation. A loud gasp comes from his mouth and Liam looks up at him, stuttering to a stop for a second at how incredible he looks. His mouth is open, eyes closed, breathing loud and ragged and his hands are gripping the counter. He looks wrecked in the best way possible and Liam feels the power that he has in that moment to be the one giving this to him and making him feel this way. It’s a little heady to be honest, but it also gives him determination to give Harry the most pleasure he can.

With that in mind he resumes his rhythm with a bit more purpose behind it. His tongue works around the head of Harry’s cock, swiping across the sensitive bundle of nerves just under it and across the tip, a slightly salty taste crossing it as Harry gets closer. His jaw starts to ache, not being used to the position, and his lips and cheeks are sore from sucking. His eyes also start to water, but he persists because he is determined to give Harry an incredible orgasm. His own erection is
entirely forgotten as he focuses solely on Harry. His lover, his best friend, his everything.

“Oh God… fuck… Liam… fuck I’m getting close… fuck,” Harry stutters out above him. His voice is deep, rich and rough with arousal. His hips keep up their attempts at trying to fuck into Liam’s mouth, but he controls them with his hands white knuckled on the counter. Liam can only marvel at his ability to do such a thing and maintain some control while also being so out of control.

But he can truly only maintain it for so long and as he gets closer to coming he starts to push into Liam’s mouth more. He goes in too far at least once and Liam immediately grabs his hip with his free hand, gripping it and holding him steady while he blinks the tears out of his eyes at being choked for a short moment.

It’s as he tastes more of Harry’s pre-cum that it occurs to Liam that he should really consider whether he wants Harry to come in his mouth or not. Probably something he should have thought about far sooner, but he got a little caught up in things and now he has to make a quick decision. He can tell Harry is just about there, cock getting harder, body movements more erratic and he decides to go for it to let Harry really have the best.

“Oh shit! Fuck! Liam I’m gonna… I’m coming…” Harry gets out a moment later. His voice breaks and his cock starts pulsing in Liam’s hand. His mouth fills with a much larger amount of salty, bitter fluid and he chokes again slightly before managing to swallow most of it. The rest dribbles down his chin as his eyes start to water again. He lets Harry ride it out as his hips still push against Liam’s hand, but they slow after a few moments. Harry’s breathing is loud in the room as his body starts to sag.

“Shit, fuck, Liam I am so sorry! I should have warned you sooner,” he says suddenly, cock finally slipping from Liam’s grasp as he crouches down. His hand wipes away the mess on Liam’s chin, but Liam waves him off, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and swallowing again. He works his jaw side to side a little to ease the ache.

“Stop, Harry, I’m fine. I wanted you to do that,” he says while waving off another attempt to help him.

Harry smirks at him with one brow up. Suddenly he surges forward and captures Liam’s mouth with his own, shoving him onto his back on the bathmat and settling between Liam’s legs. The pressure and friction reminds both of them that Liam still hasn’t finished yet and he moans loudly into Harry’s mouth. His hips push up without him even thinking about it and Harry pulls away from the kiss to grin down at him. A second later and he’s crawling backwards on his hands and knees until he’s kneeling between Liam’s legs. His fingers are already getting ahold of the waistband of Liam’s pants and pulling them down to the top of his thighs, his cock bouncing free and laying on his abdomen. It’s already leaking and Harry leans down and licks a stripe up the underside. Liam is equal parts massively turned on and concerned. He definitely didn’t want Harry to push himself too far or feel like he had to return the favor even if he wasn’t ready, but he keeps those worries off his face. Not wanting to fuck it up again like he had last night. So long as Harry seemed to be enjoying himself, Liam wasn’t about to say anything. He knew that Harry was aware that he had the freedom to stop if he needed to.

With that in mind, he lays back on the uncomfortable bath mat and focuses on how good it felt to feel Harry’s tongue working across his cock, panting breathes coming from his mouth and hips jolting with each new sensation.

Harry goes about it much the same as Liam, testing himself and not taking too much into his
mouth. He too uses his hand to cover the rest of the ground, but it’s still fucking amazing all the same. The delicious heat of Harry’s mouth, wet and tight around the head of his cock, combined with his hand squeezing and twisting in just the right ways, gets Liam right to the edge lightning fast.

He can feel Harry’s hair on his hips, tickling softly, while his other hand presses Liam’s hips down. He hums softly as he sucks, the feeling a gentle vibration that has Liam keening and his head going back so far his shoulders lift off the ground.

“Shit, shit, shit, Harry, fuck! I’m getting really close baby. I’m really close,” he warns, knowing it was the polite thing to do since he didn’t want to assume what Harry had planned.

The burn beneath his balls heats up and he feels them tighten as his orgasm washes over him and spreads through him. His body spasms with the force of it, mouth open wide as he yells the word fuck several times and his hips jut upward in short, quick bursts. He feels completely spent when he finally starts to come down from it.

He knows that one is going in his top ten orgasm list, possibly his top five, and he and Harry had only just started having sex.

He hears a quiet cough from between his legs and it brings him back to reality. He lifts his head to look down at him, finding Harry kneeling between his legs still and wiping his mouth with one brow up in amusement. He smiles at Liam shyly a moment later, with that new found self-consciousness returning again.

Arms feeling a little like jelly, he still manages to push himself up to sitting and slides his arms around Harry’s waist, kissing him softly. Harry shuffles until he’s sitting between Liam’s legs, his own going around Liam and he cuddles in close, wrapping his arms around Liam’s shoulders. They stay this way for a long time, kissing gently and hands touching softly, but staying tight together. Liam senses that Harry has reasons for this. That he is seeking comfort, safety and protection after leaving himself vulnerable. He says nothing about it, just enjoys it. It really did make him feel better as well. Having him there, in his arms, warm and safe, it gives him a strange peace of mind.

Eventually the floor starts to get uncomfortable however and Harry has to stop kissing him long enough to yawn, making Liam laugh. They carefully get themselves up with stiff legs and damp washcloths are retrieved. They get cleaned up and tuck themselves away. Shutting the light off to the bathroom and walk out to the bedroom hand in hand and Harry looks at the bed. He then starts scanning the room with a worried face.

“Where’s Fitzy? Oh no, did he get stuck somewhere?” He asks, starting to search the room. Liam quickly points to the expensive, fluffy cat bed on the floor beside the dresser, a small grey furry ball in the middle of it. Harry then goes from worried to disappointed. “Why’s he there? I thought he could sleep with us.”

“Oh,” Liam replies. “I was worried the bed was too high for him and he might fall off, because he’s so small. I also didn’t want to accidentally hurt him during the night either.”

He hadn’t intended to upset Harry. He had good intentions when he bought the bed, to keep the little cat safe until he was big enough to jump up and down from their bed himself. Clearly he had judged things incorrectly.

“Yeah, I guess,” Harry begrudgingly agrees, looking at the little kitten with sad eyes. Liam
immediately starts trying to come up with a solution and he spots the armchair by the window.

“Ok, let’s bring the chair over to the end of the bed and push the seat up against it so it’s level with the bed. Then we can put him and his bed on the chair. He will be safe from us kicking him or rolling on him, but he will still sort of be up with us. Though I still worry about if he needs to use the litter box during the night,” he suggests. Harry starts moving and drags the chair over like Liam said and gently lifts the bed with Fitzy on it, setting it on the seat of the chair. There is one little mew of protest at being jostled, but he settles again. Then Harry’s eyes are scanning around the room for a solution to the other issue.

Ten minutes later and they have fashioned a ramp of sorts out of spare blankets and pillows, the recipient of this exercise sleeping through it entirely. Liam knows it’s worth it though to see Harry looking much happier as they finally climb into bed themselves.

Cuddled up together warm, sated and happy, they are asleep almost immediately.
Chapter 28

Liam wakes up to the feeling of little feet going across his chest, a loud purring noise and Harry giggling. He cracks one eye open and is met immediately with Fitzy’s fluffy face staring back at him. His blue eyes are curious and he shuffles closer to Liam sniffing the end of his nose before letting out a cat food scented mew right into Liam’s nostril.

“Thanks Fitzy. Good morning to you too,” Liam says gruffly and Harry laughs harder beside him. At this point, Liam knows he might as well just get used to it because he knew damn right well that this was going to be the routine. He had already mostly accepted it the moment he decided to get Harry a kitten to begin with.

“He likes you!” Harry declares. He reaches over to pet Fitzy who resumes purring while simultaneously licking Liam’s nose with his scratchy tongue. “Don’t you darling? You love Daddy Liam.”

“Daddy Liam?” He says with a laugh. The kitten jumps back a little before swatting his lips. “Does that make you Mummy Harry?”

“Of course not!” Harry retorts. “I’m Daddy Harry. He has two dads. It’s perfectly normal Liam.”

“Oh of course, I’m sorry. How silly of me. My mistake,” Liam apologizes, still laughing.

“You should be,” Harry declares. He picks Fitzy up and gently puts him on his lap lying on his back and begins tickling his fluffy grey tummy.

Liam sits up slowly, leaning back against the headboard and yawning. The ache in his jaw reminds him and he can’t help but smile. He runs a hand down Harry’s back and feels a surge of affection in his chest. Harry glances back at him and smirks. He leans over to kiss Liam gently before resuming his tickle attack on Fitzy.

“What do you want to do today?” Liam asks casually. The women in the house were all going shopping, which left the men to their own devices. None of them had come up with much, other than watching the never ending series of football matches all day and stuffing their faces. Liam kind of fancied just spending the day alone with Harry, even if it was just in the bedroom. It felt like forever since they had gotten to do that without someone else joining them or interruptions.

“I was thinking I might make a Facebook account, if you will help me,” Harry replies. He releases the wiggling kitten to go play with the dozen or so toys that he had put on the bed.

Surprise runs through Liam. He certainly wasn’t expecting that.

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“I was thinking I might make a Facebook account, if you will help me,” Harry replies. He releases the wiggling kitten to go play with the dozen or so toys that he had put on the bed.

Surprise runs through Liam. He certainly wasn’t expecting that.

“Really? What for?” He asks and Harry turns and looks at him with a laugh.

“It’s nothing sinister Liam. I’d just like to get in touch with Jillian, Madeline and Sam. I did say I would eventually contact them and I think it would be nice to wish them a Happy Christmas,” Harry answers him, shuffling closer to press against Liam’s side.

Liam nods in reply. Though he is still a little surprised at this decision, he’s also pleased. Harry had been so happy that Halloween night with the little family and had been so at ease that Liam can
only believe that keeping in contact will be a good thing.

He still manages to keep Harry in bed with him a little longer though with a well-placed arm around his shoulders and constant distractions in the form of kisses or Fitzy.

Eventually though, they get up and head downstairs for tea and breakfast. They are greeted warmly by the assembled men in the living room, the first football match of the day blaring away on the telly. Harry pulls up a seat at the island and snags Liam’s laptop, popping it open while sipping his tea.

Liam pops some of the lovely Paska fruit bread that Harry had made into the toaster and gets out some sliced ham. He makes each of them a plate up before bringing it over to Harry, nudging his arm with it as a hint to eat, and then he sits next to him.

Harry glances at the plate but then returns his focus to the computer, going to the Facebook home page and clicking on register.

“Right, so I just register myself a page then? Why are there already so many Harry Styles on here?” He asks as he scrolls through all of the fan made pages using his own name.

“Because fans make them. I wouldn’t really recommend using your own name anyway if you want to remain incognito.” Liam points out. He nudges Harry with the plate again while crunching into his own toast and ham butty.

Harry throws him a look at the volume of his eating, but laughs and shakes his head. He picks up a piece of the toast himself and takes a bite.

“Right, I get that, but what name should I use? I want Jillian to know it’s actually me after all,” he wonders, filling in some of the other fields on the form while he thinks. He skips right past the profile picture for the time being. “How do I make sure it is private anyway. I only want people I know finding me.”

They spend the next half an hour going over the security settings. During which time Liam finishes his breakfast and two cups of tea while Harry manages one slice of toast and a few bites of ham.

Once he’s satisfied that the security settings are up to snuff, he grabs his own phone and quickly takes a picture of Fitzy. A cute close up shot that he loads onto the computer and uses as his profile picture.

“Ok, think that’s it yeah?” He asks, scrolling back through to make sure he hasn’t missed anything.

“Yup, except your name,” Liam points out with a laugh. Harry starts and then snorts, going back up to the little box.

He hums and thinks on it a few minutes. He tries out a few options by typing them in and staring at them, but he deletes them a moment later. Then he stops and glances at Liam once before turning back to the computer and typing another potential choice in: Harry Payne. Liam blinks in surprise himself, startled that Harry would even think of it and he glances at him peripherally, unsure of where this was going.

“Relax Liam. I’m not proposing or anything. It’s just one option that Jillian would probably recognize, but is unlikely to draw attention to me. At least I don’t think,” he says quietly. He opens
another window and searches the name on Facebook to see if any others come up that look suspiciously fake. There are a few Harry Payne’s, but all of them are real people with goofy profile pictures and day jobs listed. None of them are fan pages and Harry nods as though deciding and goes back to his profile, clicking on the register button.

The success page comes up and Harry immediately searches for Jillian and sends her a friend request before hunting down Liam’s private page. He then looks up the rest of the guys, Gemma and the rest of his family. Task completed, he quickly adds the app on his phone and connects it. Then they are at a loose end again. With nothing better to do, they join the rest of the guys in the living room in front of the game. Within ten minutes Harry’s phone beeps and he smiles softly as he looks at it.

“Jillian just added me and sent me a message,” he tells Liam while simultaneously typing a reply.

She’s quite pleased to hear from him and wishes him and everyone a Happy Christmas. She also sends along a few pictures of the kids from Christmas morning opening their gifts. She then sends the picture from Halloween and Harry loves it’s so much he makes it his cover photo.

Madeline is especially pleased to hear from Harry. She is beyond excited to hear that he got a kitten for Christmas and demands pictures immediately. He complies with a laugh, getting down on the floor to take them while Fitzy plays with his toys or toddles up to Harry mewing curiously.

They carry on chatting on and off for the majority of the day and plans are made to get together to go sledding. It’s an idea that Gemma and Ruth are particularly excited about when they get home, arms loaded with carrier bags that are all stuffed full. After dinner, Liam’s family heads home, along with Des and Gemma who have work the next day. The house feels empty without all of them there, just Anne and Robin remaining.

They collect Fitzy and head up to bed, both of them going about their nightly routine quietly. Liam catches Harry throwing him a few looks in the mirror with a mixture of nerves and apprehension on his face and Liam tries to decipher it. He senses that perhaps their new found sexual relationship was starting to overwhelm Harry a little bit. They really had been full on since it started, going at it every night, except Christmas Eve when Liam fucked things up, and he wonders if they should cool off a little and let Harry process things fully. He also doesn’t want to just assume anything or to make decisions on Harry’s behalf because that was rude.

After brushing their teeth and getting washed and changed individually, they head out to the bed and crawl under the covers. They have the same set up for Fitzy as they had last night and Liam assumes it’s the way it’s going to be for the foreseeable, but he doesn’t mind. The little guy seems to know where his bed is and after a little cuddle with Harry he toddles down the bed and climbs into his own.

That just leaves Harry and Liam alone in their own bed. Liam settles in and shuts the light off while waiting for Harry to cuddle into him. There are a few moments of hesitation before he moves. He crawls across and straddles Liam with hands on either side of his shoulders and his face just inches away. Despite the forwardness of his actions, Liam can still feel Harry’s tension and hesitation when he closes the gap and kisses him. His lips are insistent as though he’s trying to convince himself.

“Haz,” Liam says quietly. He gently nudges Harry back and his hands come up to tuck his hair behind his ears softly. “Relax. If you aren’t feeling it tonight, it’s all good. There is no pressure and no rush ok?”
He feels Harry sag with relief. Though he grumbles in frustration quietly.

“I don’t know why I’m suddenly freaking out. I have been fine,” he says angrily, sliding back off of Liam’s lap and flopping onto his back on the bed.

“Don’t beat yourself up. We’ve been pretty intense for the last few days and last night was a big step,” Liam says quietly, rolling onto his side to look at Harry. His profile is illuminated in the moonlight before he turns towards Liam, his face innocent and open.

“I don’t regret last night,” he says honestly.

“I know Haz. I never said that and I don’t either, but it was a big step. It’s ok to need a minute to process it.” Liam replies quietly, running his fingers through Harry’s hair. It seemed important to keep contact, to keep showing affection and therefore acceptance. He wanted Harry to know that he’s not being rejected, just being given time. Harry nods, eyes going down though he presses into the hand on his head. Liam leans forward to press a kiss to his forehead.

“Thank you,” Harry says quietly, rolling towards Liam and pressing in to his chest, tucking his head under Liam’s chin and his arms slide around his waist.

“You’re welcome Haz. Let’s get some rest, yeah?” He asks and Harry nods. “Ok, love you.”

“Love you too.”

***

The days leading up to New Year’s Eve are quiet and pass pretty much the same way. Each morning Liam wakes up to Fitzy either sitting on his chest mewing fishy kitten breath into his face or sitting on top of his head, usually to the quiet snickers of Harry beside him. They relax through the day, visiting with various family and the guys, many board games are played, several football games are watched and a frightening amount of food is consumed. Though not by Harry comparatively.

It snows on New Year’s Eve, adding a fresh blanket on top of the already settled layer and it’s decided that the sledding day has arrived. Harry messages Jillian to invite her and the kids, but she declines with the wonderful news that her husband is coming home that day. So instead they arrange to meet in the New Year so Harry can finally meet David.

The rest of the families, along with the guys and their families, are all on board though and show up at a park that wasn’t far from Liam’s house. It contained one very spectacular hill that was very popular for sledding.

Not surprisingly it’s packed when they get there. People of all sizes and ages are crawling all over it with a variety of sleds from simple plastic mats to more elaborate machines with steering wheels and blades. Their own group is huge and all decked out in their thickest winter wear. Even little Freddie is donning a warm snowsuit. There is only a moment of quiet as they survey the scene before they all take off running, laughing as they go.

Liam keeps a close eye on Harry, as he always does, but he is able to relax as he watches him laughing with Gemma. The two of them hurrying up the hill to race each other down, Harry’s wool hat askew on his head already.
It doesn’t take long before they are all feeling and acting like kids again. Even Des, who brought an inner tube for the event, looks absolutely hilarious flying down the hill on it. His legs and arms are splayed out before he hits a bump and ends up going flying. Somehow he lands it, managing to stay upright and still sliding, but his panicked face is caught on Gemma’s phone with a promise to have it uploaded to Facebook before the hour is up. He responds by lobbing a handful of snow at her, causing her to squeal and run behind a tree.

Louis challenges Liam and Harry to a race on their old school wooden sleds. Harry wins by a landslide when Liam accidentally leans too far to the right and topples over halfway down, trying to avoid a small child. While Louis somehow manages to go completely off course and is forced to abandon ship before he hits a tree.

The three of them meet up at the bottom, laughing so hard they are doubled over and it’s so freeing. It’s so refreshing to feel such happiness that Liam just wants the day to go on forever.

But eventually they all decide they are cold, wet and hungry. In a long caravan of cars they return to Liam’s house to have an impromptu New Year’s Eve party that Liam suspects might have been planned by the others and he just wasn’t informed. But he doesn’t mind and he can see Harry doesn’t either. So he grabs a pint and settles in to enjoy himself. Besides, it’s a great opportunity to finally eat up the rest of the leftover food.

As the clock ticks down, bottles of champagne are suddenly produced and flutes of are handed out around the room. The fireworks over London Bridge that year are spectacular, even on the telly, and they count down from thirty seconds together.

Harry’s hand finds Liam’s as they get to ten seconds left. They both stop counting and stare at each other instead. Marveling once again at how much had changed in the span of a year. It’s the first time Liam has celebrated New Year’s since Harry went missing. The first time he hasn’t spent it alone since that fateful night. He doesn’t dwell on or even consider what Harry was doing this time last year because it didn’t bear thinking about. He makes sure to keep any of those thoughts off his face. He’s determined not to ruin the night for Harry, but he can see that Harry is already thinking it on his own. The mixture of emotions flutter across his face, but in the end he smiles gently at Liam. He waits until after the entire room shouts ‘one’ and leans forward to kiss Liam at the stroke of midnight. It drowns out everyone else in the room. Liam’s entire focus zeroes in on Harry in that moment. A deep longing goes through him to never let this end, but to also have Harry in every way possible, even if he had to wait. He knew that it would be worth the wait.

The kiss goes on far longer than it probably should, though it remains chaste. He cradles Harry’s face in his hands, holding him tenderly, but keeping him in place to prolong it and Harry’s arms snake around his waist, holding tightly.

When they finally separate Harry’s face is relaxed, full of affection and his eyes are a little wet. Liam just pulls him in for a hug, holding him tight as though to reassure him that he will never let go. And he means it.

It’s not until they separate again that he realizes the rest of the room is watching them in one way or another. Either by openly gawking like Niall or subtly with side eyes like Anne, but they all seem happy, accepting and relieved.

No one says anything about it. They all just keep drinking champagne and passing kisses, hugs and good wishes out around the room with each hug just a little tighter it seems. And Liam gets the
impression that he’s not the only one who never wants this day to end. When someone suggests they stay up to watch the ball drop in New York, just over four hours away, they all enthusiastically agree and it’s decided they will watch a movie to pass the time. Freddie is given leave however, and Louis takes him upstairs to tuck him into a bed. He returns within a few minutes and the lot of them settle around the room, Harry and Liam in their favorite chair as usual.

Like Christmas, they find it impossible to keep their hands off each other. They steal little touches and kisses when they think no one is looking. Harry curls up against Liam’s chest, hand sneaking up inside his shirt to rest on his skin and his fingers slide through the patch of hair there. Liam nuzzles his nose against Harry’s forehead, just enjoying feeling him so close, his body heat, his soft skin and the scent of his shampoo in his lungs.

Despite wanting to believe no one has noticed what they are up to, he has zero doubt in his mind they have all noticed. He hears the odd snicker or catches the odd affectionate smirk from Ruth or Gemma, his own mum or Anne, but they say nothing and so Harry and Liam continue on with it.

They finish the movie and put on Ryan Seacrest’s show right as Zac Gregory takes the stage and Liam huffs a laugh. It’d been a long time since he had heard that kid sing, a lifetime ago it felt like, but apparently he was doing pretty well.

“Isn’t that the song you did with that kid Liam?” Zayn asks him and Liam nods. Harry glances at him and then looks back at the screen. “It’s good. Glad I picked you as my producer.”

“Uh-huh. You begged me to be your producer and we all know it,” Liam retorts and he feels Harry laugh more than he hears him. Zayn responds by whipping a Nib at his head. It just misses him and banks off of the lamp before it lands on Niall, who jumps in surprise before picking it up and shoving it in his mouth.

“Just remember, I’m paying you to make me sound good,” Zayn responds, one groomed brow lifted and his dark eyes sharp.

“I’m gonna need a raise then if that’s the expectation,” Liam replies evenly and Louis laughs loudly.

“Oh, it’s like that is it?” Zayn laughs and Liam nods dramatically.

“Now, now, you two behave,” Karen says scoldingly and they both laugh harder.

Truth be told, Liam was looking forward to working with Zayn on his album. They hadn’t worked together on music in so long and had always gelled because of their shared interest in hip hop and R&B. And with Zayn there was no doubt it would be great, even if Liam never touched it.

They watch the rest of the performances with N’SYNC closing things out just before the ball drops. A big deal that year had been N’SYNC getting back together for a new album. After One Direction reunited for Corden there had been big hopes of them doing the same, but alas, that wasn’t in the cards.

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Like the last time, they count down the seconds while the sparkly, glowing ball inches it’s way down the pole until there is a giant burst of light and fireworks as the clock strikes midnight in New York. The room celebrates in the same way with plenty of hugs and kisses passed around. There is a slightly dampened enthusiasm though, considering it was five in the morning. Liam and Harry share another kiss, this one much shorter and more appropriate than the last, and Harry starts
laughing midway through when Louis threatens to dump cold water on them.

With two New Year’s celebrations done, they all decide to call it a night. The lads and their families all pack up in their cars and head out, with plenty of hugs and well wishes as they go. Ruth, Thomas, Nicola and Liam’s parents all head out as well, with promises to see them in a few hours. It had been decided they would host a New Year’s Day dinner at Liam’s parents’ place just to change things up a bit.

If Liam was being entirely honest, he’s kinda glad it’s the last family thing they were doing because while he loved his own family, and certainly cared for Harry’s, he was getting bloody tired of them being around all the damn time. He just wanted Harry to himself for a while, but that thought always made him feel guilty because he wasn’t the only one who had missed Harry for two years.

The house is significantly quieter and the remaining usual suspects, Des, Anne, Robin, Gemma, Harry and Liam all trudge upstairs to bed themselves. Harry carries Fitzy and deposits him on his throne as he passes. They wash and change quietly, brushing their teeth with slightly dozy expressions on their faces. Liam finishes his first and he can’t help but step up behind Harry, wrapping his arms around his waist loosely. He just holds on gently, swaying them both slightly while he rests his chin on Harry’s shoulder.

Harry laughs once, finishing his teeth and drying his face. He folds his towel neatly and puts it beside the sink before leaning back against Liam and humming softly as he links his hands with Liam’s on his stomach.

“Today was fun,” he says quietly, voice deep and full of a satisfied kind of exhaustion.

“Mmhmm it was,” Liam agrees, pressing his nose into Harry’s neck and inhaling a deep breath of him. He was intending on smelling his soap, his sweat and the things that identified him, but instead he gets a snoot full of hair.

Frustrated, he pulls Harry’s hair away from his neck on the side he wants to get at before returning his hand to Harry’s midsection and his nose to just under Harry’s ear. Harry hums quietly as Liam’s stubble gently goes across the sensitive skin there, getting just a little louder when Liam starts pressing kisses there, working his way down Harry’s neck.

Liam’s body responds lazily, cock growing hard slowly as he covers as much skin as possible with kisses. Harry then tilts his head to give him more access. It’s when he glances up and sees them both in the mirror that he gets fully hard, pressing against Harry’s ass.

The reflection is stunning, if only because of Harry. He has his head tilted to the side and back, his eyes closed and mouth open and his lips are pink and wet as he pants quietly. His body, while still thin, looks lithe in front of Liam’s. His white t-shirt shows hints of the tattoos underneath and his red cotton pajama pants are tented at the front with his own arousal.

He’s beautiful and Liam can’t take his eyes off of him.

Still watching, he returns his lips to Harry’s neck, kissing and nipping his way around with more purpose. One hand slides up Harry’s chest, grazing across his nipples, and the other heads down to palm Harry’s erection through his pants. As soon as his hand makes contact Harry’s hips buck forward desperately and Liam’s hips follow, needing to press himself against the body in front of him.
Harry’s arm comes up to thread a hand into Liam’s hair, pulling on him while pressing back against him. Liam meets him fully, hips bucking against Harry’s ass while his hand both strokes Harry’s cock and pulls him in tighter.

He keeps watching as Harry comes more undone under his hands. Soft moans and sharp cries come from his mouth with each movement and Liam feels a strong sense of possession wash over him. It was more than just protection. It was about ownership, but in the best way. He was Harry’s just as much as Harry was his. It was equal, but that didn’t mean Liam wasn’t about to give up the chance to truly be in control at this moment. It’s always in the back of his head to stop the second Harry looks unsure, but it’s clear he’s perfectly willing right now. His body moves in sways and sharp thrusts as he searches for more friction, more contact and release.

Liam’s eyes follow his own hand as he slides it down the front of Harry’s pants, grasping his cock and squeezing it slightly. It makes Harry cry out and the sound vibrates in Liam’s own chest because of their proximity. He matches it with his own as Harry’s pleasure sends a jolt of arousal down his spine. He starts stroking Harry, changing his movements frequently from fast to slow, tight to loose and squeezing and twisting just enough. His other hand slides down to delicately roll his balls. His fingers press beneath them, touching Harry more intimately than he ever has and Harry sinks into it. He spreads his legs more while his hips are still moving and his mouth issues a litany of curses and moans.

“Fuck Liam..shit..oh my God,” he breathes out. He leans forward and his hands land on the counter as his hips move more, fucking his cock into Liam’s hand. He rolls his ass back against Liam, whose cock slides against the fabric in the crevice and Liam moans loudly. The act, the position, it’s so close to actual fucking and so erotic that he can feel himself getting close much faster now.

His grip around Harry’s cock tightens just slightly and the fingers beneath his balls press a little more as Harry’s movements become more erratic. Words are no longer possible for him so his mouth just pants and cries out with each movement. Liam can see his face in the mirror, lips parted wide, eyes screwed shut tightly and brows furrowed. He looks completely wrecked and Liam can’t help but thrust a little harder, the sight almost too much. He feels the power once again in being the one to get Harry to this place and to help him feel this. It’s almost overwhelming.

Touching, pushing, thrusting and squeezing with more purpose, he becomes determined to make Harry come first and to watch him as he does in the mirror. He knows full well it will probably tip him over the edge just witnessing it.

When Harry does come, it’s just as amazing as Liam knew it would be to see. His head goes back and a series of long, loud sounds from his throat. His skin is flushed, lips red from being chewed at various points and his eyes are closed tightly. His face almost contorts at times and Liam can feel his cock twitching in his hand. The warm fluid coats his fingers making things more slippery as Harry keeps thrusting for a bit longer, riding through his orgasm. His panting breaths are loud in the room.

The sight, the sounds, the feeling of Harry coming undone in his hands gets Liam right to the edge and it only takes a few quick jolts of his own hips, with cock sliding against Harry’s ass, before he comes as well. He soaks the front of his pants as short, sharp moans come from his mouth.

They breathe hard for a few minutes afterward. Harry is still leaning on the counter and Liam’s forehead is against his back, wetness growing cold quickly.
“Fuck… that was amazing,” Harry whispers eventually and Liam can only grunt in agreement. “We still need to work on getting our pants off first though,” he adds with a breathy laugh and Liam grunts again.

When their legs return to normal, no longer feeling like jelly, they quickly clean up and change. Liam finally turns Harry and kisses him properly, the first time he had in the entire act, and he relishes it. He pulls Harry in close, encircling him in his arms and holding on to him possessively. He has no idea why he’s feeling like this now or why he has been for a few days, but so long as Harry isn’t bothered by it he sees no reason to stop.

They make their way to bed slowly. Still kissing and continuing to do so for as long as they can until they are both falling asleep.

When they are just on the precipice of falling asleep with their bodies relaxing and breathing evening out, Harry makes a confession.

“I kinda wish you actually were fucking me,” he whispers. Liam comes back to consciousness, brows rising and a jolt of surprise going through him.

He’s not sure how to respond. In the fog of arousal he certainly knew he wanted to be inside of Harry, fucking him properly and feeling him tight and hot around his cock, but now lucid and clear headed he could see that would probably be far too much too fast.

“I can hear you thinking Liam, relax,” Harry says quietly. His tone is not quite annoyed or frustrated, but it’s on the edge. “I’m just saying I kinda wish you had been because…” he stops and goes quiet for a minute and it’s Liam’s turn to listen to him think. He keeps quiet though and patiently waits despite how much his eyes want to droop. “I don’t know how to explain… I know it’s gonna sound weird and probably bad to you.”

Liam frowns. How could that possibly be?

“I seriously doubt that Haz. Just tell me. You know that I never judge you on anything. Your feelings are valid and important to me,” he assures Harry and he gets a soft snort of laughter in return.

“You are so existential after sex,” he deadpans. He then takes a deep breath, a little wobble at the end of it. “No, I mean, it’s just… fuck. I don’t know how to explain this. It’s just that the last person I was with, that’s the last person. You know what I mean? Like, as I see it the last time I had sex, that someone was inside me, even though it was unwilling, was with one of them and I’d like to change that. To stop that from being a true fact. But that feels so unfair to you and such a bad reason to do something that I’m not sure I’m ready for yet.”

Liam digests this and he can completely understand where Harry is coming from and why he would feel this way. He also knows that he can’t rush himself, no matter the reason. Somehow Liam has to find a way to reassure him.

He gently nudges Harry, rolling them so they are facing each other. His fingers find their way into the dark mahogany curls as usual, tucking them and unfurling them.

“Listen, you’re right it’s not the best reason to push yourself if you aren’t ready yet, but you know I’m not going anywhere. If and when you are ready, and I am as well, we can correct the thing that’s bothering you. But not until we are both ready, yeah? You don’t need to rush yourself Harry.
It’s ok. We’ve got time.”

Harry’s face relaxes and Liam does as well. He knows he’s said the right thing and more importantly that he means it. He’s not going anywhere. He’s in it for the long haul with Harry and if his recent bout of possessiveness is anything to go by, he’s not likely to change his mind. He can wait for as long as it takes. Even if Harry decides he never wants to do certain things ever again that was ok with him because in the end, it wasn’t the thing that mattered most.

“Thank you,” Harry whispers, closing his eyes and leaning into Liam’s hand on his head.

“You’re welcome,” he replies, giving Harry a soft, gentle kiss. “Can we sleep now?”

Harry laughs, grinning at him for a minute before nodding.

“Yes, please.”

They resettle and cuddle back up together. Harry’s soft snores fill the space and lull Liam off into his own deep sleep, born of assurance and happiness.

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“You need a haircut,” Gemma says the next day when they are all sitting eating breakfast. It’s really more lunch since it was noon, but they had all slept in for good reason. She eyes Harry critically, looking over his long hair. It’s hanging in messy curls and tangles courtesy of Liam’s chest, since that was his pillow.

Harry’s eyes narrow and he jolts back in his seat slightly, head shaking ‘no’ in reply.

“Relax Harry. I’m not suggesting you bloody well shave your head, but it’s getting really long and kind of messy at the ends. You’ve got a lot of healthy growth now so you need to start trimming off the damaged bits,” Gemma says in an exasperated tone. Clearly she expected this response from him. Hell, even Liam got a tad nervous when she mentioned it. He loved Harry’s curls. They were fun to run his fingers through and it was relaxing for both of them when he did that. “I could do it for you if you want,” she offers.

“No, no no,” Harry replies immediately, rearing back even further. This time it’s her eyes that narrow. “I’ll think about getting a trim next time I’m in London,” he offers, clearly hoping to end the topic.

“What you do you mean ‘no no no’? I’ve cut your hair before and I did a good job,” she retorts, looking offended.

“I was like 6 years old the last time you cut my hair and I’m fairly certain mum had to fix it later. We just didn’t tell you because we didn’t want to upset you,” Harry replies. He glances at Anne who looks down at her tea sheepishly.

“What?” Gemma damn near screeches, turning to her mum immediately. “Is that true? You told me I did a good job. You even told me to consider becoming a hairstylist!”

Anne swallows her tea and glances at Harry, giving him a look for dropping her in it.

“Yes darling, I did have to do a few tweaks. You left a few bald spots at the back. Thankfully Harry didn’t seem to care at the time, but I still thought you could be a hairstylist,” she assures her
daughter. “Though at least when you did you would get some training first.”

Gemma huffs angrily, flopping back in her chair and crossing her arms across her chest.

“Gem, relax. Clearly it wasn’t what you were meant to do with your life anyway,” Harry points out. Her tension eases a few minutes later.

“Fine, but you still need a damn haircut,” she retorts, picking up her toast and taking a loud, crunching bite.

“And I said I would consider it,” Harry replies in the same tone, sipping his tea.

They were only having a small bite to eat, knowing full well the Payne’s would make sure they had more than enough to eat before they would let them leave their house. Harry is a little reluctant to leave Fitzy alone in the house, but they had kitten proofed the bedroom and Liam assures him that he will be fine for a few hours. He will be safe and sound with his bed, his litter and some food and water. As extra insurance, he puts Winston downstairs in the big family room with his own food and water. By the time they leave the house he’s flopped on the couch snoring.

The volume level at the Payne’s would probably frighten most people, but for Liam it’s normal. His mum had invited the rest of the extended family as well and they all cram into every nook and cranny of the house laughing and talking, eating and drinking. Harry gets a few curious looks from people who haven’t seen him yet, but he seems to take it in stride. He stays mostly glued to Liam’s side, but smiles and converses with everyone.

After dinner they slip upstairs to Liam’s old bedroom. Harry leads the way with a cheeky grin on his face and a buzz of arousal goes down Liam’s spine. Despite the fact that any activity would be impossible with so many people in the house.

While he had bought his parents a new house nearby during his One Direction days, Karen and Geoff had decided to keep the old one and after a few years’ worth of renovations, including some expansions, they had ended up moving back in. Liam isn’t offended because he had his own sentimentality when it came to the house he grew up in. Though he is glad the bunny curtains are gone from his bedroom. Especially with Harry now strolling around the room checking it out.

He takes his time, looking at each of Liam’s track and field awards individually, since his mother had created a small shrine of them in the room after he moved out. He also opens drawers and closets, just to see what’s inside. For most people this would be strange behaviour, but for Harry it’s pretty normal. He was perfectly open with himself if you earned his trust and he expected the same from you. So Liam just sits on the edge of the bed and watches him with an amused smile on his face. He doesn’t say anything and just waits for Harry to start asking questions.

“Do you regret not trying for the Olympics again?” He finally asks. He looks at a framed picture of Liam crossing the finish line at the race that determined his time trial for the London 2012 team. He’d been so close, yet so far. But then the X-Factor happened again and suddenly he was in a band with a 16 year old kid with deep dimples and wild curly hair. He never looked back.


“Good answer because I’m pretty glad you came to the show. Otherwise we’d probably have never met.” Harry crosses the room and goes to sit next to Liam, but then thinks otherwise. Instead he
kneels on either side of Liam’s thighs and sits down on his lap, arms loose around his shoulders.

“We might have. When you performed at the closing ceremonies or something. Though I do prefer how things ended up working out,” Liam says quietly. He tilts his head up and leans towards Harry, eyes darting to his lips.

Harry smirks again, closing the space slightly himself.

“Still kinda wish we’d figured this out a lot sooner, but no regrets,” Harry admits before finally closing the gap and pressing his lips to Liam’s. He hums softly as he deepens the kiss.

Liam’s hands slide up Harry’s back, bunching his pale blue sweatshirt up slightly before he slides them back down. He cups his jean covered ass and pulls him just a little closer. Harry hums again and smiles against Liam’s mouth, pulling away from the kiss to smirk at him with one eyebrow up.

“We could get caught Liam,” he points out in a tone that says he actually wouldn’t mind. It was clearly a bit of a thrill for him, but Liam imagines his mum or sister walking in and that’s enough to cool the heat in his belly. At least for a moment. Harry resumes kissing him and his hands start to nudge Liam backwards so he’s lying on the bed. Then he’s grinding just a little with his crotch against Liam’s rapidly filling dick.

Groaning softly he squeezes Harry’s ass and his hips lift to press even further into him while Harry slides his tongue around Liam’s mouth in a rather filthy manner. It’s both exhilarating and terrifying. He feels like he’s 16 again and sneaking his first girlfriend into this bedroom. Though she didn’t move quite the same way that Harry currently is. His ass is grinding in just the right way that it makes him immediately forget where they are and that there are a lot of other people in the house.

“Liam? Harry? Where did you two disappear off to?” Karen calls from the stairs. The sound of her footsteps ascending them sends a spike of fear through Liam and he all but throws Harry off of him which earns him a sharp laugh. They quickly situate themselves a respectable distance apart, sitting as though they were just merely chatting on the bed. Liam casually but carefully places a pillow on his lap, leaning on it nonchalantly. Harry chuckles quietly, but also picks up a pillow and places it in the same manner. “Guys, we are breaking out the board games. Thought you might want to join? What are you two doing up here?” His mother asks as she opens the door, eyes bouncing between the two of them suspiciously.

Liam can feel the heat in his face. Despite being 26 years old he couldn't help but regress a little. After all, he was sitting in his childhood bedroom and almost got caught fooling around by his mother. He covers it by looking down at the quilt, picking at it idly as though considering her questions.

“I wanted to see if the bunny curtains were still up,” Harry quips, smirking at Karen in a cheeky way. A moment later she laughs and then shakes her head. Liam knows damn right well that she’s fully aware of what they were up to, pillows or not.

“Come down and play some games with the family. You can examine the draperies later,” she replies cryptically. She turns away and leaves the door open intentionally.

As soon as she’s out of hearing range Harry cracks up laughing. It only gets worse when he sees Liam’s blush.
“Shut up Harry, that’s my mum. She doesn’t need to see these things,” Liam whispers harshly and Harry laughs again.

“Li, she knows exactly what was going on. She’s not a stupid woman. Stop fucking worrying. Clearly she’s fine with it,” Harry points out.

“We just got told to come downstairs and she left the door open. That’s a clear hint to cut it out,” Liam retorts. He gets another snort of laughter in reply.

“Chill out Li,” Harry replies, lobbing his pillow at Liam’s head.

Liam ducks and returns his own with more force, damn near knocking Harry off the end of the bed. He immediately feels terrible. It was easy to forget that Harry was still on the fragile side and a lot lighter than Liam, so it didn’t take much to knock him over. He’s reaching immediately to right him and pull him into his arms to apologize, but Harry just starts laughing again. He shoves his hair off of his face before standing up and grabbing Liam’s hand, pulling him along behind and relief washes over him.

A quick adjustment to hide his half hard dick and Liam follows along easily. Within minutes he finds himself part of a rather intense battle of Risk with Ruth at his side. Their opponents are Harry and Gemma, who spend half the time conspiring with whispers in each other’s ears. Liam is an old hand at Risk. He’s played it for years with his sisters so he quickly amasses the best pieces of land and grows his army. Ruth lets him make all of the decisions, knowing full well his prowess for the game, and just does as she’s told.

They win spectacularly. Gemma scowls as best she can before laughing and she immediately challenging him to a game of Monopoly.

It’s the wee hours before they finally stumble out of the house to their cars. Plenty of hugs and kisses are passed around between all of them. Nicola even gives Harry a tight squeeze and a loud, smacking kiss on the forehead.

The drive home is quiet. All of them tired, but happy and they stumble up to bed with the intent on getting horizontal as fast as possible.

Except Liam’s dick hasn’t quite forgotten about their little foray in his old bedroom. Despite his drooping eyes, he finds himself drawn to Harry in the bathroom as usual. Harry presses back against him immediately and willingly. They resume their position from the night before with Liam’s hands down Harry’s pants. This time he goes a little further, pulling Harry’s cock out so he can watch himself stroke it. The sight is enough to get him right on the edge. His own cock slides into the crevice of Harry’s ass again rapidly. When Harry starts thrusting and fucking into Liam’s hand the sight is all it takes and Liam comes first. Harry follows almost immediately, painting the counter and the front of the cupboards with white streaks.

They stand panting for a long while after with Harry leaning on the counter and Liam on him.

“Why do we always seem to have sex in the bathroom most of the time?” Harry asks eventually. His voice is deep, slow and spent, but still amused. Liam can’t help but huff out a laugh.

“I don’t know, but I don’t actually fancy the idea of Fitzy watching us either,” he replies and Harry laughs as well. “Suppose it’s easier for clean up too,” he adds a moment later.
Harry pushes him back. He stands up and turns around to languidly kiss Liam, arms looping around his neck.

“At least this time one of us got our pants partially off,” he laughs and Liam nods.

“Yup, progress,” he quips, kissing Harry again. “Let’s get cleaned up and into bed.”

They change quickly and wash themselves off before hurrying out to the bed to get under the warm covers, cuddling up together.

They are asleep almost immediately and Liam has a smile on his face that feels permanently etched there now.
Chapter 29

11 Months

Zayn arrives bright and early, far too early if Liam were honest, but he comes bearing coffee and assorted snacks so he’s forgiven. Even though Liam knows he will end up eating all of the food since Zayn watches what he eats.

He’s wearing ripped black jeans and the latest trainers that are bright green with white laces. His t-shirt matches the trainers perfectly and his intentionally faded leather jacket completes the look. His hair is longer and slicked back and his facial hair is groomed to perfection to look messy, but clean.

He’s typical Zayn, but his smile is genuine and he quickly embraces both of them before perching on a stool in the kitchen.

Neither Liam nor Harry are dressed yet. Both of them are padding around in their pajamas and bed heads with voices groggy from sleep. While Harry and Zayn chat, Fitzy eats his breakfast on the counter and Liam hurries upstairs to quickly shower and change. He wants to feel more presentable since he technically was going to be working with Zayn. It was an actual job he was being paid for, even if it kind of didn’t feel like one.

When he’s done, he heads back to the kitchen and finds the rest of Zayn’s band there. All of them are hanging out around the island chatting and drinking coffee as though they live there.

Liam gives Harry a quick peck on the lips and tells him to have a good day with a laugh. He then leads Zayn and the rest of the guys into the recording studio.

Zayn had already sent him a lot of demos and rough recordings of songs so Liam had a general sense of where he was going with the album and what the ideal sound would be. He had a ton of ideas on where things could be tweaked and made better.

“Let’s start with this one, yeah?” He points to the song on the computer. It was an interesting half ballad, half soul song called At The Door. Liam had a sense it could be a single and judging by Zayn’s enthusiasm to work on it, he had high hopes as well.

They start with the base of the song, adding strong drum lines and a heavy guitar riff that make it feel very dark and intense.

From there he shows Zayn the bit he had written for the piano. It provides a strangely delicate nature to the bridge of the song where it would launch back into the heavy bass along with a brass band of trumpets and horns added in. Harry had grumbled a little when Liam had mentioned bringing them in. He complained once again that he never got to add horns to Olivia all those years ago. Liam promises that one day they will re-record that song with horns just for him.

It’s mid-afternoon when they finally have it done. It still needs post-production, but it’s a great start and something they can take to the record company to show progress and the direction of the album.

They are just listening to it one more time when the door bursts open suddenly, Harry standing
there with wide eyes and something in his hand.

“LIAM! WHAT THE HELL?” He yells suddenly and Liam stops the track and jumps out of his chair. He hurries over to him, hands at the ready to steady him or comfort, whatever the case may be, but instead Harry makes no move towards him. He just stares with wide eyes and his voice is still loud when he speaks again. “You sent me over forty-five thousand texts when I was gone?”

Liam stops dead in his tracks. His hands are still slightly outstretched and his jaw drops in surprise as he finally registers the item in Harry’s hand. It’s his old cell phone. The one he hadn’t seen since the day he was abducted.

The one Liam had texted endlessly, daily for the over 770 days Harry was gone.

“Where did you get that?” Liam finally asks quietly, aware that they weren’t alone in the room.

Harry seems to cotton on to that as well as his eyes dart over Liam’s shoulder and then back to him before he motions for Liam to follow him out the door, closing it behind him.

“The police dropped it off this morning. I guess the period of time has passed that they are no longer required to keep it in evidence since it never really was evidence. I found my old charger and plugged it in because I was curious to see what was on it or if it even still worked and then I see this,” Harry says while holding the phone up for Liam to see. The message app icon’s red bubble indicates the number of missed messages, a whopping total of 46,743. “They’re almost all yours Liam. I checked. What in hell were you texting me that much for? Did you expect a reply?” He asks with a quiet, incredulous voice.

“No. Well, I mean, at first, when you first disappeared, I thought you might reply. But then I don’t know,” Liam says, shrugging his shoulders and trying to find words to explain himself. “I guess it just became habit. It was to tell you about my day, to tell you what was going on, things I was doing… how I felt,” he admits and Harry’s brows rise slightly before he looks back down at the phone.

“You texted me everything? Like, every day?”

“Yeah, kinda. I don’t know, I just… I guess it was kind of therapeutic for me. It made me still feel connected to you even if I knew you would probably never see them. Well I assumed you would never see them,” Liam replies, shrugging again. He watches Harry carefully for his reaction. One hand idly comes up to run from Harry’s shoulder down to his elbow, the need for a physical connection overtaking him. Harry’s skin is warm through the cotton of the black long sleeved t-shirt he was wearing. It was one of Liam’s old ones bearing an abstract drawing of a tiger on the front in white.

Harry’s brows furrow, face becoming a little more emotional and then determined.

“I want to read them,” he says before looking up at Liam. His eyes are open and honest, sweet and full of longing. “Can I read them?” He asks quietly, as though worried Liam would say no.

Liam can see just how much he wants to now. How much he wants to be a part of the life he missed while he was being held. There is no way in hell Liam would ever say no to him. Even if he’s a little worried about what some of them might say.

Then he remembers one thing, a confession he has yet to make. Harry would find out once he
started reading so Liam decides it would be much better if he told him properly.

“Um, yes, of course you can. But there is something I should tell you first,” Liam says carefully. Harry stares at him confused. “Listen Harry… I’m so sorry,” he starts, eyes going down with shame. “I, um, I lied when I said I didn’t go to that funeral for you. Um, and I know I sent you messages about it, from it even, and I guess I would just rather you know now, though really, I should have told you a long time ago.”

Harry’s eyes tighten and his mouth becomes a straight line as the betrayal seeps into his features. Liam’s cheeks heat up with shame and embarrassment. He should have told Harry months ago. He should have told him the truth, but really he shouldn’t even have gone.

“Listen to me. I only went because I knew it was a farce. But I had to see it I guess and I don’t know. Maybe I had big plans on throwing a fit during it and telling them they were all wrong, but I didn’t because I didn’t think they would listen to me. So I left and went and got drunk to try to forget it,” Liam rambles out. He knows he’s not making it any better judging by Harry’s face.

“Right… so let me get this straight. You went to a funeral for me that you thought was a joke, but you still attended. Then you went and got smashed after to forget… forget what exactly? The funeral? Or me?” Harry asks him, voice terse.

“NO, never to forget you. I felt guilty as hell for going. I didn’t even plan on going. I just suddenly found myself there. I really can’t even explain what I was thinking because I don’t think I was. I was acting and doing things without considering them,” he blurts out. He steps forward and takes Harry’s arms, forcing him to maintain eye contact. “I never for one second thought you were dead. I never gave up on you. I just didn’t know what to do. Please Harry,” he begs and Harry’s face softens slightly.

“Let’s just hope you explained yourself a little better on here, hmm?” He says while waving the phone in the air slightly. Liam tries desperately to recall the messages he sent during that time and fails. The alcohol blurs it out.

“I hope so too,” Liam answers sadly.

Harry sighs quietly relaxing a little more, but he backs away from Liam and lets his hands fall from his arms. Liam doesn’t try to hold him or stop him.

“I’m gonna go upstairs to read these,” Harry says quietly before turning towards the stairs. He doesn’t wait for a reply.

Liam has the deep sense that he would like to be there while he does that. To remain present, see his reactions and mitigate anything if necessary.

He steps into the studio and finds several sets of curious and concerned eyes looking at him. Only Zayn comes towards him.

“Everything ok? What was he talking about?” He asks quickly, dark eyes searching Liam’s face.

“Uh yeah, I’m gonna need to stop for today. I should be with him right now,” Liam replies. He can see Zayn’s confusion growing deeper, but he nods after a moment choosing not to push it.

He walks them to the door, figuring he will shut everything down later, and then hurries upstairs.
He finds Harry curled into a ball on the bed with his back against the headboard and the phone in his hands in front of him, eyes focused on it. He glances up at Liam when he comes in. He doesn’t look surprised to see him, but he’s still tense. He doesn’t react when Liam climbs onto the bed next to him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders despite the resistance he gets.

Neither says a word. Liam wouldn’t know what to say anyway and suspects he’s already said far too much in those texts. The thought of how much he said, and how much he gave away, makes his heart pound. There is that ever present fear that it will be too much and it will make Harry rethink their relationship. Even though he knows it’s an irrational fear, it’s still there.

He’s also just a bit embarrassed by it all. He knows that a lot of what he sent is probably crap, just boring details of each day. Like the running synopsis of every show he watched on Netflix while he was a shut in. Or just his every day boring, silly thoughts about mundane things. Harry had become a diary of sorts for him. He had become complacent in worrying about the messages ever being seen.

But now they were and it seems Harry is determined to read every damn one.

He catches snippets of the messages as his eyes try to follow along and he cringes with some of the stupider ones. He calls the police every name in the book for not finding Harry.

Slowly but surely, Harry starts to relax against him as he reads on. Through all of the messages about the theories about his disappearance, about how it was affecting his mum and sister and then on to how it was affecting Liam personally. He’d needed a few days to work up the courage to start being more personal, but looking at them now he’s glad. He knows Harry can see how much he cared.

*I miss you H. Miss you a lot and I really wish I could talk to you right now.*

*Please, please Harry, if you can, call me. Talk to me. Tell me you are ok because I can’t even consider anything else. I need you to be ok.*

*You’re everything to me, you know that? I need you to come back.*

Liam watches as each day is repeated in front of him once again and he remembers them in stark detail. The not knowing, feeling so alone, scared and desperate.

*They found a body. They think it’s you. It can’t be you because you aren’t dead. I know you aren’t. Why are they putting us through this?*

*Why can’t they just find you? Why can’t you just come home and show them you’re still alive and prove them all wrong?*

*It can’t be you. It can’t be. Please tell me it’s not you. Please just tell me! Say anything! Harry please!*

He feels and hears Harry’s sharp intake of breath as he reads through that horrific day. The day Liam had caused the scars on his hand and had to face a reality he very much was still trying to believe was impossible.

*It’s not you. I fucking knew it wasn’t!*
I told them! They wouldn’t listen!

You’ve gotta come home Harry, please! I need you to come home!

“Who was it?” Harry asks quietly. He startles the silence in the room and Liam jumps slightly.

“I… don’t know… They never said,” he stutters out. He realizes that he never did find out and didn’t even care once he knew it wasn’t Harry. He feels guilty about that.

“It was someone,” Harry says softly. “Someone died. That’s sad.”

“Yeah,” Liam agrees. He leans in closer, pressing his nose to Harry’s temple and taking a deep breath of his shampoo. He suddenly needed another physical connection and a reminder that he was there. “It is sad.”

They go quiet again as Harry keeps reading. The first year is particularly morose with a lot of repetition and Liam begging Harry again and again to just come home. He regrets those now. He knows that if Harry had the choice he would have come home. He never would have left. He hates the pain on his face and the returning tense curve of his shoulders as he reads them all. It’s a repetitive prayer full of pain and longing.

Zayn’s releasing another fucking album. Can you believe it? Now of all times.

He keeps fucking texting me about coming to his bullshit release party. Why the hell would he think that I would want to come to that?

If I hear about this bullshit party and bullshit album one more time, I swear.

It’s like they don’t even care Harry! How can they claim they are your friends if they don’t even care?

Such bullshit.

Liam winces at those. He remembers how angry he had been that others seemed to be going on with their lives while Harry was still missing and while Liam’s life was entirely on hold. He can see now that being offended was stupid when he wasn’t actually doing a whole hell of a lot to find Harry himself at that point. He was just growing a beard, wearing dirty clothes and never leaving the house. But at the time he had felt like he was the only one who gave a shit about Harry being gone. That sentiment had caused him and Louis to fall out for several months.

The tone of the texts gets even worse when they get to the next day, when the police had announced that Harry was likely dead.

THEY HAVE DECLARED YOU DEAD!!!!!

THIS IS SUCH BULLSHIT! YOU AREN’T DEAD!

How can they do this? They have no proof you are dead!

Come on Harry, you need to come home and prove them wrong!

Please Harry, please, this is insane. They have it wrong. You have to help me prove that.
They just keep saying they have no proof you are alive, but they have no proof you are dead either. This is bullshit! I think they've even convinced your mum.

“They told me about this when it happened,” Harry says quietly. Liam remembers him mentioning it during the trial. How Gary and Brian had celebrated because it meant no one was looking for Harry anymore. “It hadn’t even been a year.”

“I know. I was furious. I couldn’t understand why they would do that. Just give up like that,” Liam agrees. The anger was still a rock in his chest despite how everything had turned out. He’s always wondered what would have happened had they not declared Harry dead and if they had put more effort into finding him. The chance they could have rescued him sooner and helped him avoid some of the suffering is something that Liam will never forgive the police for. Or himself for that matter.

“Yeah I see that you were angry for sure,” Harry says with a humorless laugh. “You really did believe I was still alive though, didn’t you?” he adds afterward. His voice is barely a whisper.

“Yes I did. I couldn't consider anything else,” Liam answers, pressing a soft kiss to Harry’s temple and pulling him a little closer.

The next few months’ worth of texts are when Liam had managed to convince everyone Harry was still alive and then when they had all turned against him.

*I cannot believe they are falling for this. They just keep saying the same bullshit the police are saying, that there is no evidence you are alive. BUT THERE IS NO EVIDENCE YOU ARE DEAD EITHER!*

*Such bullshit.*

*I'm done with these people.*

He’d meant that. He hadn’t spoken to any of Harry’s family, the rest of the lads or even his own family for almost a month prior to the funeral.

A wedge of ice lodges itself in his chest as they get closer to the funeral. Harry tenses because he knows it’s coming as well.

*They’ve planned a funeral. I cannot believe this.*

**WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH PEOPLE?**

*Niall is going to have one hell of a bruise on his ass. I just threw him out. These people say they are your friends and that they care about you. Well clearly, they don’t.*

*How can they even think I would go to this bullshit, garbage farce of a funeral? My fucking sister even came and picked out a suit for me.*

*They are bullshit people with bullshit ideas and are just trying to hide the fact that they don’t fucking care. That they’ve given up without even trying.*

*You deserve better than this!*
I hate all of them.

Liam winces again as he reads his own vitriol and how furiously angry he had been with everyone. He knew he had been a mess at that time, saying and thinking things he would never normally consider, and most of it was very messy and angry. But seeing it again with fresh eyes, and knowing Harry was seeing it too, makes him ashamed and embarrassed.

I’m going to fucking show them all. I’m going to make them all realize that this is wrong and they can’t do this.

The fucking media is everywhere, of course. Pieces of shit.

Nick Grimshaw is here to leech some more fame, asshole. Pretending like he’s your friend.

Story of my Life? Really? As if you would pick this song. Clearly they don’t know you.

“Ok I was pissed about the funeral, but clearly nowhere near as much as you,” Harry says with another humorless laugh. “You went to tell them all off though and yet you didn’t?” He asks, turning his head to look at Liam, green eyes searching his face for answers. He looks pale, not that he normally didn’t, but any kind of emotional upset seemed to make it worse and the dark circles under his eyes were a little more pronounced.

“I lost my nerve. I just realized that it was probably a lost cause. That I would just be making a show of myself and would have ended up some sympathetic basket case for them all to look at with pity,” Liam replies because it was partly true. What he won’t tell Harry is that the funeral had shaken his resolve, at least temporarily. For a few minutes he had started to really wonder if Harry was in fact dead. It wouldn’t be the last time either.

The texts stop for a period of time. Liam remembers that time. The month after the funeral where he hadn’t indulged because he had tried to face the potential reality that Harry wasn’t going to see them. Little did he know.

I wrote a song for you.

The very next text after his complaint about the song at the funeral seems a little ominous. Sitting between two time stamps, the time that passed clear. It’s not for another couple of weeks that he texts again.

It’s on the album. I convinced them to let me put it on there.

It’s called the Scientist.

You need to hear it Harry. I have to find a way for you to hear it.

They want me to premiere it at the Billboard Music Awards. You gonna be watching?

“I wish I was,” Harry says sadly.

A pang of sadness goes through Liam’s chest along with more guilt. When he was writing and sending all of these texts it had become more of a therapy for him than him really talking to Harry. A way to make himself feel better, but now it seemed it was just causing Harry pain.
“Har, you don’t have to read all of these,” Liam says gently, pulling Harry in to his side and giving him a gentle squeeze. “I mean, it’s not like I’m telling you much you didn’t already know at this point.”

Harry turns and looks at him, eyes wide and sad. He shakes his head a minute later.

“No, I want to. It helps me feel like I was still a part of your life then, during that time. And I know you didn’t mean anything bad by doing this. I get why you did it.”

“Yeah, but if it’s upsetting you then don’t do it. I’m not going to force you to and you shouldn’t either,” Liam presses, desperate to get that darkness out of Harry’s eyes.

“It’s fine Liam. I’m fine, honestly,” Harry says firmly. He’s trying to sound fine, but not quite getting there.

He turns back to the phone and Liam presses another kiss to his temple. He leaves his nose pressed there for a few moments longer and Harry leans into the affection, settling in a little closer while his finger starts scrolling again.

_Fuck James Corden._

_Why would he publicly ask me if the song is about you? Of course it is, but that’s only for you and me to know._

_My manager is super pissed._

Harry huffs a laugh quietly, shaking his head slightly.

“Ah yes, your beef with James Corden. He shouldn’t have asked you if the song was about me. I still maintain that.”

“Yeah, I know. I do too,” Liam replies, annoyed again remembering it. “I had to answer or eat bull testicles. I did neither and got in deep shit for it.”

Harry snorts and keeps scrolling.

_Dunkirk comes out tonight. Louis and I are going to go check it out. I’m sure you did great in it._

_Gonna spend the day touring around LA first and check out all of your favorite places!_

Harry smiles broader as he reads Liam’s account of his day in LA with Louis. Like when little Freddie got covered in icing and when the two of them lost the toddler in a book shop for about five minutes, both running around panicked. Liam had also included some pictures he had taken. Ones even he had forgotten about of Louis and Freddie in the park, the elaborate design the barista had done on top of his cappuccino at the coffee shop and even a selfie of Liam holding his pink pastry box.

“I’m really glad we got to go do that again as a group,” Harry says with a sigh. His mood is lifted at more positive memories and stories.

“Me too. It was a great day. It made me feel reconnected to Louis and to you, a reminder of who I
really am,” Liam says wistfully. And it was the truth. That day had reminded him that he hadn’t given up on Harry yet. No matter how painful it was watching the movie and the dream that had plagued him that night of their first kiss. He knows now that he needed it.

“You sentimental sap,” Harry deadpans, snorting again.

*It’s amazing Harry.*

*I am so proud of you*

*You better win awards for that.*

Liam’s three simple texts about Dunkirk don’t seem enough somehow now. He was so emotional after seeing it that he hadn’t been able to come up with words.

He doesn’t tell Harry about the dream. It was too painful to talk about. Instead, he goes back to pleading with him to come home. Desperation colors the messages for the next few days before he had become almost lifeless for several weeks. That was the time he was just going through the motions of promo. He was doing as he was told with little argument, but also with little energy. Until his manager had dropped him in the office with the Santa Claus therapist in a final ditch effort to get Liam to let go.

*Simon is fucking prick. I’ve been doing everything he asked me to, promotion, interviews, all the usual bullshit and somehow that still isn’t enough?*

*I’m done, I just fired his ass. I’m going home.*

*God I miss you.*

“What exactly did he do that was the final straw? You’ve told me that you two didn’t meet eye to eye in terms of your album and the promo and stuff, but you’re talking here like he did something that really put you off,” Harry asks him. His eyes meet Liam’s again, full of curiosity.

Liam buys time scratching the back of his head while considering how to answer and just decides to be honest. It was only fair.

“He took me to a therapist because according to him I was obsessed with you and it was making me miserable. He didn’t like seeing me so lifeless,” he answers. “I mean yes you were an important part of my life, clearly since I was still texting you, but truthfully my heart was never into promoting that album. The only thing I cared about was that one song and every time I played it, talked about it and all that shit, it felt like I was cheapening it. I didn’t like that.”

“He thought you were obsessed with me?” Harry asks, incredulous.

“Yeah. I mean, I wrote a song about you. Though I never did tell him it was about you, but I guess he figured it out. But I mean, I refused to let you go. I obviously don’t regret now, but at that time I didn’t know I was in love with you. I just wanted you back. That’s all I knew and yeah… I guess I was kinda obsessed, now that I look back on it,” Liam admits, realizing that he really was. He spent over two years completely and totally consumed by Harry and his disappearance. While the rest of his family had attempted to move on with their lives and the rest of the guys carried on as well, Liam had remained stuck, unable to see any further than Harry and how he still fit into his life. “I don’t regret it,” he repeats, because he doesn’t. Having Harry here now pressed against him,
back in his life and his partner now, it made it all worth it. In some strange way, that obsession was just proof of how deep his feelings for the other man ran. To him, it was almost something to be proud of.

And while Liam is feeling all chuffed and proud of his devotion, Harry is now staring at him with deep concern.

“Li… I mean, uh, that’s a little worrisome actually. What if I hadn’t come back? I would never want you living the rest of your life as a shell and completely focused on me. I would want you to move on,” he says quietly. His green eyes flick back and forth between Liam’s and there’s a deep furrow between his brows.

“I know Harry. I suspect Ruth would have made sure I did. But truthfully, I would have never stopped loving you. That never would have changed. No matter what,” Liam replies, pressing a kiss to the furrow.

Harry nods and looks down at his sleeve. He’d added a sweatshirt on top of the long sleeved t-shirt, cold as he usually was.

“I guess I’m selfishly glad to hear that,” he admits after a minute, fingers worrying a thread that was coming loose at the end of his cuff. The sweater is a sunshine yellow, knit with bands of white around the collar and sleeves. The cheerfulness of the color seems at odds with the deep conversation they were having. “And I guess I can’t really talk. You were who I thought of daily as well. The face and memories that I turned to for comfort and an escape,” he adds quietly, sounding slightly sheepish.

Liam quickly tilts his head up with two fingers on his chin, forcing Harry to make eye contact with him.

“I’m weirdly glad to hear that as well. Don’t you dare feel bad about that. You had to do what you had to do to survive and I am so happy and grateful you did, because look at us now,” Liam tells him firmly and Harry relaxes slightly, nodding.

They are quiet for a minute and Harry picks the phone back up again, settling back in against Liam.

“Right, so you told Simon to fuck right off, got sued and went on home. That was months before you started producing songs for that kid, right?” Harry asks him, starting to read through the messages again.

The answer to his question becomes clear in short order as Liam starts recounting his monotonous days at home. Including tales of the shows he was watching or other mundane day to day activities.

“I’m not sure I needed to know about your dishwasher being busted Liam,” Harry deadpans after a while. He reads through Liam’s very detailed description of what happened, what was broken and what it had taken to get it repaired again.

Liam just laughs once, feeling a bit embarrassed. For a long while he had spent so much time alone that Harry was often the only person he was talking to, if you could call it that, and talking about stupid boring stuff was better than not talking at all.

*My sister seems to think she needs to rescue me. She won’t bog off. She’s here again today and wants me to go do the shopping with her.*
“Is this what you meant when you said Ruth would make sure you moved on?” Harry asks as he reads through the increasing number of texts mentioning activities with Ruth. Liam’s mood clearly changes through them, becoming less morose and boring and more energetic as he starts to accept and welcome her attention.

“Yup, but I’m glad she did it. I really did need to get my shit together at that point. My beard was out of control,” Liam replies and Harry laughs.

Julian just called me. He wants me to produce an album for some new Justin Bieber kid. Should I do it?

Ruth thinks I should do it, but she seems to think I need a job.

She’d probably be happy if I took a position as a cashier at a local shop at this point.

The kid seems kinda decent, good voice, but I can see what Julian means. He needs some work getting it cleaned up.

I think I might do it?

It’s only a few songs, couple of weeks max. Shouldn’t be too much of a bother.

I always wanted to try producing. You were always telling me to try it.

“Yes I did,” Harry agrees. “Clearly, I was right.”

Liam laughs.

Albums getting great reviews. Kinda nice to be on the good side of opinion again in the industry.

Julian already thinks I should do more, but I’m not sure. Should I?

“Yes,” Harry answers the question in a deadpan voice. “I think you should do one for a mate of ours. You know him, tall, dark and handsome, goes by the name of Zayn.”

“Good idea Harry. I’ll get right on that,” Liam replies in the same tone and they both laugh.

I forgot that I would have to do promo with this. Thought I was done with this shit.

It’s the release party tonight. Gonna wear a dark blue suit. I think you would approve.

Just gonna go for one drink. Be polite and make an appearance.

Yeah, this kid’s crowd is not really mine. Kinda feel weird here. They are all so young.

Yes, I know we were this young once too, but I feel like I’m ancient now compared to them.

One drink done. I’m out of here.

The final text sits looking so ordinary, like an unfinished conversation because it was. Had Harry not shown up in his kitchen that very night he would have carried on texting. He knows he would
have. But it seems so abrupt a finale in a way and it leaves him feeling a little uneasy for some reason.

He quickly grabs his phone and types in another message. He sends it before Harry reads it, eyes already curiously watching him. The phone in Harry’s hand dings a second later, the new message popping up at the bottom of the massive list.

*I am so happy you are home. I love you.*

Harry huffs a laugh and grins, turning and kissing Liam, hand on his cheek gently.

“I love you too. Thank you for doing this. I liked feeling a part of your life even if I wasn’t with you,” Harry says softly, keeping his forehead pressed against Liam’s.

“You’re welcome. You were a part of my life the entire time. Safe to say you played a role in almost every decision I made, everything I did,” Liam admits.

“Except the dishwasher repair. You never asked my advice on that,” Harry says with a cheeky grin.

“You’re right. So tell me then, should I have gone with the plastic washers or the metal ones to hold the sprayer cover together?” Liam asks him seriously and Harry laughs harder.

“Fuck if I know Liam. I don’t know shit about stuff like that,” he replies, hand slapping Liam’s knee in mirth.

“Exactly, so now you know why I didn’t ask you,” Liam deadpans again and Harry’s head goes back as he laughs loudly.

“Ok, ok, you’re forgiven for that,” Harry relents. He nods seriously while he tries to control his smile.

“How is it that phone is still working anyway?” Liam asks suddenly, the thought just occurring to him. The entire time he had kept texting he had always had it at the back of his mind that the phone would have been shut off with no reason to keep paying the bill if no one was using it.

“I don’t know? It just was when I plugged it in and charged it,” Harry shrugs. “I mean, it was being paid automatically out of my account. My dad must have just forgotten to cancel it. I’m glad he did.”

Liam hums and nods, that was likely the case. Des had been handling Harry’s financials while he was gone, but he was more focused on bigger investments and accounts, like his LA house, New York apartment and all of that. A small payment coming out of his checking account wasn’t likely to catch his attention.

“Sorry for taking you away from working with Zayn,” Harry says quietly after a long silence. His eyes are back on Liam’s face, searching and looking apologetic.

Liam waves a hand in the air, shaking his head once to dismiss Harry’s guilt.

“It’s fine, not your fault. Zayn’s cool,” Liam replies, kissing the furrow again to make it disappear.

“Ok well, I promise I won’t interrupt again,” Harry assures him. He then gives Liam a long side
eye, full of curiosity. “Can I hear what you worked on today? I promise I won’t tell anyone!”

Liam hums and haws, narrowing his eyes at Harry in deep consideration even though he already
knows he will give Harry anything he asks for at a moment’s notice.

And so they leave the phone and the deep conversation behind, happy to have cleared some air and
head downstairs to the recording studio.

Harry loves the song. He is ecstatic and insists on hearing it several times before Liam finally calls
it off with a laugh.

He feels a weight has been lifted from his shoulders now that Harry knows so much more of the
truth and he can tell Harry has been buoyed by it as well. There was nothing like knowing that you
were deeply missed when you were gone to help someone feel a little better about themselves.

1 Year

Harry never mentions the texts again though Liam is fairly certain he kept all of them and often
goes back to read some of them. He’s not sure what it is about them that has him so fascinated or
drawn to them, but he doesn’t ask either.

They celebrate Harry’s birthday with a small dinner party. Harry decided that was all he wanted
and it’s a quiet, but very happy affair. It’s complete with store bought cake courtesy of Liam since
he didn’t dare try baking one himself.

After that the rest of Harry’s family, Anne included, had finally headed home. They had finally
decided that Harry was safe, in good hands and well taken care of and that perhaps it was time to
give him a little space to be an adult again. It doesn’t stop his mum from calling multiple times a
day to just check in, but Harry doesn’t seem to mind.

Zayn’s album gets done in record time with the help of a few all-nighter recording sessions to get
things laid out just right. No one was willing to stop when they were on a roll. Harry seems to take
on the role of caretaker during this. He bakes and cooks for everyone as well as making sure that
Liam showers and sleeps as often as possible.

They finish the album late in the evening on February 20th. The date sticks in Liam’s mind for
some reason all day, distracting him. He doesn’t remember why until after everyone has gone
home and he and Harry are lying in bed. They are cuddled up together in warm pajamas and Fitzy
is a little grey ball on his throne.

“It’s one year today Harry,” he says quietly, the realization dawning on him. He turns his head to
look at the clock, 2:30 glowing back to him and he huffs a breath. This was the exact time he had
woken up that night.

“One year? For what?” Harry asks him, voice deep and drowsy.

“When you showed up here. It was exactly one year ago right now. I woke up at 2:30 to the sound
of you opening my fridge downstairs,” Liam replies, mind boggled. He feels Harry tense beside
him, head coming up a second later to look at the clock and then at Liam.

“You remember the time and everything?” He asks, incredulous. But then his face starts to change,
and it drops in realization. He knows that exactly one year ago he had escaped, gotten free and ended the hell he was being forced to live in.

“Yeah, I looked at the clock when I woke up. I remember everything about that night,” Liam says quietly, fingers gently trailing through Harry’s hair as the other man continues to stare at the clock. Liam can see the emotions flicking across his face. Sadness, relief, happiness and surprise, he looks overwhelmed with it all.

Harry nods a moment later, finally acknowledging Liam’s words, though he directs it at the clock. His eyes still take another moment to finally slide over to Liam’s face, mouth agape as he processes it all.

“I literally don’t know if I should cry or celebrate or what right now,” Harry admits, shaking his head slowly.

“We can do whatever you want Harry, but it’s certainly something to be happy about it. You came home a year ago. I for one am glad about it,” Liam answers him. His hand cups Harry’s cheek gently, wanting to have that physical connection to make doubly sure it was still reality, that Harry was really there with him.

“I…” Harry considers it, eyes flicking back to the clock again, brow furrowing in thought. “I don’t think I want to have a party or anything ridiculous like that. Maybe just a dinner, with family,” he says in a questioning tone and Liam nods. He didn’t see any reason not to, but he could still see some reservations on Harry’s face.

“Haz, we don’t have to do anything at all if you don’t want to,” he assures him. His thumb softly traces across Harry’s cheekbone as a sense of guilt at even bringing it up starts to wash over him.

Harry shakes his head, though not enough to dislodge Liam’s hand, and his brow furrows again.

“No, no, it’s good. It’s just a bit of a shock. It almost doesn’t even feel like that much time has gone by, but it’s good I think. Kinda nice to actually see it, know that my past is getting further behind me, but,” he stops and looks at Liam, pressing into his hand ever so slightly. His own hand comes up to rest just below Liam’s sternum, fingertip finding the space not covered by his t-shirt to touch his skin. He considers his words, brows moving a few times before he finally settles on it. “I don’t want to make this a yearly thing. Like, let’s acknowledge it this year, cuz one year it kinda important, but then that’s it. I don’t want to think about it again. Does that make sense?”

“Of course it does Harry. It’s whatever you want to do babe,” Liam replies, fully understanding where Harry’s mind was. While it was nice to know the exact date he had escaped hell, it was also a reminder of that hell in the first place. It was better left in the past so he could focus on the future.

Harry’s face relaxes, head tilting into Liam’s hand more and he smiles softly.

“Ok, thank you,” he says with a sigh. He leans forward to press his warm, soft lips against Liam’s. The scent of his toothpaste still clings to him and Liam absorbs it as always.

The kiss is chaste, but meaningful, the seal of a promise. They resettle under the covers and the lamps are turned off, but neither falls asleep for a long time. Liam can’t help but go over the events of that night again in his mind. How Harry had looked, smelled, the way he had behaved and the feeling that had hit him hours later. It was a relief so palpable at knowing Harry was alive that it
could have brought him to his knees if he wasn’t already sitting down.

He senses that Harry is remembering the night as well, but with a far different viewpoint and more memories than Liam had. The escape had started at 2:30am for Liam, but it started far earlier for Harry with a battle against an old bathroom door and a confused, panicked run about Hounslow Commons that landed him at the airport.

He realizes that while he can reminisce on the night with an almost positive viewpoint at having Harry come home to him alive and ending over two years of agony, for Harry that night probably held a lot of memories of terror, pain, deep worry and being overwhelmed. He hadn’t known that Liam still lived in the same house. He hadn’t known that anyone would even be there at all. All he knew was that he was free, but his own family had stopped looking for him.

Liam can truly understand why Harry doesn’t want to turn the date into an anniversary.

Even still, he calls his family the next day and invites them for dinner. He cooks a roast with all the trimmings and a pecan pie. Evidently he decided that cake was just a tad too celebratory. He waits until they all get there before telling them why they were there in the first place.

“It’s been a year? A whole year?” Des breathes, forkful of potatoes forgotten halfway to his mouth. All of them seem flabbergasted themselves to realize how much time had passed already. That so much had happened in the span of those twelve months.

“Yeah, it has,” Harry answers him. “Hard to believe I know. I’m not sure I’ve even wrapped my head around it, but I guess I sort of wanted to acknowledge it, just this once.”

“You only want to celebrate it once?” Gemma asks him, head tilted to the side in confusion. “I’d think you would want to celebrate every year. The day you regained your freedom and came home.”

“My memories of that night are far darker than yours Gem. It’s not easy for me to look back really and see it as a happy thing. All I remember is being really scared, in a lot of pain and so overwhelmed and unsure,” he answers her and she nods, understanding crossing her features. “So yeah, I’d prefer we just mention it this one year and then forget it from now on. I don’t want to look back, just forward.”

“Ok,” she agrees, nodding earnestly. The rest at the table does as well.

“Alright then, to one year and now only the future to look forward to,” Des says in a loud voice, lifting his wine glass in a toast. Harry smiles crookedly at him. He laughs once, but then lifts his own glass to clink it against his dad’s. The rest of the table joins in, all of them toasting the passing of the year and it helps to lift the mood.

“To the future,” Liam agrees. Harry smiles at him softly, finally meeting Liam’s glass. He’s happy to see hope in the green eyes looking into his.
Chapter 30

15 Months

Zayn’s first single is released at the end of April, with a promise of the full album in June. They choose the song that Liam had earmarked right from the beginning and it blows up the charts. It hits number one within hours and breaks records in sales.

The mass popularity and media coverage leads them to Liam. Everyone wants to talk to him about his new career as a producer, who he was going to work with next and whether he might release another album himself someday. He does a few radio interviews over the phone with Ryan Seacrest and such, but he keeps it to a minimum. Always redirecting the conversation back to Zayn and how great of a song writer he is.

He thinks he’s dodged the worst of it until Zayn shows up one day with an apologetic, but excited grin on his face, which is pretty unusual for Zayn to begin with.

“So don’t be mad, but we’ve been invited to be presenters at the Billboard’s next month,” he says carefully. His eyes dart around Liam’s face, watching his reaction.

Liam’s body tenses immediately. Safe to say he doesn’t have the best memories of the last time he went to Vegas for the awards. If he’s honest, he’s surprised he’s not banned.

“Liam I know that look, but come on. This is a great opportunity and even I want to do it. I’m really excited about this album and I actually want to do some promo this time. It’d be great to have you by my side for that,” Zayn says gently. His tone is just a little bit pleading.

Harry wanders into the living room, looking between the two of them curiously. He has a bowl of cereal in his hand and his cheek is puffed out with the mouthful he just took. Liam can’t help but stare at the small dot of milk on his lip, mesmerized as his pink tongue darts out to get it. When his eyes finally reach Harry’s they are full of amusement. He is fully aware of what Liam was just doing and heat crawls into his cheeks. He’s glad that Zayn doesn’t seem to have noticed.

“Harry! Help me convince him,” Zayn states, hand waving vaguely at Liam. It was 8:00 in the morning and yet Zayn is dressed like he is going to the club. Dark tight jeans, the latest trainers, leather jacket. Meanwhile, Harry and Liam are both still in their pajamas. Harry had gone ahead and added a dark green hoodie over his grey t-shirt to keep warm and his hair is knotted on his head. He still hasn’t gone to it cut, despite promising Gemma months ago.

He plops down on the couch, pulling his sock covered feet up to sit cross legged while he takes another bite of cereal, intentionally licking his lips in a lewd manner this time, before smirking and laughing once.

“Convince him of what?” He asks Zayn, finally returning his attention to their friend.

“We’ve been asked to present at the Billboard awards next month in Vegas as part of promo for the album. I think it’s a great idea,” Zayn explains,shrugging his jacket off and laying it across the arm of the chair. He was clearly intending to stay until he got his way in this discussion.

Harry’s eyebrows flicker in surprise. His eyes go between Liam and Zayn a few times and his
cereal is forgotten in his lap.

“You actually want to do this?” He asks Zayn delicately. His penchant for bowing out of promo and performances because of his anxiety was well known, but both Liam and Harry knew that it was not without difficulty that he made those decisions. They also knew he had made great strides in finding ways to cope and to deal with it.

“Yes, I do. It’s surprising I know, but that’s how excited I am about this album. But this jerk off over here doesn’t want to do it,” Zayn replies, indicating towards Liam with his thumb.

“I didn’t actually give you any answer I might point out,” Liam says hotly, crossing the room to sit next to Harry. His hand immediately lands on his lower back. His spine a ridge under Liam’s palm.

“You’re face said it all Liam. You don’t exactly hide your feelings well,” Zayn chides, one groomed brow rising in emphasis.

Harry turns and looks at him. His eyes searching Liam’s face, also wondering what he’s thinking. Harry knew what happened, for the most part, the last time Liam went to the Billboard’s. He had done his best to convince Liam that it wasn’t nearly as bad as he thought and that he sang the song beautifully.

“I think you should do it,” he finally says, deep voice warm and earnest. “Zayn’s right. It’s a great opportunity and you should get the chance to show off what you’ve done. Be proud Liam.”

Liam immediately starts coming up with reasons why it’s a bad idea. The most prominent one being that he just didn’t want to leave Harry alone in the house while he swanned off to Vegas.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ll come with you,” Harry offers. Before Liam gets the chance to rebuff him he puts a hand up and continues. “I’m not doing anything official. I’m not going to be seen or be a part of it myself. It’s just to support you guys, that’s all.”

“Are you sure Harry? It’s a long way to go and it will be super busy and crazy,” Liam asks him, remembering the red carpet insanity himself.

“Well, LA is further away and I already did that. Yeah, it’ll be fine. I’m not gonna participate in any of the official shit. I’ll just sit with you and support you. No publicity for me. I want to. I want to see you do something for yourself for once,” Harry says gently and Liam sighs.

He has a feeling that Harry wants him to do this to make up for the last time. As though it’s his fault it was a mess.

But he can’t help the tiny little spark of happiness that lodges in his chest. If he were being honest, he wanted to go. He was damn proud of what he’d done with Zayn’s album and he kinda, sorta wanted to have a bit of a fresh start. Maybe make some connections to get more producing work because he really liked doing it.

“Only if you are absolutely sure,” he says to Harry, holding his gaze so that Harry has no chance to lie.

Harry stares back. His green eyes are full of defiance despite the loose strands of hair trying to tangle themselves in his eyelashes.
“Yes Liam, I am sure. Let’s do this. It could be fun,” he says firmly before shrugging once. “All those times we went to Vegas I don’t think I ever really got a proper chance to look around and enjoy it.”

“I’m sure Louis can show us around. He’s been often enough,” Liam points out and they all laugh.

With everything decided, a whirlwind several weeks begins as Liam is forced to meet with a stylist for an outfit and he is sent a script to look over for when he and Zayn present to make sure they are both prepared. They would still have a teleprompter, but after a debacle involving Katy Perry and Miley Cyrus a year ago where the two of them went entirely off script and ignored the prompter in favor of openly pushing an agenda they had at the time, the awards show circuit had cracked down on presenters and insisted they stay on script. That was why it was sent ahead of time, in case Liam had questions or wanted to suggest a change.

He and Zayn had a pretty standard back and forth type of conversation to get through. It did include one joke about directions and there only being one direction really. It’s not funny, it’s not original, but he doesn’t much care. He wasn’t worried about what he would do on stage, oddly enough. He was more focused on seeing old friends in the industry and trying to find some more connections.

That and keeping an eye on Harry.

Harry had been growing more excited, but also nervous as the time grew nearer. He was looking forward to seeing old friends like Liam was, but he was also starting to realize the scale of what he was walking into. Whether he was in the spotlight or not it was making him a little trepidatious. He covers this by planning an agenda for them for the day before the show, starting bright and early to cover as much ground on the strip as possible.

Liam and Zayn had agreed that a private plane was the way to go without even really talking about it but it was with Harry in mind that they did. They both assumed that he wouldn’t want to fly commercial and be around all those people.

However they are tersely told that they are both wrong, are both idiots and are wasting money. The plane is cancelled and instead they are installed in first class seats on a British Airways red eye flight.

The airport is bustling when they get there. Harry side eyes the bus depot as they go by and Liam squeezes his hand a little tighter. No one pays them much attention though, at least not at first, but then a photographer spots Zayn and hurries towards them. Liam reacts by quickly pulling Harry away to security to get him to a safer location as quick as possible. He knows Zayn will understand and not be upset about being abandoned momentarily.

They all meet up again in the first class lounge where Zayn orders a stiff drink, but seems otherwise none the worse for wear.

However they hadn’t announced or said a word about Harry coming with them. Though they knew they wouldn’t be able to keep it a secret forever. Yet Liam is surprised when he checks the tabloids and entertainment sites later on the plane that the photographer seems to have completely missed Harry in his zeal to get shots of Zayn.

The stewardess is friendly and it’s clear she recognizes them, but she says nothing and they settle back in their seats to try to sleep. Liam and Harry have seats next to each other in the middle of the
plane. Both are the type that fold back entirely to beds with a barricade between them that can be lowered to the same height as an arm rest. Passengers can create either an individual little cocoon or a bubble for a couple, though still be in separate seats. This doesn’t stop Harry from finding his way across the barricade though and Liam wakes to find him snuggled right in with him on his bed, snoring in his ear. It’s a tight fit, but Liam wouldn’t have it any other way.

The Las Vegas airport is even busier than Heathrow was when they arrive. Thousands of tourists are all milling around chatting animatedly along with hundreds of music fans who have all arrived to take in the show. They pull their hoods up and follow their designated security personnel out the door to their waiting car. Zayn’s manager had insisted on this so they weren’t given a choice. Liam is grateful for it as they get out before anyone notices them.

They’ve been booked into the MGM Grand in the Skylofts suites. The room is pristine white and glass with a stunning view onto the strip. The sun is just setting as they get into their room. The lights are starting to glitter outside and Harry is immediately mesmerized while Liam remembers the last time he was in Vegas and he’d watched the happy people outside sullenly. He had to admit it was much better looking down at it all with Harry at his side.

“What’s go somewhere!” Harry says excitedly. “Dinner somewhere cool. Didn’t Gordon Ramsay just open a new restaurant here?” He asks Liam, eyes glittering just as much as the lights as he looks at him. Liam responds by leaning forward and kissing him deeply, thinking that room service and their bed was looking like a much better option.

Harry laughs after a few minutes of kissing, hands gently pushing Liam back.

“Later. Right now I want to go out for dinner,” he says firmly and then pouts slightly at Liam’s expression. “Come on, you were bugging the hell out of me to go out for dinner only a few months ago. You took me to that Italian place where Philip tried to join us and now you don’t want to take me out?”

Liam weakens immediately. It was impossible to say no to Harry in general, but especially not when he was using his pleading tone.

“Alright fine, find a place. But I want an early night if you are insisting on hitting every tourist trap tomorrow,” Liam relents. Harry jolts in excitement, hands clapping once.

Twenty minutes later and they are at a table in BurGR Deux, a pretentious remake of the original restaurant Ramsay had opened years back. This time it’s situated in the Bellagio and Harry makes Liam promise they will watch the fountain display after dinner. He had to actually name drop his own name to get a table, along with a generous tip to the host, but once again, he couldn’t say no to Harry. So now they sat enjoying a sweet, rich, red wine with burgers and fancy chips ordered and Liam has to admit that he kind of likes it. He can’t help but feel a hand on Harry’s thigh under the table and his thumb rubs soft circles in the denim as Harry’s body heat radiates up Liam’s side. They had intentionally sat next to each other instead of across because it always felt like the right thing to do. Harry sips his wine and glances at Liam, green eyes a little blown and his hair messy around his forehead. Liam’s fingers tuck it behind his ear more than once, lingering in the soft strands and brushing the skin of his neck.

The food is amazing. Harry moans around a bite of his burger more than once, making Liam laugh while a jolt of arousal goes down his spine at the sound. Their sex life had remained much the same. They still hadn’t really made an effort at getting their pants off and it still took place in the bathroom with Liam rutting against Harry from behind, but he was happy just to have Harry period.
So he wasn’t complaining.

After dinner they head out into the warm night. The streets are still packed with people, but no one even glances at them. The fountain show is fun and afterward Liam offers to buy Harry ice cream, which they eat while slowly strolling back to their hotel hand in hand. Despite all of the supposed dates they had been on, this is the first time that it actually felt like one for Liam. The touching, the caresses, the long lingering looks and the heat between them made it feel all the more real. His skin feels like it's on fire with every touch. It’s a warmth in his veins that is so addictive and compelling.

The second the elevator door closes Liam turns and pulls Harry flush up against him. His tongue licks into his mouth, tasting the remnants of his ice cream, sweet and creamy. Harry moulds into him kissing him back eagerly, lips insistent and stubble scratchy. He moves with ease to wrap his arms around Liam’s shoulders and his hand makes it’s way into his hair as usual, pulling on the short strands to just the right side of painful, making Liam gasp and moan.

The elevator stops at a random floor and they quickly separate to a polite distance though their hands come together again. An older couple dressed to the nines gets on, both nodding and smiling politely at the two of them. Liam almost growls when they push the button for the floor just above his and Harry’s, knowing they won’t get another moment alone on the elevator.

But in the end, it doesn’t matter and they reach their floor in good time. They bid the other couple a good night and hurry down the hall before crashing through their own door while trying to press against each other again. Their lips crash and their teeth get knocked, but they get it together in enough time before they topple onto the bed. Harry’s thighs immediately encase Liam’s hips, rutting up into him. Hands slide and press everywhere, gripping and touching, pulling and pushing. Harry’s eventually snake their way up Liam’s back under his shirt. He pulls the sweat dampened fabric up before forcefully shoving Liam up from where he’d latched onto Harry’s neck so he can pull it off completely.

Liam just dives right back down. His mouth reclaims Harry’s neck, tongue swiping at his salty skin, hair scented like the restaurant. His teeth scrape down Harry’s ear, nipping gently at the sensitive skin just below. The legs around his hips tighten as Harry pushes up into him.

“Damn… fucking jeans,” Harry pants out into his ear and Liam agrees immediately as his cock throbs against the constricting fabric. His underwear already getting damp.

“Off?” He asks simply. Harry nods quickly, helping Liam sit up. He wants to watch Harry take his pants off, he really does, but he’s so damn eager to get his own off that by the time he’s done Harry is already down to his black boxer briefs. He moves rapidly back into position and their erections meet with only thin cotton layers between them now and they both moan loudly.

“Fuck, shit, yes,” Harry breathes out, hips jolting up as his thighs come up to encircle Liam’s hips again.

Liam immediately starts moving, thrusting and rolling his hips to create friction, heat and pressure. They both pant loudly, gasping moans and sharp cries filling the space of the room.

Hands start roaming again. Harry’s grip Liam’s ass intermittently and one of Liam’s finds it’s way up under Harry’s sweater and shirt, tracing across his soft, warm skin. He’d love to take Harry’s hoodie and t-shirt off so their bare chests could meet, but Harry has been reluctant about doing that.
Liam isn’t sure if it’s because he’s self-conscious about his body or because nudity still frightens him a bit, but he takes the chance that Harry is giving him to at least touch.

The movement of their hips becomes more frantic the closer they get and Liam can feel the heat building between his legs. He knows he’s on that edge, but then he’s being shoved and pushed until suddenly he’s on his back. Harry straddles him and ruts against him hard. He’s leaning down, hands on either side of Liam’s head and his hair tickles his chest, but his face is pure bliss and beauty. His perfect pink lips are open, panting moans and cries punching through them and his eyes are screwed closed. He looks completely lost in the sensations, riding Liam like he never has before and all he can do is hold on and watch. His hands are on Harry’s thighs, feeling the muscles moving, and his eyes are focused on his face as he drinks it in.

“Harry, look at me,” he hears someone say and realizes a second later that he was the one who spoke. His voice is deep, rough, a breathy growl as he fights the orgasm that is so insistently building. But he wants to see Harry’s eyes and more importantly he wants Harry to see him. To be present with him and to remember this.

Harry’s eyes open, black with desire and arousal and they meet Liam’s. His face blanks slightly before his mouth opens wider and he cries out. His cock spasms against Liam’s as he comes, a warm wetness making them both slippery. Liam is so mesmerized watching him that he completely forgets himself and only returns to his own body when he follows Harry over the edge. His hips jolt upward a few times, thrusts mimicking fucking and he barely breathes through it. As he comes down he gulps in air, panting and gasping loudly for a few moments. Harry watches him with slightly concerned eyes.

“You ok?” Harry asks him, voice barely a whisper.

“Yeah…yeah I’m fine,” Liam manages. Harry laughs softly, smirking down at him. Liam responds by reaching up and tucking Harry’s unruly hair behind his ear before sliding it around to the back of his head. He pulls him down to kiss him, to taste his breath and to feel his soft, damp, swollen lips.

Harry settles on Liam’s chest, arms relaxing in a loop around his head and they kiss for what feels like hours. The air conditioning raises goose flesh on Liam’s exposed skin, but the spaces that Harry occupies feel almost overheated, creating an incredible contrast.

Eventually they are too tired to carry on and stumble into the bathroom to change and clean up. They get back to the bed where they giggle as they struggle to get the blankets down so they can crawl under them.

Harry sets the alarm for a painfully early hour for their adventure of a day he has planned and they are asleep within minutes.

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“Liam, it’s time to get up. You already slept through the alarm, come on.”

Liam grunts, slowly gaining awareness as a hand shakes his shoulder. He feels boneless, exhausted, sore, and very much unwilling to move.

He swats at Harry’s hand half-heartedly, trying to get the shaking to stop. When that doesn’t work and only earns him a laugh, he quickly gets ahold of the offending limb and tries to yank Harry
back down into bed with him.

“Leeee-yum,” Harry draws out, fighting back. “You promised we would go site-seeing today. So let’s go. There’s so much to do.”

Liam grunts again. He’s aware of the promise he had made, but he’s also aware of the magnitude of his regret at doing so.

With the shaking not getting him anywhere, Harry ups the ante and starts poking Liam with one sharp finger. On the shoulder at first, but then his nose, his cheek, his chest and stomach which are fully exposed in the way he’s flopped on his back on the bed.

“Harry, knock it off,” Liam slurs out, trying to swat at the hand again. “I’m awake. Jus’ give me a fuckin’ minute.”

Harry sighs loudly, giving one final hard poke to Liam’s chest before standing up from the bed.

“Fine. I’m going to call to get coffee up here. When I get back in this room I want you at least standing,” he says firmly and then his footsteps head out the bedroom door.

Liam groans and squints his eyes against the sun. He scratches at his stomach idly. He notes that he hadn’t quite washed all of the come off, leaving dry patches that are less than comfortable. He’s not even sure who’s it is.

He throws one leg over the side of the bed and groans again before throwing the other one over. He finally sits up and cracks one eye open to glare at the window. He had no problem indulging Harry, but he failed to see why they needed to do it so early in the bloody morning.

Despite his complaints, he still gets himself up and slumps his way into the bathroom to piss and brush his teeth. He’s just gotten into the shower, standing under the hot stream with the hope of it giving him some more energy, when Harry returns with the promised coffee.

“Good, you’re up,” he says nonchalantly as he deposits the cup on the bathroom counter.

“As if I had a choice,” Liam retorts grumpily.

“Look I know you’re tired, but today is supposed to be fun. So snap out of it,” Harry replies. There’s the hint of a smile in his voice since he knew damn right well that Liam would give him whatever he wanted.

Liam replies by grumbling, but he carries on washing anyway.

When he gets out he downs half of the coffee in one go. He winces at the bitterness before drying off and throwing on some clean pants and cargo shorts. He adds a white vest on top, figuring light and white would be the best way to stay as cool as possible in the Vegas heat. Once dressed he finishes the coffee, runs a hand through his hair and heads out to the bedroom. Harry is standing by the window watching the strip with eager eyes. The sight of him immediately melts away any of Liam’s grouchiness and he quickly crosses the room to wrap his arms around his waist, pulling him back against his chest.

Harry goes easily, leaning slightly and sighing softly. His head tilts the moment Liam starts pressing a line of kisses down his neck. He allows it for a few minutes until Liam starts to think
they might want to head to the bed instead of outside and then he stops it. He turns and holds Liam back by his shoulders.

“Later. Today I have an agenda. So let’s get going,” he says firmly and Liam’s dick doesn’t quite know what to do, should it keep filling or stop?

The rest of Liam ends up dumbly following Harry out the door and to the elevator. He wonders if breakfast might be a part of this agenda, but finds he’s a bit scared to ask.

They reach the street level and Harry takes Liam’s hand and starts marching down the street. He heads south first, taking them to Mandalay Bay and the Shark Reef Aquarium, which Liam has to admit is pretty cool. They take tons of pictures posing with the sharks on Harry’s old school camera. Then they head over to Luxor to take pictures with the Sphinx statue.

Harry finally relents to Liam’s pitiful looks and leads them into Johnny Rockets for lunch.

Afterwards they continue their way up the strip, checking out each of the fun casinos. They ride the roller coaster on top of New York New York, despite Harry’s reservations. Then they pose with the Eiffel Tower outside of Paris. They watch the fountain show again outside the Bellagio, deciding they like it better at night. Then they are off to Caesar’s Palace where Liam decides to throw a twenty into a slot machine and walks away with fifty dollars. Harry takes pictures of him with his winnings grinning like an idiot before they carry on up the street.

Harry insists they take the gondola ride at the Venetian. They sneak touches and kisses when the gondolier isn’t watching and giggle when he does catch them.

It’s late afternoon by the time they have finished with Circus Circus and they grab a cab up to the Stratosphere to have dinner in the Top of the World restaurant. The food is ok, but the view is stunning.

After dinner they grab another cab up to Fremont Street where the lights in the canopy above have just turned on, making both of them stop and stare upwards with their mouths open in awe.

“Wow, this is so cool,” Harry breathes, turning in a circle to take it all in. Liam very sneakily gets a picture of him on his phone, which will be another of his favorites.

When they finally get enough of the lights above they look back to the street and are immediately greeted by a very well sculpted gentleman in a tight sequined blue thong playing the guitar and they both laugh.

The wild and weird only increases the further down the street they go, but they both love it. They laugh, take pictures and check out all of the vendors and shops that line the street. There are thousands of tourists out enjoying it with them and Liam is surprised that no one has recognized them or approached them. He’s about to say as much to Harry when someone finally does spot them. Two young women, probably about the same age as them, stop dead in their tracks a few feet in front of them. Their mouths drop open in shock before they both smile shyly and begin fidgeting because it’s clear they want to approach, but also know they probably shouldn’t.

Liam is the one who notices them, but he’s careful to not let them know he’s seen them. Harry is busy rifling through a basket of tchotchke Las Vegas key chains, babbling on that they both should get one because why not. He gently nudges Harry, trying to get him to move away from the women and Harry glances up at him confused.
“We will find some key chains Haz, but let’s move on right now. I think I see a better store just down the street,” he says gently, earning him an offended look from the owner of the stall. Harry frowns at him for a second, mouth opening to rebut the idea when his eyes flick over Liam’s shoulder and spot the two women.

“Well it was bound to happen I suppose,” he says a minute later, shoulders drooping slightly.

“It’s fine, but we should maybe just move on,” Liam gently urges again. His hand is on Harry’s waist, trying to guide him away and Harry resists.

“Why? They aren’t bugging us, just staring a little, but that’s ok. I can live with that,” he replies before returning his attention to the basket, pulling a keychain out that is shaped like the Las Vegas sign. “Hey look, this one lights up!”

“Harry…” Liam starts, feeling protective as always, but he gets cut off.

“Chill Liam, it’s fine. They aren’t doing anything. They haven’t even taken a picture,” Harry states evenly, fingers picking up another keychain. This one a fake million dollar casino chip, complete with faux gold details.

Relinquishing the argument, Liam still does his best to shield Harry from view. He lets him finish picking out a few more trinkets before paying the vendor and taking the bag.

The minute they are done he quickly steers Harry away from the two women. Both of them are pretending to look at some necklaces at another stall, but their eyes keep flicking back up to Liam and Harry. Liam prays they don’t follow.

Harry moseys on down the street. He insists they take pictures with the Chippendales to show Gemma and buys several more souvenirs, but Liam just keeps an eye on the people around them. He’s glad when he sees that the two women seem to have let them walk away without following and thinks they’ve seen the last of them until they are just about to leave, hailing a cab at the end of the street.

“Liam?” Comes a female voice behind them and he stops and tenses. Harry turns as well to look over his shoulder curiously, some trepidation on his face.

When he turns he finds the two women standing a few feet away, both of them clearly trying to be as polite as possible.

“We’re really sorry, but we are big fans and we don’t want to bother you. We didn’t say anything earlier and figured we’d just leave it, but now we are seeing you again and we hope it’s not too much of an imposition, but could we just get a quick picture with you?” One asks. She’s small, short and blond with pale blue eyes that match her tank top. Her friend is several inches taller with long brunette hair, dark eyes and a huge green purse.

He sighs quietly, getting ready to rebuff them when he realizes that they were only speaking to him. It’s clear they recognize Harry, but they are very carefully not involving him, not talking to him or even attempting to ask him for anything. He relaxes a little. He could hardly be pissy when a fan asked him for something considering he was still in the business. But he does appreciate that they had let them walk away earlier and were respecting Harry’s request to be left alone.

“Do you want me to take the picture?” Harry asks behind him, already reading Liam’s reaction and
body language. The blond girl grins broadly.

“If you don’t mind,” she replies, quickly fishing her phone out of her pocket, another thing for Liam to appreciate. They hadn’t had their phones out, hadn’t assumed they would be given the picture and were making the effort to show they weren’t sneakily taking pictures either.

“Sure,” he finally answers, realizing he still hadn’t actually relented. He puts Harry’s carrier bags down in the back of the cab before heading towards the women, holding out a hand. “What’s your name?” He asks the blond one.

“Sarah,” she replies with a big grin and a giggle. She shakes his hand quickly, his large one engulfing her tiny one.

“And I’m Lisa,” the other girl supplies, shaking Liam’s hand congenially as well.

“Alright then,” Liam says, moving to stand between them while Sarah hands her phone over to Harry, looking terribly nervous as she does so.

“Everyone ready?” Harry asks, holding the phone up and moving a few inches closer. His brow furrows as he concentrates on getting the shot perfect.

“Yup,” they all answer in unison and the flash goes off on the back of Sarah’s pink phone. It goes off two more times before Harry decides he’s satisfied with what he got. He smiles gently at Sarah as he hands her phone back.

“Thanks Harry,” she says loudly before stopping herself, smiling at him sheepishly.

“You’re welcome,” Harry drawls and she melts a little.

“Ok, well thank you. We will let you two carry on with your evening,” Lisa says, letting Liam return to Harry easily and he nods at her.

“No problem, and thank you,” Liam says gently, knowing they will understand where his gratitude is coming from.

They both nod and giggle before turning and heading towards the bus stop to get on to a double decker bus that is clearly heading to the Flamingo.

Harry slides into the back of the cab and Liam quickly follows. While Sarah and Lisa had been lovely, respectful and kind, it was safe to say others would have seen the pictures being taken and they didn’t want to deal with any kind of mob scene.

The ride back to the hotel is quiet. Harry’s hand is warm and soft in Liam’s, his green eyes still out the window watching the lights with a gentle smile on his face. His hair is starting to come loose from the bun, soft tendrils framing his face and ruffling in the breeze from the window. Liam slides his phone out and takes another sneaky picture, but he gets caught this time. Harry turns to look at him with surprise, brows furrowing.

“The hell are you doing?” He asks with a laugh.

“Just taking another picture. You looked so happy then. I just wanted to capture it,” Liam answers.
honestly and Harry’s face relaxes.

“You’re a sap Liam,” he replies dryly.

“Youp, but I’m your sap,” Liam answers, sliding an arm around his shoulders and pulling him close.

“True, and thank goodness for that,” Harry sighs, leaning into him.

They move slower tonight. They kiss languidly in the elevator and then in the room, Harry’s back against the wall for a long time. The room is warm and it’s not long before the back of Liam’s shirt is damp with sweat pooling at the base of his spine. He’s glad when Harry starts pushing his vest up, pulling it over his head and tossing it aside. In the moment he’s pulled back he looks at Harry and drinks his face in. His eyes are dark, pupils blown, cheeks flushed and his lips are red and swollen. He’s also sweating. A fine sheen crosses his forehead and Liam can only assume he’s hot as well, seeing as he’s wearing a t-shirt with a thin hoodie on top.

He reaches forward and takes ahold of the zipper on the hoodie. His eyes glance up to Harry’s face to get approval before he starts pulling it down. He then helps slide it off his shoulders, letting it land on the floor in a heap. Liam knows he can just leave it like this, leave the t-shirt on, but that desire to feel Harry’s bare skin against his makes it presence known and his hands land on Harry’s waist, fingers just under the hem of the cotton shirt and he glances at Harry’s face again. He sees a lot more trepidation there, but he nods just slightly.

Liam can’t help but let his hands graze across his skin as he slides it up, feeling the bone and sinew there. His thumb brushes across Harry’s nipple just because, making his breath hitch slightly. Harry dutifully lifts his arms and lets Liam pull the shirt free, adding it to the hoodie on the floor.

His fingers tingle with the heat from Harry’s body as he traces them down his chest to his stomach. Harry’s heart flutters beneath them, breaths short and catching with each press of Liam’s hands. He can’t help but marvel at the chance to do this, to touch him. He leans in to press kisses along Harry’s sternum. He follows his fingers across his chest and his tongue traces around each nipple. Harry sighs softly at the sensations and his tension releases slowly as Liam continues to work his way down, trying to cover as much skin as possible. His hands unbuckle Harry’s belt and undo his pants before he even thinks about it, but Harry doesn’t react in a negative way. Instead he just runs his fingers through Liam’s hair, eyes watching him in a relaxed, curious manner.

He pulls Harry’s jeans down, lifting each leg to divest him of his flip flops and then the pants, before he carries on kissing and worshipping his body. His hands push Harry’s boxer briefs up his legs to expose more thigh for him to press his lips to. His tongue swipes at his inner thigh, making Harry’s hips buck forward. His cock hard and pressed to his abdomen.

When Liam leans in and mouths at Harry’s balls, he pants loudly above him, a long low moan coming from his throat. It only gets louder when Liam’s mouth works it’s way down his hardened length, hands now sliding right up the back of Harry’s underwear placing his palms against the skin of his ass.

There is a voice in Liam’s head that is telling him not to push too far and not to take it too far. As much as he wants to yank Harry’s pants down and press his fingers against his hole, he has to remember to take it slow and careful. He settles for pulling one hand free and using it to pull Harry’s pants down far enough to release his cock before wrapping his lips around the tip and sucking, making Harry moan loudly above him. His voice quivers with the sensations.
“Fuuuuuuucckkk,” he groans out. His hips snap forward and Liam lets them.

Hands back on Harry’s ass inside his pants, he feels the muscle moving as Harry’s hips thrust and fuck Liam’s mouth carefully. It’s not easy and Harry’s cock threatens to get to the back of his throat several times. But it is infinitely worth it though to hear the sounds he’s making and to feel his muscles moving under his hands. He uses his tongue as much as he can, pressing and licking, but as Harry gets closer to coming his movements become more erratic. His hips snap more and Liam has to squeeze his ass in warning a few times.

Harry mixes panting breathes in with curses and his hands land in Liam’s hair. His legs spread slightly when Liam’s finger accidentally slides a little closer to his hole. He’s not sure if it’s consent to touch there or not and he doesn’t get the time to really explore it before Harry’s crying out above him.

“I’m coming! I’m coming! I’m coming!” He chants, hips still snapping. Liam quickly pulls his hands free to grab them. He holds him steady while he quickly starts sucking with his mouth, tasting Harry’s release as it starts to coat his tongue. His cock twitches rapidly, in time with his panting breaths.

He swallows as best he can, wiping his mouth with his vest that he grabs from the floor when Harry’s cock slides free. Harry slides down the wall and lands with his knees on either side of Liam’s folded legs. His hand pushes the vest away to capture Liam’s mouth with his own, kissing him furiously and Liam returns it despite his aching jaw and sore lips.

“What do you want me to do to you?” Harry asks him when he finally pulls away. His eyes are intense and his breath is warm on Liam’s face. “Do you want me to suck you?”

If Liam were to be honest and to speak the truth, he would answer that he wants to lay Harry on the bed, crawl between his legs and fuck him hard and dirty. To feel him tight and hot around his cock. Ever since they had started mimicking the act by rutting against each other, he had been thinking about how it would feel. What it would be like to truly fuck Harry and to reach that level of intimacy.

But he doesn’t say the truth because he knows that Harry isn’t ready yet and has already said he’s not. Liam isn’t about to make him uncomfortable or make him feel like he has to do something he’s not ready for.

So instead he nods and agrees to be sucked off because that was definitely good as well.

As soon as he’s got assent Harry stands up, yanking Liam up with him. He pushes him towards the bed, undoing his pants as they go. He pushes his shorts down, underwear following immediately, before he pushes Liam himself down to sitting on the bed. He completely gets the articles of clothing off and throws them haphazardly before kneeling between Liam’s knees. He pulls them to get him right to the edge of the bed and then leans in to kiss his way up Liam’s cock. Making it twitch with each one. When he reaches the tip he takes it into his mouth and slides down as far as he can. His lips meet his hand as it wraps around the base and he sucks hard as he pulls off. This makes Liam’s hips come off the bed slightly, a loud groan coming from his mouth.

Harry’s mouth is so hot and so wet. His tongue is rough yet smooth all at once as it slides across the delicate skin. He slides back down and sucks his way back up again. He speeds up incrementally until Liam is just a panting, moaning mess. Every nerve ending is on fire and his body spasms with the desperate need for release, but he holds off as long as he can. He doesn't ever
want this to end.

When he does come, it’s with a shout. Then it’s a series of curses and stuttering breaths. His cock jerks in Harry’s mouth, balls tight and every muscle coiled. He rides it, absorbs it, commits it to memory. When it’s over his entire body feels like jelly. When his arms are no longer able to support him, he flops back onto the bed. He hears Harry cough and the sound of him grabbing a tissue before he’s crawling up the bed beside Liam, flopping down on his chest.

“You ok?” He asks with a smirk. Liam nods, making him laugh.

“Tired, but oh so good,” Liam finally replies and Harry laughs harder. “Let’s go to bed.”

“Ok Liam, let’s go to bed,” Harry snorts. Liam nods, shutting his eyes with every intention of just passing out as he was.

This was of course not acceptable to Harry who insists they get up, when Liam’s legs are stable enough to support him of course. Then they go clean up and brush their teeth.

He’s happy when Harry chooses to stay in his underwear, but he slides his own back on as well because he’s worried that staying naked could make Harry uncomfortable in a non-sexual situation. They crawl under the covers and flop down. Both of them are snoring within minutes.
Chapter 31

The stylist arrives just after noon wanting to make sure Liam’s electric blue suit fits perfectly one more time. Then he’s being shoved about with hands in his hair and on his face, styling, smoothing and perfecting. Harry watches it all from his perch on the couch across the room with a smirk on his lips.

Liam was expected to arrive at the red carpet at just after 4:00 to walk with Zayn. The upshot is that they brought the award show back to the MGM Grand where he and Harry are staying. This means it’s only a short trip downstairs, but it is still a bit of a process.

Harry wasn’t walking the red carpet. They had worked out a route for him to take where he could wait just outside the doors inside the theatre for Liam. It was out of view of the press, but he could still watch everything happening and could see Liam and vice versa. He throws on some black jeans and a black t-shirt, then adds Liam’s soft grey Adidas hoodie on top with his hair in a knot on his head. While Liam is dressed to the nines for the show, Harry looks like he’s just going out to the movies with friends. He’s comfortable and casual and Liam is just a little bit jealous.

Especially when his new shiny black shoes start pinching his toes.

He’s not entirely sure why he’s being dressed in a dapper suit like he’s a groomsman in a wedding, but apparently it was partly Zayn’s idea to go along with the album and Liam didn’t get a say.

They eat a quick dinner ordered from the room service menu and then ride the staff elevator down. Liam’s handlers quickly escort him to the start of the red carpet while a kind hotel staffer leads Harry to his waiting location down some back hallways.

As always, it makes Liam nervous to have Harry out of his sights, but he knows it’s only for a short period of time and he’s got his phone securely in his pocket in case Harry needs him.

Zayn is already there waiting, dressed in all black as per. Though his suit is cut a little closer to the body with strange chrome panels on his arms and shins.

“Those for you to check yourself out throughout the show?” Liam asks while he pretends to use one as a mirror, ducking Zayn’s swatting hand.

“It’s fashion Payne. You wouldn’t understand which is why I had to make sure you were in top form tonight,” Zayn retorts, adjusting his cuffs with a pretentious air and Liam snorts.

“By dressing me as a groomsman? I’m just missing a rose in my lapel,” he replies before ducking another swat.

“Where’s Harry at?” Zayn asks, deciding to drop the discussion.

“By the doors. Press can’t see him there, but he can watch us.”

“Good. I think this will be good for him,” Zayn answers. He doesn’t really explain why he feels that, which was typical Zayn.

They start working their way up the carpet as soon as their handlers beckon, stopping at intervals for pictures and stepping forward to talk to only selected members of the media.
They meet up with Louis and Niall about halfway down. Each of them are there to present as well, since they both also had albums underway. Inevitably, Liam gets asked why he’s not producing their albums and he answers honestly that he and Zayn are the closest when it comes to sound and taste so it was a partnership that made sense.

No one brings up Harry until he gets to Ryan Seacrest. He corners Liam as soon as he comes up and completely ignores Zayn.

“Liam! Great to see you. Long time no see,” he starts, voice booming and cheerful as always. Liam stares at him for a second.

“We just spoke on the phone last week,” he deadpans before remembering himself and smirking as though he’s just playing with the guy.

“Yes, yes we did. But it’s been at least two years since we last saw each other. Well, two years ago at the Billboards actually. You were performing that year. Any chance you’ve got some of your own music in the works?”

Liam’s hackles rise slightly. He senses a direction to this conversation, but for Zayn’s sake he keeps polite for the time being.

“No no, just keeping on working with the producing. I really enjoy it actually and it’s great to be able to help out other artists in making their albums. I’m pretty proud of the work we did on Zayn’s album,” he answers diplomatically. He sees the conspiratorial glint in Ryan’s eye immediately.

“Any chance you are producing another album? You know, the album of the guy you live with because it’s been a while and we know what kind of killer song he can write,” Ryan asks. Liam feels Zayn tense beside him and the smile on his face turns into more of a grimace.

“Nope and he told you he wouldn’t be. Time to drop it Ryan,” Liam snaps back. He holds out a hand and shakes the interviewer’s. He squeezes it a little tightly, but still does his best to keep things civil. “It was good to see you Ryan. Have fun tonight.”

With that he and Zayn walk away, heading towards a couple of TV hosts from Canada. He takes a few deep breathes as he walks, trying to calm his anger. He glances up towards the doors, realizing they are almost there, and he can see Harry standing in the shade of the tent they have put up. He’s watching Liam with concerned eyes, having seen the interaction that just took place. Liam forces himself to relax and smile at him to show him that everything was fine. Right next to Harry, just around the corner from the tent, there stands a small fenced in platform full of fans. A few security guards are close by to keep control. Liam watches as Harry seems to take notice of them and peeks around the edge of the red canvas.

Liam is then pulled into a conversation with the Canadians and is glad when they keep the topic completely about Zayn’s album and the process of making it. They are very polite and complementary of both of them and it helps to release his tension again.

As they are being led to the next press stand, he glances over to Harry again to make sure he’s ok. He finds him now standing next to the platform full of fans, chatting with a few of them who are in the corner. The security guards have circled and all of them are watching critically, but weirdly it’s all very calm. Only about five of the fans are even paying attention to Harry, while the group next to them is screaming at Rihanna. They seem to just be talking like old friends. As he’s watching, he
sees Harry throw his head back and laugh at something one of them says and he shakes his head in disbelief.

He still keeps a closer eye though because while Harry may appear to be happy and relaxed, that could change in an instant and Liam wants to be ready just in case.

When he and Zayn finally reach him, he gets introduced to the five fans as a group of friends from Seattle who had driven down on a whim to see the show. Turns out they came to see Zayn as they were big fans and they had been reminiscing with Harry about the time they had come to see One Direction on their last tour.

“He hit me in the face with an almost full bottle of water,” a pretty redhead named Emily says about Harry with a laugh. “I demanded an apology and we got to talking.”

It is decided that they all need to get a selfie with Zayn and then he signs autographs for them all. Emily asks Liam politely for a picture too and when that’s done their handlers swoop in to start leading them inside as the show was about to start.

They give the fans a warm farewell, Liam thanking them genuinely as well, and head into the heavily air conditioned arena. They make their way down the hallway reserved for talent to be led out to their seats. Liam had given them the heads up about Harry coming so he was situated right next to him with Zayn on his other side.

They are just about to sit down as the lights start to dim, when a familiar booming voice comes up beside them.

“Harry!” Ed Sheeran calls out, hurrying towards them in his plaid jacket and jeans. This makes Liam jealous once again since he was also wearing comfortable trainers while Liam is fairly certain his toes are now bleeding.

“Ed!” Harry replies, backing out of the row of seats again to embrace his long time friend.

“God it’s good to see you mate,” Ed says as he steps back, hands still on Harry’s shoulders.

“You too. Congrats, I hear you got married and have a baby on the way,” Harry replies.

“Yeah yeah mate. You gotta come over for tea sometime and meet the family.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Harry agrees, glancing at Liam quickly.

“Awesome. Well enjoy the show,” Ed says happily, glad it’s settled. “Loving the new single mate,” he adds towards Zayn before giving them a funny little wave and heading back to his own seat.

The lights go out suddenly and they scramble to get into their seats. Ed ends up just being the first of many to pop over to see Harry during commercial breaks or particularly long winded speeches. When Liam and Zayn get up to go backstage to get ready to present, almost immediately their seats are filled by Harry’s friends from Kings of Leon. The three of them giggle and chat happily. Liam then realizes how good it is to see him back amongst friends. Though he still thoroughly enjoyed having Harry to himself a lot of the time, he knew it was good for him to start interacting more with other people and old friends. To reconnect himself with his own life.
The show is fun. There are some great performances and a lot of bad jokes, but it’s long and tiring. Liam finds himself starting to dread the after party, but he knew Harry wanted to go and probably would want to even more so now.

Or so he thought.

“Do we have to go to the after party?” He whispers in Liam’s ear just as the nominees for the last award are being read out by Taylor Swift on stage. She had spotted Harry, but had chosen not to come over. Probably due to how coldly Liam treated her the last time he saw her.

“I thought you wanted to go?” Liam whispers back, looking over at Harry.

“I did. To see friends and hang out and stuff. But I dunno, I’m just a little tired and overwhelmed,” he admits, looking a bit sheepish. Liam sighs and is annoyed with himself that he let this happen.

“We shouldn’t have come at all babe, I’m sorry,” he replies, sliding an arm around Harry’s shoulders. Harry immediately shakes his head, but leans into Liam.

“No, this isn’t your fault. I’m glad we came, I am. I just don’t think I’m ready for a crazy after party, that’s all. I’m still happy we are here,” he assures him, head plopping down on Liam’s shoulder.

He has no doubt there are a lot of eyes watching them, but it’s no secret they are together so he doesn’t worry about it.

As soon as Lorde has finished her acceptance speech, Liam all but leaps out of his seat. He pulls Harry up with him, intending to get them out quickly to avoid any crowds. Zayn looks at him questioningly. His brows pull together as Liam starts to head in the opposite direction of where they were supposed to be going.

“Aren’t you coming to the after party?”

“No. Harry’s not feeling it and to be honest I’m bloody tired too. We’re gonna head upstairs and chill for the night. We’re flying out tomorrow morning,” Liam explains. Zayn’s face becomes a little worried and he turns his attention towards Harry.

“You ok?” He asks him. Harry nods and shrugs at the same time.

“Yeah I’m fine. Just tired as well. Tonight was fun and I’m glad I came, but I just think I’m done,” he answers honestly. Zayn relaxes and nods, happy there was no imminent collapse coming.

“Ok, good. Well have a good night and flight tomorrow. I’m heading out to LA, but I’ll call you,” he says, stepping forward to hug them both.

He then heads off with his handler towards the club where the party is taking place. Liam and Harry turn and head the opposite way.

It’s a bit of a process getting out. More people stop them to give Harry hugs and tell him over and over how much they missed him. Liam can see that it’s starting to wear on him and finally just wraps an arm around Harry’s shoulders and leads him towards a back exit, not letting anyone else stop them. They go through a maze of hallways and doors, finally ending up in a kitchen area where they get directions to the staff elevator.
Once inside, they both breathe out in whoosh the second the doors close, grateful for the silence.

“Well that was an adventure,” Harry deadpans. He snorts a laugh a minute later.

“Indeed,” Liam replies in the same tone. “I really need to take these shoes off.”

Harry glances down at his feet and considers them.

“They aren’t comfortable?” He asks and Liam vigorously shakes his head.

“No, no, not even a little bit. I fucking hate them. I want to set them on fire,” he replies. Harry looks at him in shock and laughs.

“That’s a bit extreme don’t you think?”

“No,” Liam replies shortly and Harry laughs harder.

“Ok, we will have a ceremonial bonfire with them when we get home. For tonight, how about a soak in the tub for them?” He offers. Liam nods and thinks that sounds like heaven. As a bonus, they had a huge jetted tub in their suite with a large picture window over looking the strip.

It only occurs to Liam twenty minutes later when they are back in their room, after his shoes are forcefully discarded in the corner and water is filling the tub, that he isn’t sure whether they are having this bath together or not. If they are, there is the generally agreed upon requirement for full nudity to be involved.

He watches Harry carefully as he moves about the room. He discards his own shoes and socks and the hoodie. He lays it neatly on top of his bag before he heads back into the bathroom to check the water.

“They’ve got bubble bath in here. Should I add some?” He hollers out. Liam nods first before realizing Harry can’t hear that.

“Yeah, sure. Sounds good.”

“Ok. It smells nice. Kinda vanilla like,” Harry replies and Liam hears it being poured into the water. The scent trails out of the open door a minute later.

He stands and discards his jacket and tie, then unbuttons his shirt and slides it off his shoulders. He lays each piece across the back of a chair meticulously. There is no question that he really really hopes Harry will be joining him in this bath, but he still has no real confirmation of it. So he continues to undress methodically as he listens to the water shut off. Harry comes out of the bathroom still in his jeans and t-shirt while Liam is down to just his underwear.

Harry glances at him and nods, heading over to the nightstand.

“Go get in, it’s just right. I’ll be in in a minute. Just want to plug my phone in.”

True to his word, he pulls his phone out and starts digging for his cord in his bag. Liam studies him and notes the slight tension in his shoulders indicating that he was nervous. So clearly he did intend to join Liam, but was still struggling with his fears.
Not wanting to stare and make things worse, Liam heads into the bathroom. He looks at the gorgeous tub and the twinkling city beyond it and gets an idea. Flicking the light switch he drops the room into darkness. The only source of light are the ones outside and it provides a nice, calming ambiance in the room.

He shucks his underwear and steps into the water. Harry is still rifling around noisily out in the bedroom as he sinks down, sighing happily as the heat envelopes his body. He sits trailing his fingers through the water while he waits and a few minutes later Harry rounds the corner and stops dead, looking surprised at the darkness before smirking at Liam.

“Are you trying to be romantic Liam?” He asks with a laugh and Liam nods dramatically.

“How cute of you. Of course. Only the best for you. Also, the city looks super cool this way,” he replies, indicating out the window. Harry wanders up to the side of the tub, eyes absorbing the incredible view and he smiles softly.

“It’s beautiful,” he says with a sigh before glancing back down at Liam. He still looks a little bit nervous so Liam dutifully turns his attention towards the window, making it clear he won’t watch Harry get undressed if that’s what he wants.

He hears shuffling behind him including the sound of Harry’s jeans hitting the floor and he forces himself to keep his eyes trained out the window. Then Harry’s foot is sliding into the water and Liam spreads his legs to make room for him. He only glances once at Harry’s naked ass as he sits down between Liam’s thighs, settling back against his chest. Liam pulls him close, circling his waist with his arms and pressing a kiss to his shoulder. He then feels Harry fully relax.

“Thank you,” Harry whispers quietly. Liam nods, knowing what he was referring to.

They sit quietly for a long time watching the city move below them, lights twinkling, people on the sidewalks and cars on the road. Harry trails his fingers across Liam’s arms, drawing light patterns with the water and Liam takes every opportunity to press kisses to the areas he can reach. His shoulder, his neck, his temple and eventually pulling his hand up to kiss each of his fingertips. Harry’s green eyes are blown watching his every move. As soon as Liam is done with his hand Harry turns in the tub and kisses Liam deeply, tongue sweeping into his mouth as his arms go around Liam’s neck.

Liam takes the opportunity to touch. His hands trail down Harry’s back and then up again, body coming to life and heat filling his veins. Harry turns further, maneuvering so he’s on his knees and straddling Liam’s lap. There are no pants between them, no underwear or fabric of any kind. It feels incredible to have Harry’s skin against his cock, sliding against Harry’s, hips pushing together.

His hands travel back down Harry’s back, cupping his ass and pulling him closer. His cock slips down between Harry’s legs and Harry jumps slightly from the feeling, making Liam stop moving. He immediately tries to give Harry some space, but Harry pushes back. He pulls away from the kiss, but intentionally settles in Liam’s lap to keep his dick nestled in his crotch.

Harry looks at him and studies his face carefully for a long minute. Liam waits, unsure what to do or say.

“I know you want to fuck me,” Harry finally says matter-of-factly. It’s not an accusation and he doesn’t sound upset. He just acknowledges it and makes it known that he’s aware.
“Haz, it’s fine. I know you aren’t ready and I respect that,” Liam replies, keeping eye contact to make sure Harry knows he’s not applying any pressure on him.

Harry nods at him and considers it for a minute longer before his eyes narrow slightly in thought.

“You know, we could always reverse things,” he says carefully, watching Liam’s reaction. “I could try fucking you.”

Liam’s brain grinds to a halt for a second. That had never even occurred to him in all this time. He had been so focused, so into the idea of fucking Harry and of being the one on top that he had never even considered the idea of a role reversal.

The real question is, would that be something he would be into? He considers it and a little pang of worry goes through him about possible pain, especially considering Harry’s size. Yet, there is also some curiosity there. And it seemed only fair that he be willing to take it if he wants to give it to Harry. It was all about balance, really.

“Yeah, we could try that,” he finally answers. Harry looks surprised at his acquiescence, then suspicious because despite Liam’s resolve, his lack of a decent poker face was clearly giving away how nervous he was about the idea.

“Yeah, you look like you want to,” Harry says with some sarcasm. He has one eyebrow up, though it’s not mean in any way. “It’s ok Liam. We don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“NO, no!” Liam says loudly, more loudly than he intended. “It’s not that. I want to try it, I do, but you are…” He stops and heat fills his cheeks. He knows it’s ludicrous considering their current position.

“I am what Liam?” Harry asks, looking adorably confused. His hair is damp and curling at his shoulders.

“You are…” he starts, waving a hand in the air. “You are a little bigger than average… a lot bigger than average… and you know… there’s the whole pain thing…”

Harry’s face blanks for a second and then he barks a laugh.

“Seriously? You are worried about my dick size?” He asks in a sharp voice, eyes widening in emphasis. “You do realize you suffer from the same affliction. I can attest to that considering I’m sitting on it right now.”

Liam nods, feeling like a daft idiot. Harry cups his face in his hands gently, leaning forward to press a soft kiss to his lips.

“Relax Liam. All it takes is preparation. But again, if you really don’t want to, we won’t. You’ve never forced me to do something I wasn’t comfortable with and I’m not about to do the same to you,” he says meaningfully, holding Liam’s gaze to make sure his words hit home.

“I trust you,” Liam replies. “And I’m sure, though I would think that maybe the bathtub isn’t the best location.”

Harry smirks at him, looking around at the tub and then back to Liam.
“No, it’s probably not, but we don’t have to get out of the water just yet. It’s kinda nice.”

Liam nods in agreement because the heat from Harry and from the water were soothing his tired muscles just nicely. He also knew being relaxed would probably help quite a bit when they got down to business.

They take their time kissing languidly, touching, caressing and just holding onto each other. The water cools slowly and their skin starts to prune. It’s about then they decide to get out and the tiniest little prick of nerves goes through Liam’s chest. He knew that if he wanted to stop and change his mind at any minute he could and Harry wouldn’t even question it, but he found himself still curious and determined. He had to at least try.

After they dry off, Harry leads him out to the bedroom by his hand. The lights are all left off and Liam can tell by his shoulders that Harry is trying really hard to be brave about the nudity, but he’s still clearly feeling self-conscious. When they reach the side of the bed he can’t help but gently turn Harry to face him and pull him in. He holds him flush against his body, lining them up perfectly. Harry sighs softly, leaning his forehead against Liam’s.

“So how do you want to do this?” Harry asks him quietly. Liam startles a bit because he honestly has no idea. He considers the options and immediately rejects several due to his own personal discomfort. He finally settles on keeping things as simple as possible.

“I guess old fashioned with you on top. I want to be able to see you,” he replies quietly. Harry nods, his face understanding.

“Ok, um, I guess lie down then, I’ll grab stuff we need,” Harry replies, voice sounding just as nervous as Liam’s. He has to fight a laugh because standing here discussing the mechanics wasn’t exactly sexy, but sex sometimes was like that and it was best that everyone was on the same page, which required conversation first. Liam does as instructed, settling on the bed on his back with his head on the pillows. He spreads his legs, but then quickly closes them before Harry sees him because he knows it’s not the most becoming view and heat fills his cheeks again.

Harry disappears into the bathroom again, returning a few minutes later with a towel, lube and a condom. Liam can’t help but wonder if he pre-planned this, but then he realizes they are his things long forgotten in his toiletries bag. He hopes they are still usable.

“Did you check the best by date on that lube? I’ve had that for a long time,” he asks. Harry stops at the side of the bed, squinting while trying to examine the bottle in the minimal light coming in from the window. Liam takes the opportunity to quickly run his eyes over Harry’s nude form. His cock is still mostly erect, stomach flat and hard, hip bones sharp because he’s still so thin. But he’s so lovely, wiry and delicate, yet strong at the same time.

“It’s still got a year I think,” he replies, handing it over to Liam so he can check himself. He does find that indeed, Harry is right.

“Oh, good,” Liam says, more to himself than to Harry. It earns him a smirk.

Harry looks him over on the bed, being far more open about it than Liam and he reaches forward to swat at Liam’s knees.

“I’m gonna need to sit there so move your legs,” he instructs, already lifting one of his own to
kneel between Liam’s knees.

Liam dutifully spreads his legs. He opens them wider as Harry starts to push them further apart, until he feels embarrassingly exposed, but he swallows the feeling. There is a bit more shifting as Harry makes Liam lift his hips to slide the towel underneath.

“We don’t want to make a mess of the hotel’s duvet with the lube,” he says idly and Liam can’t help but laugh once, remembering how particular Harry could be about cleanliness.

Harry drops the condom on the bed near Liam’s hip and opens the lube, squirting a generous amount onto his fingers. Liam stops laughing and his eyes widen of their own accord as he watches with rapt interest and nerves.

Harry glances up at him and cocks his head to the side. His hair falls off his shoulders and smiles gently.

“Just relax Liam. Remember to relax,” he instructs gently. He lowers his slick fingers down while lifting one of Liam’s knees at the same time to open him up even further.

The first finger circles his hole at the same time Harry dips his head down to press a line of kisses across Liam’s stomach. It’s a strange combination of sensations and Liam jolts a little, trying to fight through his body’s natural instinct to clench. The finger makes a few circles testing the waters and Liam focuses on breathing and relaxing his muscles.

Harry’s tongue slides up the underside of Liam’s cock as the finger starts to press inside. It’s only a few millimeters, but enough that Liam loses control again and tenses right back up. His mind is trying to focus on the two sensations at once, but is failing to grasp either.

“Do you want me to stop?” Harry asks carefully. Liam shakes his head and takes a deep breath. He closes his eyes and makes another attempt at relaxing.

Harry waits, likely watching him, but when Liam makes no move to stop him or leave the bedroom he decides to carry on. He returns his tongue to Liam’s cock, focusing there for a little longer. It’s enough that Liam finds himself so distracted that he doesn’t even feel the finger moving initially. Each time he feels himself starting to tense again, he forces his focus onto the feel of Harry’s rough tongue. It brings him back to full hardness again in no time and he’s surprised when he realizes that Harry has an entire finger inside of him.

The feeling in his ass isn’t wholly unpleasant, just strange, new and foreign. But he thinks he could get used to it, really start to enjoy it even. He had expected it to hurt so much more and frankly, this wasn’t that bad.

Then Harry adds a second finger and all of Liam’s previous fears about size versus stretch come right back to the front of his mind and he tenses again.
He feels Harry’s eyes on his face when he does it, but he keeps his eyes screwed shut. He once again goes through all of the reasons why he was doing this and that he did indeed want to. He just needed to bloody well relax.

He wonders if a shot of whiskey or something would help calm him down.

Then he has a horrifying thought: what if he farts?

The idea of that makes him laugh so suddenly that Harry jumps, mouth releasing Liam’s cock as his head snaps up to stare at him.

“The hell are you laughing at?” He asks incredulously, fingers only halfway in coming to a stop.

Liam laughs harder. The embarrassment of the idea of it happening makes it that much funnier and he covers his face with his hands.

“Liam! What in hell?” Harry asks again, voice more sharp.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Liam replies, trying to get control of himself. It was such a ridiculous thought to have at such a moment.

Things were definitely not getting sexier.

“I’m so sorry,” Liam repeats, pulling his hands away from his face and taking deep breaths. Short chortles still escape from his mouth as he tries to stop laughing. “I just had a really stupid thought and it made me laugh, clearly. I’m sorry. It was ridiculous. I’m fine, honestly.”

He hears Harry huff a laugh, still not daring to look at him.

“What in hell were you thinking about?” He asks and Liam most definitely does not want to answer that question.

“Nothing, honestly. It was something really stupid so don’t worry about it. Just carry on, please,” Liam replies, still sounding the tiniest bit hysterical.

“Liam come on, be honest with me. This isn’t going to work if you aren’t ok with this,” Harry says carefully, voice now very serious.

“Honest to God Harry it’s nothing.”

“Liam.”

“Fuck! Fine,” he finally relents, knowing Harry wasn’t going to drop it. Talking about it now with two of Harry’s fingers still halfway in his ass only made the entire thing that much more surreal. “I was worried about what would happen if I farted.”

The room stills. Harry is dead silent between his legs for about a full minute before he starts to laugh. A loud snort preceding it.

“Oh my God Liam!” He shouts.

“SEE! I told you it was ridiculous and nothing to worry about! It’s why I was laughing!” Liam
retorts, cheeks on fire.

“It’s fine Liam. It’s a natural thought really and I’m sure it’s no big deal if it happens. Sex does tend to come with all kinds of fun sound effects and stuff,” Harry says gently. His voice wobbles slightly as he tries to calm his own laughter. “I’ll uh… I’ll just make sure I’m not downwind.”

“Just leave it, please. It was a stupid thought. Jesus this has to be the least sexy sex ever,” he moans out, frustrated that he was the source of all of the issues right now. Harry wouldn’t cause this much trouble if the roles were reversed.

The fingers leave his body and he feels the bed shifting on either side of him as Harry crawls up to hover over him, staring straight down at him.

“Stop. Relax please. This is perfectly normal, ok? If you can’t laugh while having sex, then you aren’t having a good time,” he says firmly. He leans down to kiss Liam just as firmly and Liam relents and relaxes.

“Oh, you’re right and I’m good, honest,” he assures Harry. He tries once again to calm and control his own reactions and body. He nods when he thinks he’s got there and Harry nods back.

“Ok then,” Harry replies, crawling backwards again and getting back in position.

Liam feels the two fingers reappear and the hot wet mouth and tongue retake his cock. He closes his eyes and focuses on the good sensations and his breathing.

The two fingers go in slowly and Harry takes his time scissoring them apart and sliding them in and out until Liam is able to completely relax around them. Then he adds a third and a fourth consecutively, giving him time to adjust around each.

It remains a strange sensation. While Harry’s mouth was nothing short of magical on his cock, he finds he just rides the sensations and is too distracted by the newness of the feeling inside him to get close to coming.

After the four fingers have been going at it for a while, Harry’s other hand takes over for his mouth to give his jaw a break. He looks up at Liam as though asking for permission and Liam nods. A little pang of panic comes back again, but he squashes it.

Harry looks relieved and gently pulls his fingers out. He retrieves the condom and opens it, rolling it on. Liam notes that he’s very hard, much further along than Liam despite having not been touched. Clearly this was turning Harry on a lot and that makes a spike of arousal go down Liam’s spine.

Condom on, Harry coats himself with more lube and wipes his hand on the towel. He crawls up Liam’s body again to settle on top of him and kisses him deeply, tongue swiping inside his mouth.

He rocks his hips forward a few times, cock sliding against Liam’s hole as Liam pulls his knees up even further, wrapping his legs around Harry’s waist loosely.

When Harry starts to press in, the blunt head of his cock breaching the tight ring of muscle, Liam immediately tenses again. He is already able to tell that Harry was much bigger and broader than his four fingers had felt.
The tightness makes Harry moan into his mouth, but he stops moving and gives Liam time to adjust. For which Liam is appreciative.

He returns to focusing on relaxing again, his own cock forgotten between them and he finds himself missing Harry’s mouth on it as a distraction. Making a decision, he slides a hand between them and starts stroking himself, regaining his erection. He focuses on the sensation of his hand sliding along it and his fingers rubbing and teasing the bundle of nerves under the head. It’s enough to make him relax again, Harry’s cock sliding in further.

Harry moans louder, breaking the kiss and mouth opening wide as he’s enveloped in Liam’s tight heat. His hips snap forward just slightly before he catches himself.

“Shit, fuck Liam… oh my God you are so tight. It feels amazing,” he whispers.

He keeps it slow, getting fully sheathed inside Liam at a snails pace. He sets up a slow, steady rhythm at first, sliding out almost fully before thrusting back again.

He lifts himself up onto his hands, planted on the bed just above each of Liam’s shoulders and he braces himself on them as he starts to thrust a little more earnestly. His breathing is loud and his throat issues several moans, gasps, cries and grunts.

Liam keep stroking himself, but finds it much the same as when Harry was fingering him. It feels good, but he’s not edging closer to orgasm. He does thoroughly enjoy watching Harry’s reactions however. They are what give him the most pleasure and start to get him closer.

Harry’s hips snap a little harder the closer he gets to coming. Liam winces slightly a few times when he goes a little too hard, but he says nothing. He doesn’t want to make Harry feel bad for causing any pain when he knows it’s not intentional.

As Harry thrusts harder, riding into Liam more forcefully, he lets go of his cock in favor of holding onto Harry’s hips, feeling them moving. His own hips lift to match with the movements to make the slide smoother, easier and he finally starts to feel a deep pleasure. An erogenous part of his body coming to life.

Harry lets out a long moan, turning into a yell near the end and his body jolts, jumping and spasming suddenly as he starts to come.

His hips stop and Liam can feel his cock moving inside of him. It’s yet another new sensation and probably the strangest, but weirdly it’s the best one.

Harry rides it, intermittently thrusting as he pulls every last pulse out of his own body before he finally collapses on to Liam, panting hard against his neck.

“You ok?” Liam finally asks him. His hands gently soothe his back and pull his hair out of his face.

“Yeah…” Harry breathes out. “Yeah…That was amazing… Way better than I could have imagined.”

Liam smiles at that. He knows that was Harry’s first time being on top, penetrating another man, and Liam was the lucky one who got to have him. He is damn near smug about it.
Harry seems to realize himself after a minute and pushes back up on his hands to kiss Liam hard. He pulls his softening cock out at the same time before he crawls backwards again.

He quickly removes the condom before his mouth wraps around Liam’s cock, one hand holding it and jacking him while his mouth sucks. The other hand goes back between his legs. Two fingers go back in, pressing and sliding in and out and Liam feels that deep pleasure returning, mouth dropping open in a moan as the dual sensations on his cock and in his ass fight for his attention.

“Oh fuck…” he pants out, hips starting to move on their own accord.

His orgasm builds slow, but it is powerful when it arrives. His ass clamps down around Harry’s fingers and his body shudders. “Fuck! Harry, oh my God,” he gets out, voice getting almost whiny at the end.

As the spasms slow to a stop, Harry releases him and crawls back up flopping on the bed, but mostly on Liam.

“Wow,” Harry says quietly and Liam can only nod. “We should have done this a long time ago,” he jokes and Liam does a short noncommittal snort.

The air conditioning turns on nearby, blasting their naked bodies with cold air and Liam welcomes it. His body is covered in a fine sheen of sweat which isn’t made better by the Harry shaped blanket currently covering half of him.

The blanket starts to snore in his ear a few minutes later and Liam can’t help but laugh, turning to press a kiss to his forehead.

He’s tired himself, but he feels a little wired. The kind of sensation a person feels in their body when there has been some sort of seismic shift in their life. An altering event that can never be undone. He has no regrets, aside from the cooling lube on his ass that is starting to turn sticky, but he still feels changed. Like a different person somehow. It’s stronger than when he lost his virginity and he can only assume it’s because of the much deeper, stronger relationship he has with Harry versus the girl from school he sloppily fucked in his dad’s old car.

When the stickiness and cold air start to get too uncomfortable, he carefully extracts himself from the bed and Harry, bringing the towel with him. He slips into the bathroom, wets a washcloth and cleans himself up. He winces at the sting of slightly raw flesh, despite the amount of lube Harry used. He senses he’s going to be sore tomorrow, which is spectacular considering they have an 11 hour flight to sit on.

But it was worth it, so worth it and he can’t help the pulse of joy and adoration he feels in his chest as he goes back out to the bedroom and stands staring at Harry. He’s sprawled on the bed, but one hand is reaching, always reaching, for Liam. His face has a slight frown and goose flesh is visible on his arms. Liam steps forward to quickly clean him up with the damp washcloth before carefully sliding the blankets down to cover him and protect him from the cold breeze. He slides in next to him and immediately he’s there, sliding in close and an arm goes around Liam’s waist holding on tight. The tension in his body eases under Liam’s hands.

Pressing one final kiss to Harry’s forehead, Liam drifts off as well.
Chapter 32

Liam is not wrong about being sore. He does his best to hide it but Harry catches him wincing a few times as they get in the car to go to the airport and when he sits down in his seat on the plane. Each time he gets an apologetic look, but Liam waves him off. While it wasn’t exactly comfortable, it was kind of an amusing reminder and brought up memories each time of Harry’s blissed out face over his, his cock sliding in and out of him. Liam would then find himself uncomfortable for an entirely different reason.

He still wanted to fuck Harry, that wasn’t even a question, but he certainly wasn’t going to say no to bottoming again either.

The flight is long and boring, but it’s good to get home. Winston and Fitzy are there to greet them along with Gemma, who had kindly come to stay at the house and watch the furry children. They see her off and unpack, stopping each time they cross paths in the bedroom and house to kiss. They press in close to each other and their hands roam just a little more each time.

They’ve not even been home an hour when Liam’s phone rings. It’s The Weeknd’s manager calling to ask if he would be interested in producing his client’s next album. Liam agrees enthusiastically, thrilled to be given the chance to work with someone he admired so much.

Harry is excited for him as well and is working his way down to giving Liam a celebratory blow job on the living room couch when his phone rings again. This time it’s Shawn Mendes’ manager and he’s barely given his assent and hung up the phone when it rings again. This time it’s Halsey’s representative.

He’s overwhelmed to say the least and can’t help but notice that they all had their managers or someone from their team calling him, while he was there fielding it all himself.

Blow job forgotten for the time being, Harry pulls out his laptop and helps Liam construct a schedule so he can properly accommodate them all. Once he has dates, he emails each of them to check if the dates work and his phone rings again.

After four more phone calls Harry finally takes the phone and shuts the ringer off to let the calls go to voice mail.

“While I am over the moon for you to be getting all of this attention, and are so desired by all of these people in the studio, I’m thinking you might want to consider hiring someone to help handle all of this for you. Once you start working on an album with someone, you won’t be able to be fielding phone calls at the same time Liam,” he points out. Liam nods and knows already that he’s right.

“Do you want a job?” He asks Harry jokingly and Harry immediately shakes his head.

“Hell no, way too stressful. Are you still in touch with anyone from your former record company?”

“No and besides, they sued me. I’m not about to give them any business, but,” Liam thinks on it and a person jumps into his mind immediately. “Julian. I’ll call him and see if he knows of anyone.”
Julian laughs at first, but congratulates Liam on his success and makes a quick comment about how it was all his doing in the first place. He gives Liam the name of an assistant who had recently been looking for new work when his previous company went out of business.

Later, after a quick phone call to a young guy named Tommy, it’s all settled and he will start work the next day.

All of that taken care of, Harry and Liam resume making out on the couch. Harry’s hand goes back down Liam’s pants and less than five minutes later he’s on his knees on the floor with Liam’s thighs spread and his hard cock in his mouth.

It feels so scandalous after so many months of so many people living in the house with them to be out in the open in the living room having sex, but that just makes it so much better and Liam comes far faster than he would have liked.

He pulls Harry up from the floor with his hand on the back of his head and brings him in to kiss him in a filthy manner. He then carefully pulls his legs onto the couch with his knees landing on either side of Liam’s hips and his denim covered erection right in front of his face.

Liam presses hot kisses against it, enjoying the gasps and soft moans from above him before he teasingly takes his time undoing Harry’s pants. He slides them down to the tops of his thighs with his underwear following just as slowly.

Relaxing back against the couch, he lets Harry slide his cock into his mouth. Harry’s eyes watch with rapt interest the entire time, his own mouth opening wider as the sensation goes over him.

He keeps his hands gently wrapped around Harry’s hips as he starts to fuck his mouth. Just to be ready should Harry lose control or go a little too fast. One of Harry’s hands lands at the back of Liam’s head, fingers threading through his hair. They tighten now and again as Liam’s tongue swipes across the tip or his cheeks hollow just enough. His other hand holds the back of the couch, keeping him anchored and steady as he thrusts into Liam’s mouth.

Liam would love to be able to see them, to watch how this must look, and the thought makes his recently spent cock twitch with some interest. He knows from his angle Harry looks fucking amazing, stunning and so very, very hot. He watches as Harry’s chin tips up and his head goes back. A long moan comes from his bared white throat and Liam matches it. The vibrations make Harry keen and his hips stutter slightly before he picks up speed, getting closer.

“Fuck Liam, oh my God…” he breathes out, fingers in Liam’s hair tightening again.

Liam releases one hand from Harry’s hip and brings it down to gently cup his balls, rolling them and squeezing just a little. Harry lets out a staccato moan. Feeling weirdly confident and sure, Liam’s hand slides between his legs to touch and slide his fingers across the skin of Harry’s taint. He presses just a little and Harry’s voice goes up several octaves, while his hips pick up speed suddenly.

“Fuck yes Liam. Touch me… touch me there,” he moans out rapidly, cock noticeably hardening more in Liam’s mouth.

Liam’s fingers press again, sliding across the skin time and again, and within minutes Harry is emptying into his mouth. His body shudders and spasms and his voice is loud in the space. It’s a series of curses mixed with shouts and moans.
He folds over Liam when he’s finally done, panting and sliding sideways as his legs give out. Liam carefully holds his waist and helps to guide him to lie on his back on the couch, before sliding forward to lie mostly on top of him.

“Holy shit… that was amazing,” Harry gets out and Liam feels smug. For a guy who’d never given a blow job only a few months back, he liked to think he’d gotten pretty good at it.

“Is this our honeymoon period or something?” Harry asks a few minutes later, breathy laugh in his voice. “Like, we’ve been having sex pretty regularly for a while, but the moment we got to Vegas it kinda felt like it changed. To me at least.”

Liam considers how the moment they hit the ground in Vegas they hadn’t been able to keep their hands off of each other and how much more adventurous they had gotten, to the point of having proper penetrative sex finally. He realizes that Harry is right.

“Yeah, I guess it is. ’S kinda fun though, no?”

Harry laughs, hands pulling Liam’s face in for a kiss.

“Yes, yes it’s definitely fun. I’m not opposed. I just realized it now since we just fucked on your living room couch for crying out loud.”

Liam shrugs and looks around the room for a second.

“Bout time someone did,” he deadpans and Harry laughs harder.

“This is good though,” Harry says quietly when he stops laughing. His fingers trail down the side of Liam’s face. “It’s nice. Feels good to be like this.”

Liam nods unsure of what else to say, but a warmth settles in his stomach knowing that Harry was happy. There was something so gratifying about that and knowing that he was a part of it. He would never tire of it.

The following weeks fly by with meetings, work, more meetings and having Tommy pretty much camped out in the living room. It’s good, in that Liam is enjoying the work and he feels like he is actually accomplishing something and the accolades continue to pour in. But it is also annoying because he had finally gotten the house back to himself and Harry after all of their family members had finally moved out, and now it was full again all the time.

As much as they had enjoyed that fuck on the living room couch, it became impossible to explore that anywhere but their bedroom with the front door swinging like a revolving door.

Liam feels bad that he is basically abandoning Harry during the day. Though Harry never complains and just goes back to baking all the time. He brings plenty of delicious treats into the studio for Liam and whomever is there that day to enjoy.

But Liam tries to make up for it at night by worshipping Harry’s body with his mouth, since Harry had finally started to become more comfortable in his own skin again since Vegas. They don’t try anal again, not at first, but neither one complains when they both had mouths ready to do the work.

Three months after the Billboard awards, Liam finally gets a break. A full three days off with no
meetings or conference calls or recording or post-production to take care of. Just three days of wrapping himself around Harry and shutting the rest of the world out.

The morning of the first day he wakes up positively joyous, despite his aching jaw from Harry fucking his mouth rather rambunctiously the night before. He rolls over in bed thinking he’d be quite happy to have another go round just because they can and he’s disappointed to discover that he’s alone. The scent of bacon reaches his nose a second later though and he relaxes, knowing where Harry was.

Grumbling, he fights to get out from under the blankets and stumbles into the bathroom to piss and brush his teeth. Back out in the bedroom he grabs a pair of pants and throws them on. He figures that if they weren’t expecting company then there was no reason he couldn’t walk around his own house in his underwear.

He hears Harry’s voice as he comes down the stairs, a quiet murmuring that he can’t make out and he stops for a second, worried that in fact they weren’t alone. Then he hears Harry say thank you rather enthusiastically before saying good bye and the sound of his phone going down on the counter a moment later.

“Who was that?” Liam asks as he comes into the kitchen. He snags a piece of bacon off the plate before Harry swats him with the spatula.

Harry turns and glances at him quickly, eyes twinkling meaning that at least it was good news, before he returns his attention to the eggs frying in the pan.

“No one,” he replies deviously and Liam stops chewing for a minute.

Harry was up to something.

“Harry,” he starts, voice deep with warning not to get himself involved in something he might regret.

“Liam, relax. It’s fine ok? Everything is fine and you will find out in due time,” Harry cuts him off. He slides the eggs onto a plate, adding a slice of toast and some fried tomato, and brings it over to Liam. “Eat your breakfast.”

“Why? Are we doing something today that I don’t know about?” Liam asks suspiciously, already inwardly groaning. He really didn’t want to leave the house today. He just wanted to veg out on the couch with Harry watching bad TV and doing dirty things to each other.

Harry stops and stares at him, face surprised and a little disappointed.

“No, I mean, I guess not if you don’t want to,” he says quietly, picking up his toast and ripping it in two.

“Harry, come on. I’m sorry. What did you want to do?” Liam asks quickly, feeling guilty.

“Nothing major,” Harry shrugs. “Just thought we could go for a walk. We haven’t done that in ages. We’ve been cooped up here and it would be nice to get out and get some fresh air.”

“Ok then,” Liam agrees, leaning across the island to kiss him quickly. “A walk sounds nice. I’m sure Winston would love it too.”
Harry’s shoulders relax and he smiles brightly at Liam before reaching for some bacon himself. He breaks off a piece and tosses it to the aforementioned dog on the floor.

“What did you want to do today?” Harry asks, crunching into the bacon.

“I just wanted to relax with you and a walk sounds just about right. So long as we can also have some couch time,” Liam replies and Harry laughs quietly.

“Couch time, eh?”

“Yes! Couch time. With some bad telly and junk food, relaxing,” Liam retorts, knowing full well that Harry knew exactly what he wanted to do on the couch.

“Sounds good,” Harry replies. His eyebrows waggle slightly and they both laugh.

Liam was right, Winston is over the moon about getting to go for a walk and is bouncing around like crazy while he is just trying to get his leash attached to his collar.

It’s a warm, muggy day. The August sun beats down on them and they haven’t even left the yard before Liam strips his vest off, tucking it in his back pocket and adjusting his snapback to protect his eyes from the brightness.

Harry saunters along beside him in a blue t-shirt and jeans. The sight of so many clothes makes Liam feel even warmer, but it doesn’t seem to affect Harry nearly as much.

The air in the wood is damp, but cooler and the ferns and trees are lush and green after a long period of rain and the ground is soft under their feet. They reach their usual stopping point, the fence to the property beyond the trees, in good time. They pull out water bottles, leaning on the rotting wood to take in the scenery. Liam remembers how many times they had been there before while Harry was still recovering and the times Harry had leapt forward and kissed him just to test himself and his limits. Now Harry leans forward and kisses him confidently. His body is hot and damp with sweat under Liam’s hands, while his lips and tongue are skilled and certain. His hands slide up Liam’s naked torso, tracing the muscles and pulling him closer.

“Um, so I think I’m ready,” Harry says after a while, pulling back from Liam’s mouth to speak. His bottom lip goes between his teeth immediately, meaning he was nervous.

“Ready for what babe?” Liam asks him, hand tucking a stray curl behind Harry’s ear. A trickle of nerves goes down his own spine at where this conversation was going.

“To let you fuck me. To be with you that way,” Harry replies, erasing his nerves from his face and appearing confident.

Liam startles at the admission. His nerves are replaced with arousal, but he forces himself to keep a clear head.

“Harry, it isn’t a matter of you letting me do anything to you. It’s us doing something together,” he says gently. Harry tilts his chin down and gives him a look.

“Yes, I know Liam. That’s what I meant, but if you’d rather not,” Harry trails off. He lifts a brow because he knew full well that Liam wanted to. He knew just how badly Liam wanted to no matter
how much he had tried to hide it.

“How Harry, you know I want that for us, but I have to warn you to be cautious. I want you to be completely certain. Things are good as they are. There’s no reason to rush,” he says quickly, turning to follow Harry as he starts to head towards the trees again.

“Shut up Liam. I wouldn’t say I was ready if I wasn’t. Now get your ass moving because there’s bad telly and junk food to attend to first,” Harry throws over his shoulder with a smirk.

Liam catches up with him quickly, grabbing his hand and starting to run. He pulls Harry along with him and it earns him a loud laugh.

They run all the way back to the house, Winston panting the most when they get there, and they both breathe out with a whoosh when they get back into the comfort of the air conditioning. Harry immediately turns towards the kitchen, but doesn’t get far.

“What kind of junk food do you want?” He asks with a laugh, already being lifted off of the ground and carried over to the couch where Liam deposits him on his back. He quickly crawls on top of him, slotting between his legs and claiming his mouth.

Harry’s legs wrap around him. His body arches up to press closer as he moans into Liam’s mouth, sending a spike of arousal down Liam’s spine.

He presses down, rolling his body against Harry’s. The feeling of Harry’s body heat and the thought of that being tight around Liam’s cock is enough to get him fully hard and his hips push down a little more insistently.

A few seconds later and Liam is on his back on the floor. Harry had flipped them and therefore toppled them off the couch. Liam doesn’t feel any pain from it because he is completely distracted when Harry grinds down onto him, but he suspects he will have bruises later.

Liam’s hands travel up inside Harry’s shirt pushing the fabric up. His skin is heated and soft and Harry lets him pull it over his head. He tosses it off to the side before diving back down to get his tongue back in Liam’s mouth.

They kiss and rut, touching and pressing together for a long while. It’s long enough that Liam starts to forget that there was another ending planned and that he wasn’t supposed to just come in his pants this time.

Harry remembers before him and sits up eventually. He fights off Liam’s attempts to pull him back down and sits there, straddling Liam and looking down at him for a long moment.

“I think we should probably go upstairs to the bedroom,” he says finally. He looks around the room before returning his eyes to Liam with a small smirk on his lips. “I know you enjoy a good living room fuck, but the things we need are upstairs and it’ll be more comfortable.”

Liam nods, already agreeing.

“And we can shut the cat and dog out,” he says dryly, aware of the fact that Fitzy was curled up on the chair with eyes watching them. He’d grown quite a bit, his coat now thick and fluffy and he had a penchant for biting Liam’s toes whenever he got the chance. Harry thought it was hilarious.
He glances now back at Fitzy himself and laughs. He quickly scrambles to stand up, lending Liam a hand to get upright as well. Then he’s pulling Liam up the stairs, giggling the entire way. They crash through the door of the bedroom and slam it shut behind them before coming back together again, kissing furiously and grabbing at each other.

They manage to stumble their way over to the bed, landing in a heap with Liam on top. He prepares himself to be flipped, since Harry had proven he had a tendency to do that. Liam remembers how they had approached it the last time they had sex, when he was the bottom, and he decides that he needs to treat this the same and talk it over first.

But that meant he had to stop kissing Harry, which was a very compelling distraction.

As predicted though, he gets tossed and lands on his back with Harry straddling him again. He uses it as the chance to cool things for a second and to get prepared rather than just rushing in.

“Harry,” he says quickly, but whatever he was going to say gets cut off immediately. He’s not sure if Harry is doing this intentionally and avoiding talking about it because maybe he’s changed his mind or if he’s just that into the moment. He needs to find out either way. “Harry, stop for a second,” he finally gets out, gently holding him at arm’s length. Harry stares down at him surprised. He already looks a mess. His hair has completely abandoned the bun it was in, his mouth is swollen and red, his eyes are blown and his cheeks are flushed. He’s gorgeous.

“What?” He asks Liam. His voice is gruff and slightly impatient.

“If we are still doing this, we need to work it out. Like we did last time,” Liam says carefully, opening the door for Harry to change his mind and to tell Liam the truth if he needs to.

Harry’s lips move as he thinks it over, but he nods after a moment.

“No, you’re right. We should figure it out and get prepared,” he agrees. His voice tightens with nerves and his hands get fidgety pulling on his bottom lip.

“Har, if you want to change your mind it’s ok. There’s no pressure,” Liam assures him gently, but he gets a frustrated look in return.

“Liam, I’m not changing my mind. I’m just nervous ok,” he admits finally.

“Ok. That’s fine Harry, but talk to me ok? Talk it out with me. We are in this together,” Liam replies. He sits up as well, though Harry stays sitting in his lap.

Harry laughs and shakes his head once.

“I swear, you are such a sap sometimes,” he laughs and Liam gives him a faux offended look.

“I’m not the one obsessed with rom-coms I might point out,” he retorts, laughing as well.

“I know, but doesn’t mean you have to talk like you are in one,” Harry replies with a finger poke to Liam’s chest.

“Fine, but I’m not wrong,” he answers. Harry laughs again and sighs before nodding in agreement. “Right, so I’ll ask you the same question you asked me before we did this the last time: how do you want to do this?”
Harry’s eyes meet his. His lip is back between his teeth before he scans the bed, as though looking for answers before they return to Liam’s.

“Um, I think me on top. I feel most comfortable that way and in control,” he replies quietly, but confidently.

“Ok, works for me,” Liam agrees and Harry laughs again.

“Is there a position you would seriously disagree with right now?” Harry asks him, eyes crinkling.

Liam pretends to think on it with a dramatic expression on his face before he finally shakes his head ‘no’.

“Yeah none come to mind currently,” he replies. Harry’s head goes back as he laughs before he returns his lips to Liam’s, kissing him chastely for a long moment.

“Ok, with that agreed, I’ll go grab stuff. You get naked,” Harry instructs while leaping off of him and the bed hurrying towards the bathroom.

Liam doesn’t have to be told twice to get naked. He’s already sweating to start with so he quickly shucks his shorts and underwear. His shoes having previously been flung off somewhere across the living room.

Harry comes out of the bathroom, fresh bottle of lube and a condom in his hand. They had bought some new stuff with the intention of being better prepared in mind. He puts them down on the side table and toes his own trainers off and reaches for his belt to undo his pants, but Liam’s hands get there first. He tugs Harry over to stand between his knees.

“Let me do it,” Liam says quietly, voice deep with arousal. There was something about getting to take Harry’s pants off that turned him on so immensely. He so rarely got to do it because Harry usually beat him to the punch. When he glances up at Harry he sees the realization dawning on his face with a knowing look and Liam hopes that means he will get to take them off every time now.

He unbuckles his belt carefully, then slips the button on his jeans through the hole and carefully pulls the zipper down to not drag it across the sensitive skin of Harry’s erection. Harry sighs softly when Liam leans forward to press his mouth against it, sliding his jeans down as he mouths at Harry’s cotton covered cock.

The jeans hit the floor with a soft thud and Harry lifts each foot to kick them off, shoving them away with his toe once he’s free of them. Liam’s fingers carefully take hold of the waistband of his underwear and he starts to pull them down carefully. His mouth presses to each inch of exposed skin and the course hair tickles his cheeks as he kisses his way down Harry’s inner thigh joins with his abdomen. Harry’s cock twitches at the sensation and a long, quiet moan escapes his throat when Liam slides his tongue down the side of it.

Liam then has an idea. The best way to prepare Harry was with him in this position, able to step back if he needed to. With that in mind, he nudges Harry’s legs to move so he is straddling Liam’s while still standing. This opens him up and gives Liam access.

Harry glances down at him when he picks up the bottle of lube and uses his teeth to get the plastic safety wrap off. It’s clear he’s nervous again, but he’s not saying anything and doesn’t move away.
The only movement is his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows. So Liam keeps moving forward.

Coating his fingers in the slippery fluid he slides his mouth down Harry’s cock, sucking his way up a few times. He employs the same distraction technique Harry had used on him for a few minutes before moving his prepared hand between Harry’s legs, fingers prodding until they reach their goal. The back of his mind starts to marvel at how incredible it was to even do this, and with Harry, someone he had known so long and had loved for probably just as long. It was like a final step. A piece of the puzzle slotting into place to complete the picture.

Harry’s breathing stutters when he feels Liam’s finger touching him. Liam’s eyes go up to watch his face as he starts circling his hole, but he closes his eyes again when Liam’s mouth carries on sucking, distracting him again.

Liam had to admit it felt odd doing this, but it was also incredibly arousing to be touching him in such an intimate way. He carefully starts to insert his finger and feels resistance immediately. He uses his thumb to rub Harry’s taint, remembering how much he liked that and it earns him a long groan and the tightness subsides a little.

It feels like it takes forever to just get one finger inside of Harry. But he takes his time, carrying on with his mouth and only taking short breaks to rest his jaw. He continues to use his thumb while his other hand is wrapped around the base of Harry’s cock, squeezing and stroking. He can feel Harry’s hips trying to move, trying to fuck Liam’s mouth as usual, but he maintains control knowing that the delicate operation going on between his legs demanded he stay still.

When Liam’s finger finally reaches the knuckle, he can’t help but marvel at the feeling. Harry is so hot and tight around him and his own cock jerks at the sensation, feeling almost impatient.

He slips the finger in and out several times, feeling the ring of muscle giving and tightening as Harry works on relaxing as best he can.

When he feels like Harry is ready, Liam pulls his finger out and starts pressing back in again with two this time, but Harry jolts suddenly, body going tense.

He immediately pulls his hand away and his mouth releases Harry’s cock to let him back away, but Harry doesn’t move. He just closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, swallowing loudly before releasing it through his mouth in a whoosh.

“You ok?” Liam asks him and Harry nods immediately.

“Yes, I’m ok. Just a tiny wobble, but I’m ok,” he answers, eyes opening and coming down to meet Liam’s, showing him that he meant it. “Keep going.”

Liam nods after a moment, waiting until Harry’s body started to relax again and for the tension to ease before he carefully reaches forward to wraps his left hand around Harry’s cock, starting to stroke him again. His lets him ride on that sensation for a few moments before he brings his lube covered hand back up, fingers repositioning themselves at his hole. Harry’s hand comes forward and settles in Liam’s hair. He threads through the strands, he’s not directing or tightening, just touching and anchoring himself to Liam.

Liam presses his two fingers in slowly and carefully, keeping himself in tune with Harry’s reactions and ready to pull away again if he needed to. But Harry relaxes under his touch, moaning softly when the fingers are all the way in.
He works a third in just as slowly, four fingers feeling almost impossible at how tight Harry was, but he slowly manages it. He spreads them carefully to loosen him and make his body ready.

Harry’s panting breaths fill the space in the room. When he can’t control his hips any longer he puts a hand on each of Liam’s shoulders and starts thrusting into Liam’s mouth, riding his fingers at the same time. Liam’s cock jolts again and pre-come leaks from the tip almost immediately. He’s not sure he’s ever felt this turned on or this peak level of arousal where it seems like even a slight breeze against his dick could make him come, but he holds off. He lets Harry fuck his mouth while also fucking himself on his fingers.

It is quite possibly the hottest thing Liam has ever experienced so far.

He understands now why Harry had started to get impatient about getting inside of Liam. He feels like he’s going to explode himself if he doesn’t get inside of Harry soon.

Harry’s breathing and moans get louder, hips moving more erratically before he suddenly stops, looking down at Liam again, face determined.

“I’m good. I’m ready,” he says breathily, eyes almost black and Liam nods dumbly, pulling his fingers free and shuffling to get into the middle of the bed, head on the pillows.

Harry grabs the condom and crawls on to the bed, kneeling with one leg on either side of Liam’s thighs as he rips the package open. He rolls it down Liam’s cock and reaches for the lube, pouring an ample amount out onto this hand before he starts slicking Liam up.

Satisfied with his work, he closes the lube bottle and tosses it to the side on the bed, crawling forward on his knees to position himself right over Liam’s cock.

He lowers himself achingly slowly, letting Liam’s cock only get the very tip in before stopping for a long while. Liam never complains or says anything. He just gently holds Harry’s thighs steady and knows that he has to go at his own pace.

His face winces a few times as Liam enters him. Liam’s size is much bigger than his fingers, a similar problem to what Liam had faced, but he manages it eventually and he settles onto Liam’s cock with a soft smile.

“I’m ok,” he says quietly. It’s more to himself than to Liam. His face looks almost serene and blissful at finally overcoming what he saw as the last hurdle. The final step to moving forward.

He moves slow, hips only rolling at first before he starts rising up and sliding back down again at a careful pace.

Liam is almost overwhelmed with the sensations. From Harry tight, hot and wet around his cock, to his thighs squeezing on either side of Liam’s hips. His hands are heavy on Liam’s chest and his head is thrown back, mouth open, ribs heaving with each breath and his skin is flushed red all over.

His cock bounces between them and Liam is the one who reaches forward to wrap a hand around it. To jerk him at the same pace they were fucking.

Harry moans loudly at the additional feeling and he starts bouncing in Liam’s lap a little faster.
“Fuck, Liam…Oh my God…” he breathes out, eyes opening and closing.

Liam can’t help but agree with those sentiments. His own mouth issues a litany of sounds and poorly chosen words, but he doesn’t care and he knows Harry doesn’t either.

Harry’s body curls forward after a while. He is still bouncing on Liam’s cock, which is dangerously close to emptying at that moment, and his hands land on top of the headboard. He holds it to balance himself as he starts fucking himself on Liam in earnest. Skin slaps skin in a lewd manner and his voice gets louder in the room.

“Oh my God…Oh fuck Liam…Oh my God,” he repeats. He rides Liam harder, grinding down each time. Liam speeds up his own hand, heels dug in and hips lifting off the bed in an attempt to get just a little deeper inside of Harry.

Harry comes with a long drawn out yell and threads of white coat Liam’s chest, but he doesn’t even notice them. Nor does he notice the sounds Harry is making. All he feels is Harry clamping down around him, body almost vibrating and pulsing around his cock and his hips lift off the bed even further. He pushes hard into Harry as he starts coming as well, the power of his orgasm making him see white.

He knows he’s yelling because he can feel his voice getting horse. He can feel every muscle tightening and straining, but all he can focus on is Harry tight around him. So very, very tight.

It’s like he loses time as he comes down from it. Harry is a flopped mess on top of him, breathing hard in Liam’s ear. His limbs and body are loose as though he’s lost all strength and Liam knows how he feels.

It seems like an hour before either one of them moves. His cock softens inside of Harry and he starts to slip out. He shifts his hips slightly, just enough to fully slide out and then he goes dead weight again.

“Holy fuck…” Harry breathes out in his ear, sounding completely spent.

“Yup…” Liam agrees, unable to add more.

They are silent, aside from their breathing, for another long several minutes before Harry finally shifts. His body twitches as he struggles to move, but he eventually slides off of Liam to flop on the bed beside him. Liam knows he needs to take the condom off and get a cloth to clean himself up, but frankly he can’t be arsed to do it yet.

Eventually he does, sitting up with a groan, pulling the condom off and knotting it. He struggles to stand and slumps into the bathroom feeling boneless. He deposits the condom in the bin and washes himself off.

He brings a wet cloth back to the bedroom with him to wipe Harry clean and he’s surprised to find he’s not sleeping. Instead he’s watching Liam, eyes sharp despite his obvious doziness.

Liam knows what Harry is feeling. That strange sense of a cosmic shift. That feeling that only comes with giving yourself over to someone else so completely, willingly and it makes him slide in to kiss Harry’s lips.

“Are you ok?” He asks carefully. He is always concerned that something could be wrong, but
Harry nods immediately and returns the kiss quickly.

“I’m fine. Better than fine, really,” he replies quietly. “Thank you for that.”

Liam nods. He knows what Harry means without him having to say more.

He had told Liam he wanted to be fucked. To feel someone inside of him again in order to finally erase what they had left inside of him. Liam prays that it worked. That Harry has finally gotten the last part of peace he was looking for.

When he starts to snore a few minutes later, Liam knows he has.
They eventually make it downstairs to the couch after a nap and a long shower together where they spend more time making out than actually washing.

It’s slow and leisurely with no real goal in mind since neither one felt like they could get it up if they wanted to anyway. But it’s nice.

They both slip on some underpants, on the off chance that someone might come to the door, and flop down on the couch with a big bowl of popcorn between them and a variety of candy strewn on the table. Harry immediately insists they watch Bake Off because he wants ideas for things to make when Liam starts working again.

Since they have actually watched every possible episode of the show ever made at least twice already, Liam gets bored pretty quickly. He quells that by lobbing a piece of popcorn at Harry’s head. It earns him a quick side eye and there’s a tiny smirk on Harry’s lips, but he returns his focus to the show, making a great show of trying to appear very serious about watching the telly.

Three pieces of popcorn later and Harry has finally had enough. Especially when the last one sticks in his hair. He suddenly turns, grabs a handful of popcorn and throws it at Liam.

“HARRY!” Liam yells, dodging the flying projectiles. Winston immediately hurries towards them and gobbles them up from the floor.

“What?” Harry asks incredulously, popping a piece in his mouth this time. “You started it. I was focusing on the sponge cakes.”

Liam picks up the bowl of popcorn and calmly places it on the table. Then just as calmly, he reaches over to grab Harry’s legs, pulling him and pushing him until he’s on his back on the couch. He laughs loudly until Liam’s mouth cuts him off.

Bake Off and the junk food forgotten, they kiss slowly, hands roaming and bodies sliding together. For once, Harry doesn’t immediately flip them. Instead, he chooses to allow Liam to stay on top and his legs eventually hook around his hips.

It’s perfect, it’s peaceful and it’s exactly how Liam wanted to spend his time off. He would happily keep making out with Harry for the rest of the evening if his stomach didn’t feel the need to start growling loudly after a while.

The sound of it makes Harry jump and then he starts laughing, snorting into Liam’s mouth.

“Are you by chance hungry Liam?” He asks innocently and starts giggling again.

“Apparently,” Liam deadpans.

“Well, maybe we should get some dinner then? I wouldn’t want you feeling faint or anything,” Harry suggests helpfully.

Liam grumbles and then his stomach grumbles again. He admits defeat and crawls off of Harry, flopping back on the couch and adjusting himself in his underwear. He wasn’t hard, but there was
some interest. Perhaps food would make things better.

Harry gets up from the couch and wanders into the kitchen where he loudly rifles around the fridge and the cupboards.

“What do you feel like?” He calls out. Liam shrugs before he remembers that Harry can’t see him.

“Um… I dunno. D’you want to order pizza?”

“Hmmm,” Harry thinks. The shuffling sounds stop as he halts his progress to consider the option. “Think I’d prefer a curry."

“Sounds good to me,” Liam agrees, knowing he would be willing to eat anything at this point, dead horses excluded.

Ten minutes later and they have ordered a couple of chicken curries, some extra rice and a variety of naan breads. Liam knows they won’t eat it all, but doesn’t care. He does make an effort to go upstairs to put on jeans and a t-shirt though. He figures the delivery guy doesn’t need to see him in just his pants.

The second he’s retrieved the food and closed the door however, he shucks both items of clothing and heads over to the couch with Harry.

They devour a pretty impressive amount of the food and end up lying on the couch afterward moaning slightly about being full.

Another episode of Bake Off playing and Liam pulls Harry back up against his chest. He snakes an arm around him and presses soft kisses to his shoulder. Liam hears Harry sigh softly as he settles in against him easily, lacing their fingers together.

“What do you want to do tomorrow?” He asks on a commercial, turning his head to look back.

Liam shrugs and smirks at him.

“Same thing we did today?” He answers innocently and Harry laughs loudly.

“And the day after that?” Harry asks, still giggling.

“Same,” Liam replies easily, nodding for effect. Harry’s head tilts back as he laughs harder. “What? Did you have other plans?” Liam asks.

Harry shakes his head, eyes closing as he gains control of himself.

“No, no, can’t say I did. But maybe let’s not do Indian food every night,” he replies finally and Liam shrugs again.

“Fine. That’s one thing we can do differently.”

Harry shuffles onto his back, hand coming up to slide through Liam’s hair to the back of his head and he pulls him in for a long, lingering kiss. It starts innocently enough, but as the contestants on the telly go through the second challenge of the day’s competition, things on the couch turn more heated. Liam’s leg manages to slide between Harry’s and their bodies curl more towards each
other. Their hips begin moving to create friction and their hands slide down bare skin.

Eventually, Liam slides between Harry’s legs completely, the limbs coming up to circle around Liam’s hips as they rut together with more purpose. It makes Harry moan into Liam’s mouth.

“I don’t think I’m ready to… go again tonight,” Harry says carefully. It takes Liam a second to understand his meaning, but he nods as soon as he grasps it.

“I know. That’s ok. I can do plenty of other things to you,” he says with attempted seduction in his voice. Though it clearly fails based on Harry’s laugh.

“Oh can you? Like what?” Harry challenges, smirk on his lips.

Liam lifts a brow and starts sliding backwards, dislodging Harry’s legs while he starts pressing kisses down his chest. He gives each nipple a good going over, tongue and teeth pulling them up to little buds while Harry keens quietly above him. Then he makes his way down his stomach, tongue dipping into his bellybutton then tracing the laurels on either hip. His teeth nip at the course hair poking out of the top of his pants.

He loves the sounds Harry makes and the way his body is writhing on the couch. His cock hard and heavy, barely held down by the cotton of his pants. But Liam is cramped up on the end of the couch and he decides that this will not make for a good blow job on his part.

He quickly slides off of Harry and onto his knees on the floor. His hands hook the top of Harry’s pants and pull them down and off in a quick sweeping motion that makes Harry squeal and laugh in surprise. Then Liam grabs his legs, pulling and maneuvering him until Harry figures out what he’s doing and sits up himself, spreading his legs on either side of Liam. He sits staring down at Liam, chest flushed, bottom lip between his teeth and cock thick and hard on his abdomen. Liam’s own cock starts to dampen the front of his pants.

He forces himself to focus though and settles in with one hand on Harry’s hip. The other is wrapped around the base of his cock as he wraps his lips around the tip, sucking just there to start. Immediately Harry’s hips try to lift in order to press himself further into Liam’s mouth, but he holds him down. He’s determined to control it this time.

Liam’s teases his tongue around the head, returning to sucking the tip frequently while his hand strokes slowly. His thumb presses in at the base above his balls each time, earning a sharp noise from Harry.

Harry’s legs spread further on either side of Liam and his ass slides down on the couch until he’s completely opened up to him. Then an idea crosses Liam’s mind. There was one area that Harry loved to be touched, that really got him turned on, and Liam wonders what it would be like to press his tongue there.

Slipping his mouth and hand off of Harry’s cock, he puts his hands under each of his thighs and lifts slightly, giving him easier access before leaning back in. He kisses and sucks each of his balls before aiming even lower and running his tongue up Harry’s taint with strong pressure. The reaction is immediate. Harry’s moan is loud and sharp in the room and his hands land on the couch, pushing his hips up himself to give Liam more access. He plants his feet on the coffee table to give himself more leverage and lifts.

Harry’s crotch right in his face, Liam takes the opportunity and goes back in. His tongue presses
and slides while his thumbs follow it. Harry shudders and writhes under his ministrations, body jolting at some of the more powerful sensations. His moans turn louder and inch closer to screams. He releases the couch with one hand to wrap it around his cock, jerking himself rapidly as Liam’s tongue becomes more insistent.

“Oh Fuck Liam, Oh Fuck Liam, Oh Fuck Liam,” he chants out, voice screechy and wrecked.

The final words of the chant get turned into a long loud sound that becomes a scream as he starts coming. His body jolts violently with the force of it and Liam can only marvel at getting to see it so up close. The way the muscles move under his skin, his cock tensing and twitching and his balls tight. Liam damn near comes himself just from witnessing it and he hasn’t even taken his pants off yet. He carefully continues to swipe his tongue across the sensitive area, earning further shudders and jolts out of Harry, until Liam can tell he can’t take anymore and he’s reached the point of oversensitivity.

His body relaxes slowly, still quivering and jerking at times, and his breathing is a shallow panting sound. Carefully releasing Harry’s legs, Liam looks up to find Harry completely destroyed on the couch. His head is thrown back, his eyes are closed and his mouth has dropped open. Liam can’t help but smile at having caused it.

He laughs quietly and presses a kiss to Harry’s inner thigh, gently brushing his stubble across the delicate skin and Harry jumps again. One hand barely lifts off the couch to vaguely wave at Liam. He’s not sure what the gesture means exactly, but he figures it is a gentle request not to do that since he clearly can’t take any sensation at the moment.

“Fuck…” Harry slurs out, barely above a whisper.

“You ok up there?” Liam asks innocently. One green eye pops open to give him a half-hearted incredulous look.

“How did you even know?” Harry asks, voice scratchy. Liam shrugs.

“ Took an educated guess,” he replies and Harry releases one breathy laugh.

“Good guess… holy fuck. I don’t think I’ve ever come that hard before,” Harry says, sounding a bit surprised. Liam just grins, pleased with himself.

“Good,” he says smugly and Harry laughs again. Both of Harry’s eyes finally open and he gestures for Liam to come closer. He lifts himself up onto his knees and leans in to kiss Harry deeply and slowly, tongues moving lazily together. He can’t help but press himself against him. His cock still hard and insistently poking into Harry’s abdomen.

Harry’s hands land on Liam’s hips, pushing his underwear down as far as he can reach before he wraps his long fingers around him. He jerks Liam with skilled practice, squeezing and twisting just right. Liam moans into his mouth, breathing loudly through his nose with his hips thrusting just enough.

One hand still stroking Liam, the other comes up to grip his hair and pull his head back to expose his throat. Harry works his teeth and tongue down one side and up the other. He picks a spot just under Liam’s ear where the skin is most sensitive and latches on, pulling a nice hickey out. It makes Liam come with a shout and he paints Harry’s stomach with more white streaks.
It’s not until he’s come down from his orgasm, cheek pressed to Harry’s shoulder, that it occurs to him that the new bruise on his neck will be visible and anyone with a brain will know what it is.

“Are you marking your territory now?” He asks dryly and Harry laughs once.

“Yup. Just making sure everyone knows who you belong to,” he replies just as dryly.

“Wow, I make you come the hardest you ever have and suddenly you get possessive,” Liam deadpans and Harry laughs harder.

“Damn right. I should just tattoo my name all over you to make it perfectly clear,” Harry giggles and Liam shrugs.

“Sure, if you want to,” he replies. He knows that Harry is joking, but actually thinking about getting tattoos for each other wasn’t that bad an idea. It should be something meaningful for both of them of course, but a public display that only they will truly understand.

Harry stops laughing and Liam can feel him trying to look at him so he lifts his head to make it easier.

“You serious?”

“Yeah. I mean, we already have so many tattoos. Some of them are related to the band and our days together with the guys, but we have nothing that is directly about or for each other,” Liam replies. Harry’s brows rise and he looks surprised, but not opposed to the idea.

“Ok, but what would we get?”

“I don’t know,” Liam says, considering the options. He didn’t want anything that was silly or cheap like each other’s astrological symbols or such, but he wasn’t sure what would adequately cover what they wanted to convey with them.

“I know! I know exactly what we will do. Can we do it tomorrow?” Harry asks suddenly, finding a small surge of energy. Liam immediately eyes him suspiciously. “Don’t look at me like that. It’s small and simple and perfect I think. Please just trust me.”

Liam sighs and then nods.

“But does it have to be tomorrow? I mean, we’ve already got plans,” Liam says with the tiniest bit of a whine in his voice and Harry laughs.

“Relax, we will most definitely have sex tomorrow, but let’s do this first,” Harry reasons with him and Liam relents. Frankly, he’s curious at this point as to what Harry has up his sleeve.

Harry of course refuses to give him any clues or hints as to what his idea is. For a guy who couldn’t keep a secret to save his life when he was a kid, he’s certainly perfected the art in adulthood.

Liam presses at him when they finally crawl their way off the couch and make their way up the stairs giggling and kissing. He carries on questioning while they brush their teeth and then after they’ve crawled under the covers. Both of them are still naked and it’s something that sends a thrill through Liam, momentarily distracting him.
He finally has to give up when Harry starts snoring on his chest.

The next morning he follows Harry’s instructions to get up and dressed. They grab a bite of breakfast before they head out to the car. He’s not nervous to get another tattoo, he has plenty already, but he is anxious about what he is getting.

They head to a small parlor right in Woking where they take walk-ins. Harry struts right through the door like he owns the place.

“Hi. What can I help you with?” A heavily tattooed man asks as soon as they come in. His eyes widen slightly as he recognizes them, but he keeps himself professional. Liam would peg the guy at around the same age as them. He’s shorter, heavy set, has a short groomed chestnut colored beard and about 20 piercings in each ear.

“Hi. We are here to each get one small tattoo on our hands,” Harry replies. Liam starts slightly, finally getting some information.

“Oh, ok. What were you thinking?” The guy asks, coming closer. His eyes travel down to their hands in curiosity.

Harry glances back at Liam and smirks before lifting his hand and describing what they were getting. Liam immediately agrees, knowing it was perfect.

An hour later they leave the parlor with a perfect letter H on Liam’s ring finger on his left hand, while Harry is now sporting a perfect letter L on his own wedding ring finger.

It had left Liam feeling a little emotional while it was being done, knowing just how significant it was. Yes, they could go actually get married, but this was just a bit more permanent feeling. It was an indelible mark left on their bodies that other people could freely see and it linked them together.

They drive home at an alarming speed and crash through the door with their hands all over each other. Their mouths slide together in a filthy manner and they damn near trip and land in a heap on the floor several times on their way to the bedroom.

Liam doesn’t know what the plan is or what will happen when they got there exactly, he just knows he has a deep, fervent desire to be inside of Harry. He could only hope Harry would be on board with that.

Clothing is stripped rapidly and the sounds of tiny rips couple in with their heavy breathing while their mouths work together. Liam gets Harry’s sweater off and then his shirt before nudging him back towards the bed and down onto his back. He kisses his way down his neck and chest to his stomach before stopping to watch his own hands undoing his pants. He pulls them down with determination, and his underwear follows in short order. He hears Harry huff a quiet laugh, but he doesn’t stop Liam.

Landing on his knees on the floor beside the bed, Liam grabs Harry’s knees and yanks him towards the edge. He spreads Harry’s legs on either side of his own body to open him up, leaving his ass barely on the mattress. Before he starts, Liam quickly snags the lube from the side table and puts it within reach. He then returns his focus to all of the skin available in front of him.

He works his mouth up one thigh, paying special attention to the sensitive skin of Harry’s upper inner thigh, before carrying on down the other. Harry keens and whines from the bed and his legs
jolt when Liam hits a particularly sensitive spot. His legs spread even wider when Liam’s mouth lands on his balls. Liam lifts up slightly to run his tongue up Harry’s erection and tastes the pre-cum already pooling on his belly. He knows he needs to get him ready faster.

He picks up the lube and pours some on his fingers, making his actions known so that Harry is aware of what is coming and can stop him if he wants to. He gets no rejection or negative reaction and he’s relieved by that.

Slicking up four fingers on one hand, Liam carefully lifts Harry’s balls out of the way, giving them a gentle squeeze just for fun, before running his tongue from his hole upwards. This earns him a sharp noise from Harry’s mouth and a full body shudder.

He starts swirling the first finger around as he repeats the action with his tongue. Harry opens up to him quickly with each swipe of his tongue and each press of his lips. It seems like no time at all before he’s three fingers deep, feeling Harry shudder and squeeze around them with each sensation. He notices Harry’s hand heading south to wrap around his dick, likely to relieve some of the pressure, but he stops him immediately.

“No, don’t touch. I want you to come with me inside you,” Liam instructs. His voice is deep with arousal and his own cock throbs harder inside his jeans at just the thought of Harry coming around him again.

“Dammit, Liam. Then fucking fuck me already!” Harry replies desperately. “I’m ready. I’m ready already, Jesus.”

Liam spreads his fingers once more, testing just how ready Harry was. Though truthfully, he was still new to this and didn’t know just how much resistance he should feel or not.

“Are you sure? I’m only three fingers in right now,” Liam questions. He was determined not to hurt Harry, ever, especially not in this way. He wasn’t about to push it just to get off sooner.

“YES! LIAM! YES!” Harry yells back and Liam decides not to argue any further.

He pulls his fingers free and stands up quickly. He strips off his jeans and pants while flinging his socks. He then reaches for a condom.

Suddenly hands are on him, yanking him down onto the bed on his back. The condom is ripped from his fingers before the hands move quickly to roll it onto him. Once the shock has worn off, he lays back and lets Harry take control. Liam watches eagerly as Harry quickly slicks up his erection. He uses what is probably far too much lube, but he figures it’s probably best to use too much rather than too little.

Once finished, Harry quickly crawls up the bed and straddles Liam. He starts to sink down onto him, green eyes sliding shut and mouth open wide as he takes him. Liam holds his thighs again and does his best to help brace him while he works his way down, taking him inch by inch as his body stretches.

When Harry is finally settled in Liam’s lap, his cock in all the way to the base, he sits for a few moments. His eyes are still closed as he adjusts. Liam gently takes his arms and pulls him down to kiss him, tongue sliding into his mouth. Harry sinks into him easily and his hands slide under Liam’s head.
Neither move for a long while. They just kiss and remain connected. While Liam loves the feeling of being a part of Harry, even with the condom there, his cock would like to feel a little more than just the delicious tightness.

He starts lifting his hips slowly with short, gentle pumps in and out of Harry. He’s not moving much distance, but it’s enough for the time being and Harry moans sharply. He momentarily forgets to kiss Liam, but he leaves their lips connected.

Sliding his hands down to Harry’s thin hips, Liam lifts him just a little. It’s enough to get more out of each thrust from his own hips and they both moan. Harry’s turn almost squeaky at the end as Liam manages to work some pressure in against his most erogenous spot.

The hands that were just cradling the back of his head tighten in his hair as Liam’s hips pick up speed. His heels dig into the bed to get more leverage as he pushes upwards in quick, sharp movements. Harry cries out with each thrust, voice going up in pitch and volume as he gets closer. One hand finally releases Liam’s hair and moves swiftly to wrap around his cock. He strokes it at the same speed Liam is fucking into him and it only take a few before he comes. Warm fluid streaks up Liam’s stomach and chest as his body clamps down around Liam’s cock, making Liam cry out loudly as he starts to fill the condom.

He will never get tired of how it feels to have Harry come with him inside. How his body tightens and shudders, squeezes and pulls the most incredible sensations out of Liam’s cock.

Like last time, Harry collapses completely on top of him as he comes down from his orgasm. As though he’s used every last bit of energy he had with the force of it. Liam somewhat understands how he feels. His own body is almost jelly like, to the point that he can’t even lift his own arms for a few minutes.

When he finally does regain control of them, he gently lifts Harry’s hips and slides out of him before rolling him to the side, getting very little help in his efforts. He stumbles into the bathroom and discards the condom. He grabs a wash cloth and cleans himself up before heading out to the bedroom with another cloth for Harry, who is flat on his back and snoring loudly.

Liam can’t help but laugh. It was such a stereotype for a man to fall asleep seconds after having sex, but Harry really made it into an art form.

He cleans Harry off and tosses the wash cloth into the hamper before flopping down on the bed beside him. The room is warm. His own body feels stifling so he doesn’t bother moving any blankets over them.

Minutes later he’s asleep himself.

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When Liam wakes up he finds himself not only covered by Harry sprawled across his chest, but also by the sheet. He’s not sure if it’s because Harry was cold, doesn’t like to sleep without covers or felt vulnerable, but he doesn’t question it.

When Harry wakes up they stumble into the shower together. It’s a repeat of the day before as they spend far too long making out under the stream and end up wrinkly with the water tepid when they finally finish.
Pants in place they head downstairs and heat up the leftover Indian food, devouring it in front of another episode of Bake Off.

As soon as Liam gets bored of it, he goes down on Harry again and brings on another body shaking, screaming orgasm. He is then rewarded handsomely for it with Harry’s own mouth on his body. Harry does try to go below his balls, kissing and licking the same area that seemed to make him go insane, but it doesn’t have the same effect on Liam. They surmise that he must have an erogenous zone elsewhere.

This thought makes Harry’s face turn devious and Liam can’t help but feel a tad nervous. Though he seems to decide that tonight wasn’t the best to try it, since both of them were wobbly legged after two intense sexual sessions already.

There was a time Liam felt like he could fuck all day and night, but that was before he had discovered just what sex with Harry was like. There was something so much stronger about it. It was so much more draining, but in the best way. While it meant they weren’t fucking continuously, the times they did counted for so much more.

Sated once again, Harry demands that they watch The Notebook, claiming he hasn’t seen it for a while. Liam knows they watched it only a month ago, but he relents and ends up dozing through most of it. Later, he follows Harry upstairs and collapses into bed with him. He feels completely bone tired despite them having not done much except the tattoos, fucking, napping and watching TV all day.

Liam wakes the next morning to lips pressing their way around his body. A tongue tastes certain areas to test his reaction and he lies there enjoying it, not moving for as long as he can. Liam thinks he’s managed to appear convincingly still asleep, until Harry takes it upon himself to tickle the bottom of his foot and then he knows he’s been discovered.

“What are you up to Harry?” Liam asks idly, quickly pulling his foot away and tucking it back under the blanket. He opens his eyes to find the other man kneeling at the end of the bed.

Harry shrugs nonchalantly at the question, appearing completely innocent.

“Nothing much. Just looking to see where I might get the most reaction,” he replies easily in a drawl. He rolls onto his hands and knees like a cat and crawls up the bed to straddle Liam’s lap.

Liam’s cock gives a twitch at the action, starting to fill as Harry settles down on top of him.

Harry’s one brow goes up as soon as he feels it, mouth quirking up into a smirk.

“Maybe my erogenous zone is just seeing you naked,” Liam quips in a deadpan voice. Harry huffs one dry laugh and shakes his head.

“Yeah, because I’m such a beautiful prize. All bony and covered in scars and shrunken tattoos,” he replies sarcastically, hand waving down at himself.

Liam startles at the comment and the derision in Harry’s voice as he says it. To him, Harry was perfect. No, he wasn’t the man Liam used to know with the toned abs, clear golden skin and a full muscular frame. That didn’t mean he was by any means hideous now. Over a year back in safety had allowed him to return to a healthy color and glow. He had gained some weight, though not nearly enough, but enough to make him appear just lean, but lovely. Yes he had scars, but they were fading and to Liam they were just a part of him. He didn’t even see them anymore. But he
isn’t stupid enough to believe that Harry doesn’t see them every time he looks in the mirror. That he doesn’t see how his jaw is still very sharp and his hair is still damaged at the ends. He’s still refusing to go get a haircut. Stubbornly defying his sister for pure amusement. He struggles to find the right words to rebut Harry’s own assessment of himself, but it’s hard since clearly he’s biased in his opinions.

“To me you are the ultimate prize. You always have been. Just to get the chance to be with you, see you, touch you, that’s all I need because I love you. Just you,” he finally replies. Harry’s face softens and his eyes gets a little wet. He knows the accusation that’s coming and the way Harry will try to defer the moment. His comments are always ironic considering he’s the one who watches The Notebook religiously. “Yes I know I’m a sap, but I’m your sap. So get used to it.”

Harry smiles softly, then grins and laughs. His hand swipes across his eyes quickly before he leans down and kisses Liam for a long moment.

“I am used to it. It’s how I want it to be, so you better not change,” he says when he finally pulls away. Liam nods dramatically to agree and Harry laughs again before returning to being serious.

“Right, let’s assume that I am an erogenous zone for you. Humans are known to have more than one, so let’s see if we can find any others on you, hmm?” He asks and Liam squirms slightly.

“Just leave my ticklish areas alone, ok?” He bargains. Harry spends a long minute pretending to think about it before finally nodding once.

“Ok, fine. It would be counterproductive anyway and you pissing the bed laughing would definitely kill the mood,” Harry decides and Liam gives him a dirty look.

Wiggling his ass slightly, Harry quickly wipes the look right off of Liam’s face before he leans in to kiss him once. He holds himself up on his hands placed beside Liam’s shoulders and looks down at him with a studious expression.

He starts carefully working a line of kisses down Liam’s jaw, nuzzling in under his ear to nip and flick his tongue at the sensitive skin there and it earns him a soft moan. Feeling encouraged, he pays more attention to his ear, running his teeth and lips down the shell with just enough pressure and Liam’s body twitches of his own volition.

He spends some time there, working over Liam’s ear and neck thoroughly on each side before evidently deciding he wasn’t getting the response he wanted. He starts working his way down his chest and turns his attention to Liam’s nipples. When that doesn’t turn Liam into a writhing, panting mess, he carries on further south across his stomach, down each hip, to the soft skin of his inner thighs and even down to the back of his knees.

All of it felt good to Liam, really, really good. He was fully hard, but he knew he wasn’t feeling near the level of pleasure from each location that Harry got when his perineum was touched.

Frustrated, Harry stops and kneels between Liam’s knees. His elbow is on Liam’s hip with his chin in his own hand and he regards the other man with narrowed green eyes.

“Seriously? How is this so difficult to figure out? Have you never noticed a spot on your body that really gets you going?”

“My dick,” Liam replies evenly and Harry rolls his eyes.
“Yes Liam. Every guy gets off on having their dick touched. But with me, as you know and discovered for me, there is somewhere that is just as good. Sometimes it’s better, depending on what you’re doing to me, and I want to find that for you,” he replies, getting slightly whiny near the end. “Give me some clues here Liam. I’ve already been inside you and that didn’t really get you off as it did me. So where else? This can’t be that difficult.”

“I did like it when you fucked me,” Liam replies quickly, wanting to make sure Harry knew he enjoyed it. “Like it got really good near the end. I don’t know what changed, but something did.”

Harry hums in thought, eyes going narrow again. He moves suddenly, snagging the bottle of lube from the bedside table and Liam’s heart picks up speed just a little. Despite his nerves he lets Harry arrange him, spreading his legs and lifting his knees before settling into position. He starts by distracting Liam using his tongue on his balls. He runs it across the delicate skin and up the line on the underside and Liam gasps. A spike of pleasure shoots through him. Harry glances up at him with surprise on his face before he smirks and does it again. Liam’s legs jump slightly at the sensation this time.

Harry hums happily, now focusing his energy on this location with his mouth while his finger works on Liam’s hole. He circles it before starting to slide in slowly. Liam is so distracted by Harry’s tongue that he barely even feels the finger until Harry gets it all the way in. He turns his hand palm up and wiggles it and a bolt of arousal goes straight up Liam’s spine, lifting his hips off the bed.

“FUCK!” He yells and slurs at the same time. His hands grab fistfuls of the sheets as he tries to find some control again.

He swears he hears Harry laugh quietly once, but he doesn’t get time to call him out on it before his tongue is sliding right up the seam of his scrotum. His finger flicks forward once again and Liam starts speaking in tongues.

Safe to say Harry found what he was looking for and Liam can barely control his legs. Harry’s only unoccupied hand tries to pin his hips down as he carries on and he works up a quick rhythm. Within minutes Liam comes and his vision goes white. His body stiffens and twitches violently a few times as he paints his stomach. His cock hasn’t been touched once through this entire experience, but it feels like it doesn’t even matter.

He sags as he comes down from the high of his orgasm and his body turns into mush. Liam finally understands how Harry felt that first time he went down on him and used his tongue on his most sensitive area. It’s almost as good as feeling Harry come around his cock buried deep inside him, but that was still Liam’s favorite feeling ever.

He hears Harry laugh again and the bed moves as he crawls up to straddle him. Harry’s lips press against Liam’s a moment later and Liam kisses him back lazily. He’s not really able to put more energy into it at first, but he works his way into it. His tongue meeting Harry’s and his hand slides into his hair as it hangs down to tickle his face and shoulders.

Harry’s hips move slowly, erection sliding on Liam’s abdomen and he decides it’s only fair he return the favor. Lifting Harry’s hips he breaks the kiss and starts guiding him to crawl further up the bed until his cock is just over Liam’s mouth, knees beside his shoulders. He gently tugs Harry’s hips down to slide into his mouth and his tongue immediately presses and licks against the bundle of nerves just below the head as Harry moans.
Keeping one hand on Harry’s hip to control him, he helps him set up a rhythm fucking Liam’s mouth while the other hand starts pressing and caressing his perineum.

“Oh fuck…” Harry moans out, hips stuttering slightly at the first sensations. He then resumes his thrusts as his forehead flops against his forearms where they are crossed on top of the headboard.

The wet sound of Harry fucking Liam’s mouth is filthy, as are the sounds coming from Harry’s mouth. Liam’s cock makes a valiant twitch, but he keeps his focus on making Harry feel good.

Harry’s hips start to get erratic and the muscles move under Liam’s hand. He can feel it when Harry’s balls tighten and his body tenses before he goes still. A long shout comes from his throat as he empties into Liam’s mouth.

Like Liam’s, Harry’s body twitches and shudders as he rides through it. He flops, trembling with the force of it still, onto the bed beside Liam. His body is all at bent angles with his leg still across Liam’s chest.

“You really need to take more vacations from work,” he mumbles from under his arm. His hair disguises what is visible of his face. “This has been a good holiday.”

It’s Liam’s turn to laugh this time. He carefully extracts Harry’s leg before reaching for some tissues to clean himself up. Once done he gently manhandles Harry into a more sensible position. He settles both of them on their sides, cuddled up close so he can press gentle kisses to Harry’s cheeks, eyes lids and the tip of his nose, earning him a scrunched grin.

“What do you want to do for the rest of the day?” Liam asks him. He feels the tiniest bit sad that it was the last day of their little holiday, but they had really made the most of it as far as he was concerned. Though other people might disagree.

Harry shrugs, already starting to look dozy and Liam laughs.

“Nap first,” he finally replies, yawning in emphasis. Liam kisses him when he’s done, feeling more than just a little boneless and sleepy himself.

“Alright, we will start with that then,” he agrees. Harry presses in further to get comfortable and begins snoring a few minutes later.

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Liam wakes to Harry flopped across his chest. His hand with the brand new L tattoo is splayed out over his ribs and seeing it causes a swell of affection in his chest. They hadn’t told anyone about the tattoos yet. They figured they would just leave it and see who noticed first.

He glances over to the clock and sees that it’s already after 3:00 in the afternoon and a fresh wave of sadness that their little mini-break is almost over goes over him again. He had a meeting at 8:00 tomorrow morning, but he starts to consider cancelling it when Harry starts to stir. He snuffles and yawns before stretching his legs with a loud groan.

“Good afternoon sunshine,” Liam says with a laugh. Harry groans again, still half asleep. “Come on Haz. It’s after 3:00. Let’s get up, get some food, do something.”
“Like what?” Harry slurs out, scratching his nose clumsily as he still works on coming to full consciousness.

“I don’t know. Go for a walk or something? I just want to spend some time with you,” Liam says quietly.

“Liam, I know that maybe we don’t get a lot of time alone anymore, but I’m not going anywhere. We will still have this and will still be together every single night. So please relax,” Harry says gently, finally lifting his head to regard the other man. His hair is sticking out in every direction and he has an actual embedded mark in his cheek from Liam’s nipple that makes Liam snort loudly with laughter. “Why are you laughing at me?”

“You have my nipple imprint on your cheek!” Liam replies, laughing harder. Harry looks shocked. He sits up and hurries off the bed to the bathroom to look in the mirror. Seconds later, Liam hears him snort and start laughing too.

“I am not going out anywhere until this goes away,” he hollers from the bathroom. Liam laughs again, sliding off the bed himself and stumbling into the bathroom.

They shower together, flicking soap at each other and giggling between making out like teenagers. Once done they brush their teeth and throw on some comfortable clothes before heading downstairs to scrounge around the kitchen for some food.

“Why don’t we pack a basket and go to the fence for a picnic?” Harry suggests, pulling out cold cuts, cheese and mustard for sarnies.

Liam agrees immediately and grabs the bread before heading off to hunt down a cooler or basket of some kind. He’s shocked when he finds an actual picnic basket complete with plates and cutlery in his storage closet. He examines it and tries to remember where in hell it came from before he remembers Ruth giving it to him a few years back.

He carries it back to the kitchen and shows Harry, who is delighted to have such official equipment. He quickly packs it full of sandwiches, drinks, an assortment of baked goods and some candy just because.

They throw on their shoes and Harry quickly leashes Winston while Liam grabs the basket. They set off into the wood, unoccupied hands tight together.

The heat has lifted and the air is less muggy, making it a comfortable day. It’s not long before they’ve settled beside the fence dividing the properties, red checked blanket on the ground and Winston tied to a fence post so he can roam, but not take off.

They eat quietly, enjoying the view sitting side by side. It’s so lovely and domestic that it feels almost unreal. Liam knows he could never ask for anything more because he’s got everything he could ever want.

As the wine starts to drain down they start talking, reminiscing about the past, the life they had lived together and how much had changed. They muse on what might have been, but don’t dwell on it: Both agree that there was no use.

The sun is starting to set when they set off again. They head back to the house in the twilight and the sky shifts from orange to purple.
Once the dishes are done, the leftover food stowed away and the pets are fed, Harry tickles Fitzy lovingly before they shut off the lights downstairs and mutually agree to just head up to bed without saying a word.

They close the door and come together. Their mouths meet and their hands hold on tightly for a long few moments. It’s slow and languid. Each piece of clothing comes off at almost a snail’s pace, but they savor it. Fingers trail down bare skin as it’s revealed and they slowly make their way towards the bed.

Like the day before, Liam undresses Harry fully. He sits him on the edge of the bed before spreading his legs and kneeling between them. He grabs the lube and prepares him, taking his time and making it last as long as they are both able to hold out.

When Harry declares that he’s ready, back arching off the bed, fists gripping the sheets and breaths panting, Liam finally stands and shucks the rest of his clothes. He grabs a condom, but it’s taken from his hands. Harry pulls him up to the edge of the bed and slides his mouth down Liam once before replacing it with the condom and adding lube.

Liam moves to get on the bed and lie on his back, but Harry stops him. He shuffles up the bed backwards himself and motions for Liam to get on top of him and slide between his thighs. Liam can’t help but hesitate for a second, always afraid of Harry pushing himself that bit too far.

“I’m ok Liam, honestly. I want this,” Harry says gently. His eyes are firm as they meet Liam’s and he nods.

Liam crawls between Harry’s legs, helping him lift his knees to spread them further before he sinks down and lines himself up. He starts to push in while his lips meet Harry’s.

He takes his time and works himself in carefully, not wanting to cause pain, but also prolonging it again. The chance to fuck Harry this way was his biggest fantasy and he wants to savor it.

When he’s finally seated with his cock all the way in they stop kissing for a long moment. Neither one of them moves and neither says anything. They just breathe, foreheads together. Liam knows he’s not the only one savoring it now and not the only one committing this moment to memory. He feels almost overwhelmed by it.

“I love you,” Harry whispers finally, eyes wide and honest. It’s so compelling and sweet that Liam immediately kisses him before responding.

“I love you too.”

Harry smiles and then grins, pulling him down for another kiss. Liam finally starts moving his hips, his throbbing cock demanding attention, and they both moan.

He wants to go slow and wants to keep drawing it out, but he knows he’s close. He can tell Harry is too so he gives them both what they want, long deep thrusts that cause the bed to jolt with each and Harry snakes a hand between them. He strokes himself at the same rhythm until he spills first, clenching down around Liam and drawing his orgasm out of him as well. They swallow each other’s moans, Harry’s free hand buried in Liam’s hair again holding him in place. He keeps moving his hips in short, quick thrusts to feel every bit of it.
It’s quiet when they are done. Their bodies stay linked as long as they can be, until Liam finally slips out and Harry’s legs drop back down to the bed.

Liam gets up and hurries into the bathroom. He cleans up and throws the condom out before bringing a cloth out to clean Harry as well. He tosses the cloth towards the hamper, grabs the blankets and crawls under them with Harry who curls in immediately, cheek on Liam’s chest again.

Neither falls asleep immediately, but it’s not awkward or uncomfortable. It’s silent and Liam just enjoys having Harry naked next to him and the hand with the L tattoo on his chest again. It makes him think.

“Maybe we should get married,” he muses quietly. He thinks that they had already proclaimed the permanence of their relationship with the tattoos, so they might as well do the final step. He feels Harry laugh more than he hears it.

“That was the least romantic proposal I’ve ever heard in my life,” he deadpans. Liam starts, realizing that he hadn’t actually meant it that way, was just speaking out loud, but he can understand how Harry heard something very different.

“I… was just thinking out loud… trying to get your opinion. I didn’t mean…” Liam stumbles out and Harry laughs again. He lifts his head and rests his chin on his hands to stare at Liam.

“I know Liam, relax. And yes, I think we should get married. It’s good for tax write-offs and all that,” Harry replies grinning and Liam laughs once.

“Uh-huh, and I was the least romantic one hmm?” He deadpans.

“Just thinking out loud like you,” Harry replies, shrugging.

“Wait, if that was the least romantic one you’ve heard, how many times have you been proposed to?” Liam asks, sounding incredulous even though he knew Harry was joking.

“None! I was meaning as compared to like movies and stories I’ve heard,” he replies hotly, looking scandalized by Liam’s question.

Liam narrows his eyes in faux consideration, but eventually nods and Harry laughs again.

“Alright fine. I believe you,” he concedes and Harry shakes his head slowly.

The humor passing, Liam starts to feel more serious about it. He realizes that this was actually something he wanted. It was that final piece of the puzzle. The thing that completely declared Harry his and that he was Harry’s.

But Harry was right, he needed to ask properly. Even though he pretty much already knew the answer, a little trickle of nerves still goes through him.

Harry just watches him, brows moving slightly as he tries to decipher Liam’s face, green eyes wide and curious. Liam gently runs his fingers through Harry's long curls, tucking them behind his ear.

“Harry Styles, will you marry me?” He finally asks. Harry’s lips quirk up into a small smile that just keeps growing until he’s grinning. His eyes scrunch and look a bit wet.
“Yes, Liam Payne. I will.”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2 Years

“It’s going to be a bonny season full of buns, bread and biscuits. Our bakers have all packed up their spatulas and speculaas recipes to join us in the kitchen.”

“That is correct Mel. This year we’ve got bakers from all across the UK including Henry from Tilbury, Hilary from Northampton and... well, Harry Styles?”

The room erupts in giggles and cheers as Sue says Harry’s name. A non-plussed expression is on her face as the camera throws to the group of bakers all stood behind their counters in the big tent, focusing in on Harry in his apron with a cheeky smirk on his face. He’s clearly trying to look confident, but the way he keeps nervously running a hand through his now much shorter hair belies the truth.

Gemma had finally dragged him out of the house just before he was set to start filming and competing on the Great British Bake Off and demanded that he get cleaned up properly if he was going to be on TV. She had meant for him to just get a trim, maybe a few inches off to make it tidier and healthier, but it was Harry’s decision to cut it all off to almost the same short length he had worn in Dunkirk.

Liam had tried to be supportive and understanding and had complimented him on it because he did look good, older and more mature with shorter hair. But he couldn’t hide his disappointment at seeing the curls gone and Harry had teased him a little about it.

“It’ll grow back Liam, but this is easier for on the show. It won’t be in my face or falling in my work.”

Liam had nodded, still wrapping his head around the fact that Harry was doing the show at all.

Turns out, while Liam was busy recording for months on end in the studio, happily enjoying Harry’s near daily baking adventures, he was actually being used as a guinea pig for his creations because he was practicing. He had decided to try out for the show because he’d always loved it and wanted to give it a shot.

He’d gotten word that he was going to get the chance the morning of the first day of their three day mini-break, but didn’t tell Liam until two weeks later when he was completely sure.

The premiere is on tonight. Liam, his family and Harry’s family are all gathered about the living room watching. Harry was currently off still filming, though they were nearing the end.

He was keeping very tight lipped on his position on the show, not even revealing if he was still on or not. He would just quietly leave for the mandatory weekend each week without even a hint.

All Liam knew was that if they were invited to come for filming the next weekend, then he had made it to the finals because that was usually when the family was allowed to be there.
For now though, he smiles as he watches Harry on the screen, working away at measuring out butter and cream while turning on his mixer with his new wedding ring glinting in the lights. The wedding had been small. They found an old kirk in the Scottish Highlands that looked mostly abandoned, but was so lovely and charming that they had driven everyone up there for the ceremony. It was perfect. Full of love and the signal of the start of a new chapter. It was also surprisingly private. The media, fans and rest of the world were still in the dark about it. Though now with Harry on the show, no doubt word was spreading and gossip was firing up.

The first week's challenge was all about cake, with cupcakes up first. Harry starts chopping some strawberries to make the compote he intended to fill his with. He was being ambitious already, choosing to make three different kinds to impress the judges. First, a strawberry one with thyme in the cake and a compote inside with cream cheese frosting. The second one was blueberry with a lemon meringue topping and the third was peach with a kiwi mango filling and orange buttercream.

Paul Hollywood and Mary Berry saunter up to his station. They eye him and his current progress critically and Harry bites his bottom lip nervously.

“Right, Harry you are trying for three different flavors I understand,” Paul asks him gravely and Harry nods, hands now working at slicing peaches. “Why three? Are you concerned you might be making too much work for yourself?”

“Well, I’m here to compete and to show what I can do. I’ve practiced these a lot so I’m feeling good about them,” he replies, tossing the peach pieces into his batter and gently folding them in.

Liam’s stomach belies the practice Harry had been putting in. He had gained five pounds from those cupcakes alone and had started jogging again every morning to keep control.

Paul and Mary nod, wish him good luck and carry on, but Sue remains behind. She snags one of his blueberries and pops it in her mouth.

“Harry I do have to say, when I saw your name on the roster my first reaction was something along the lines of ‘what in hell is going on’? I know you used to work in a bakery and we all know the famous ‘I used to be a baker’ line, but what brings you here to do this?”

Harry glances up at her and then back down to his peach batter, carefully scooping portions out into the little green and peach striped papers.

“Um, I mean, I’ve always been a fan of this show and ever since I got home I’ve been baking. I find it comforting and for a long time it was a distraction more than anything, but I grew to really love doing it. Even more than when I worked at the bakery. I love trying out new recipes, so it seemed a natural thing to give this a shot,” he replies, sliding his first pan into the oven. Sue nods and looks impressed.

“Well, good luck Harry. I look forward to trying what you come up with,” she replies and moves on to pester the next competitor. The camera goes to Paul and Mary at Henry’s station where he’s carefully trying to swirl his batter into a tie die rainbow design, earning him a lot of questions.

Harry does well in the first challenge with only a few critiques about his sponge being a bit dry on his blueberry cupcake and the buttercream a bit heavy on the peach one. He comes in third in the technical with his German Butterkuchen cake. Then they get ready for the show stopper. It’s very much go big or go home and Harry pulls out his hummingbird cake recipe. The first one he’d made...
for his family just after the trial, but this time it’s three layers with a spun sugar bird’s nest on top, gum paste eggs and adorable little hummingbirds fluttering about the sides.

Its touch and go against Henry, who’s cake is a towering six layer masterpiece with a waterfall coming down the side, but in the end it’s flavor that wins the day and Harry is crowned Star Baker for the week. The room cheers once again.

Like every other week for the last eight weeks, Harry says nothing of his progress when he gets home late Sunday night. He sets the remnants of his baking on the counter, since the contestants were allowed to take their leftovers home, and kisses Liam hello. He declares himself exhausted and heads up to bed.

Liam doesn’t ask for the next two days. He’s worried that maybe Harry did get eliminated and he doesn’t want to talk about it, but then suddenly he’s in the kitchen practicing again and Liam just doesn’t know what to think.

Harry waits until Thursday night as they are going to bed to finally say something.

“I packed you a few things. Figured we’d leave tomorrow afternoon and stay closer to make it easier.”

Liam stops plumping his pillow and looks over at Harry who is innocently plugging his phone into the charger and turning the light on his side off.

“Make it easier for what? Where are we going?” Liam asks carefully.

Harry turns and looks at him. His face is still innocent and blank.

“Figured we’d stay in Newbury. I want to be closer so I can rest up for each day of the finals. I have a lot of work to do,” he answers evenly. He slides down under the covers and cuddles in closer to Liam, head landing on his chest. “I already texted everyone and booked some rooms. Should be fun.”

“You made it to the finals,” Liam states and he feels Harry smile and laugh.

“Yup,” he answers with a quiet laugh before his head pops up, a cheeky smirk on his lips and chin on his hands. “Yup, I did.”

“Harry!” Liam starts, pulling him in for a kiss. “Jesus, why didn’t you say something sooner? We could have been celebrating all week!”

“Because, I wanted to focus and I wanted it to be a bit of a surprise. I mean, I haven’t won or anything. I have tough competition in Henry for sure. He’s gotten Star Baker a lot, but I’m happy I’ve made it this far,” he declares, smiling softly. “I really didn’t think I would to be honest,” he admits a moment later. He shakes his head slightly and stares at the headboard before his eyes come back to Liam.

Liam runs his fingers through his shorter hair and smiles at him softly as his chest fills with affection and pride.

“Congrats babe. You deserve to be there. No question.”
“You’re biased,” Harry replies with a chuckle.

“No, I’m not. I’ve been tasting all of the stuff you’ve been making. I’m an expert opinion,” Liam retorts.

Harry laughs again and shakes his head, settling back down on Liam’s chest.

“Still though, it will be easier to stay in Newbury for the weekend I think.”

“Yup, sounds good to me,” Liam replies. He closes his eyes to sleep, but still smiles with pride like an idiot.

They form quite the parade the next afternoon. A train of cars heading to Newbury and the hotel workers look a tad overwhelmed when they all pile in talking noisily.

It’s a long two days waiting until Sunday when they will actually be allowed to go to Welford Park. Family was only there for the Show Stopper challenge.

Harry, of course, says nothing about his progress through the first two challenges. He just remains quiet, calm and focused.

Welford Park itself is lovely when they arrive. The sun shines down after several days of rain and a bunch of picnic tables are set up with plenty of decorations and crew people bustling around.

They are assigned an area and cameras are brought over to interview all of them. They are asked how they feel about Harry making it this far in the competition, what he’s been like at home, and if they have any anecdotes about him to be used. Liam wonders momentarily how he will be introduced in the voice over since they still haven’t officially announced their marriage.

Then it is a long tense wait. They drink tea and punch while chatting nervously with each other while just a few yards away, Harry and Henry are working hard inside the tent, no sound filtering out to the people outside. Some very lovely scents do make their way out though, including rich spices and warm fresh baked breads. But Liam doesn’t know if it’s Harry’s work he's smelling or Henry’s.

It feels like a bit of a blur when things finally start happening. The remnants of Harry and Henry’s work are brought out for their respective families to admire. Pieces had been removed during judging, but both are still very impressive.

In a change from the usual format, they had left bread week until last with the final Show Stopper challenge being a bread sculpture using at least four different types of bread and reaching at least three feet tall.

Henry had gone all out with an amusement park made from bread. It was complete with a three foot tall roller coaster with little scone people riding in the car.

Harry’s is a stack of pumpkins all carved as Jack-O-Lanterns. Each with a different face and all different shapes and sizes. It takes Liam a second to recognize them. Stood next to them is a little girl made from bread, quite an impressive feat, and Liam can’t help but smile at the depiction of Madeline. It’s actually quite accurate right down to her cheeky grin. There’s a small boy on the other side sitting on the ground. His hand is stuffed inside another pumpkin and his frog costume is damn near perfect.
The two contestants are led out of the tent with Paul, Mary, Sue and Mel and they stand in a line. The judges each speak a few words about how talented Harry and Henry are, how pleased they are with the results and how tight of a competition it was between them.

Then Sue steps up and the families all go dead silent. Tension fills the air as they ready themselves for the results and Harry’s eyes meet Liam’s. Harry is full of apprehension and nerves and Liam wants so badly to go to him and hold his hand through this, but he’s fairly certain he would quickly be escorted back to his place in the crowd.

“Right, it’s been a grueling and tumultuous ten weeks, mainly for Paul’s goatee, but also for our bakers. We have finally reached the end and I have the joyful task of announcing our winner today,” she declares, clapping her hands together and glancing over at Harry and Henry. Both of them stand stock still and watch her with wide eyes. “So, without further ado, please help me in congratulating… HENRY!”

The crowd starts clapping and Henry’s round face explodes into a huge surprised grin. His hands come up to cover his mouth as his wife scurries over to hug him. Harry steps out of the way and keeps clapping, grinning at Henry as well. He doesn’t look the least bit surprised or upset at the outcome. Liam makes his way over to him and pulls him into a hug as well.

“I’m sorry babe. You deserved it. That sculpture is incredible,” he whispers into Harry’s ear, but Harry immediately pulls back and shakes his head.

“No! No, it’s ok. I wanted him to win. I was just doing this for myself, to try it. But I never intended to go further than the show. At least not publicly,” Harry says emphatically, eyes on Liam’s. “He wants his own show. A career on television with his baking and winning this gives him that chance. I didn’t want to stand in his way.”

“Did you intentionally do something to lose?” Liam asks him incredulously.

“No,” Harry shakes his head. “No, not at all. He’s really good. I knew I could try my hardest, and I did, but that I still wouldn’t stack up against him. It’s ok, really.”

Liam nods, understanding now.

“Well, I’m still proud of you for making it this far,” he declares, hugging Harry again and giving him a quick kiss.

“So are we!” Gemma declares beside him. She shoves Liam out of the way to hug her brother and the rest of the families crowd around.

Somehow a camera and Sue make their way in. She pulls Harry aside for a quiet post-show interview and he reiterates how wonderful Henry is and that he is just happy he made it this far. He tells them that he has no plans to host any baking shows, but that he will continue doing it at home for fun. Sue takes that chance to give Liam a wink and asks if he is alright with that.

“It’s fine by me. Though I’ll have to up my workout time I think,” he replies with a laugh.

They hang out in the park for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, laughing and celebrating.
The drive home is relaxed and for the next several weeks they host watching parties for each episode. Everyone pipes in with their own comments on the judging, always in favor of Harry of course.

For the finale, they invite Jillian, Maddie, David and Sam over and the little girl is thrilled that Harry chose to make a bread sculpture of her. She demands he make another one to stand in her bedroom and to sometimes go to school for her. Harry of course agrees obligingly.

As Liam looks around the living room that evening, he realizes with a jolt that two years have now passed since Harry came back to them. The same amount of time that he was missing. Harry’s birthday had come and gone with the same fanfare as the year before, complete with paper hats and Liam’s store bought cake. Though it isn’t until this night that it truly hits home to him how much has happened and how far they have come.

Four years. Both of them were now 27, which felt frighteningly old. Especially when he remembers that it was over ten years ago that they had joined together as a band called One Direction.

But it was ok, because he had to believe the worst was over and they only had the best things to look forward to in the future.

His eyes meet Harry’s across the room and somehow he knows they are both thinking the same thing. That they are both realizing it. Harry makes his way across the room to Liam. He slides his arms around Liam’s neck and kisses him softly. It had all started five years ago with a kiss in a green room and now look at them.

Liam has never been happier.

Fin.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! As always I’m open to artwork, though this one would be a bit more difficult, but hey, who doesn't like a challenge!

This was quite a journey and I'm sad to see it come to an end, but I hope you all enjoy it!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!