If You Love Me, Come Clean

by withthethieves

Summary

AU in which Louis works at a recording studio where Harry's 'up and coming' and 'exciting', soon-to-be famous indie band has just signed a deal to record their debut album at, and Louis' never even heard of them for Christ's sakes, but that doesn't stop him from repeatedly catching the eye of the raven-haired, eyeliner-wearing and slightly dangerous-looking frontman (but he's not interested, he isn't.)

Notes

Okay so I'm just so incredibly happy to be able to finally post this! I feel like I've been writing it forever and now that it's finally done it feels so great. This fic is really special to me because it's sort of a love-letter to London, as well as the fact that it kind of made me realise a few things about myself, and I think if anyone comes away loving this fic half as much as I love it, then I'll be pleased.
You can find me on tumblr as dreamsmp3! Come talk to me if you want to!

There's a tag for this fic on my blog, which you can find here and also a post for this fic which you can reblog if you want to here.

Every chapter has a song, and there's a playlist with a link to every one on my blog as well which you can find here.

I also have lots of thank yous, so...

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And to everyone else who encouraged me along the way, thank you, I really hope you enjoy x
Louis knows something feels off the second he trudges into Air Studios that morning. Then again, it could have been the three espressos he downed in quick succession earlier, before quite literally running out the door of his flat in order to get the tube to Hampstead Heath on time.

He used to be a tea man, but having to stay up until all-hours of the night going over recently recorded songs, while at the same time writing endless pages of various lyrics and melodies, meant that he’d had to make the transition. He hates the stuff, really, but it helps to get him into the office on days like these, and limits the number of people he has to verbally attack with one of his notorious scathing comments after they would somehow piss him off. So, yeah, it’s not really his thing, but it does the job.

Except, all thoughts of caffeinated substances aside, Louis does have the feeling that there is something different in the air at the studio, and he wants to know who, or what, is responsible.

The answer to his question, or musing, rather, comes in the form of a noisy, and frankly disruptive, cluster of people who bound through the front entrance not minutes later, laughing at something that Louis is sure doesn’t deserve that much of an appreciation. He hasn’t even made it to his desk yet and there’s already loud voices distracting him. This is going to be a long day.

He turns around, facing the direction of the glass door that they came through, ready to tell whoever these people are to shut up, please, thank you very much, in the most biting tone he can muster. Before he can do that, however, he’s met with a vision he definitely didn’t expect to see at 8.35am on a Tuesday morning.

A group of boys have walked in, maybe three? Louis really can’t be bothered to count. The taller one, who can’t be older than early twenties, surely, who’s dressed in all black with sharp, heeled boots and harsh eyeliner to match, stands at the front. Arms behind his back in the middle of the lobby, his wavy, coal-coloured hair is the only soft thing about him. He looks like he’s completely comfortable being the centre of attention, everyone halting their actions to look over at what has caused the disturbance. In fact, he looks like he’s in his element, with a smug grin plastered over his not-attractive-in-the-slightest face.

The sight of him makes irritation prickle at Louis’ skin uncomfortably.

“Can I help you?” Louis inquires, with a hand on his hip and the tone of someone who feels like doing the exact opposite. He’s already had enough of this character, and he hasn’t even said a word yet.

The tall and unkempt boy turns to face him. In a substantial contradiction to his overall rough appearance, his pale green eyes flash with child-like amusement. This only serves to agitate Louis even more.

“I don’t know, can you?” the yet-to-be-named boy utters with a teasing tone, striding towards him.
Louis focuses on his voice, which is low, and husky, and not sexy at all. He sounds like a chainsmoker, Louis notes to himself, and this observation is in no way an attempt to distract himself from how incredibly disarming the boy looks up close.

Louis pulls his thoughts together in time to respond, “Well, that depends on how much of my time you’re planning on wasting.”

His snarky response only amuses the emerald-eyed, alluring boy in front of him. He honestly looks like a forest nymph or something, all bouncy and beautiful, like something mythical.

The boy chuckles, looks straight into Louis’ eyes, and holds out his hand. Louis is momentarily surprised that someone who looks and acts like he does still manages to maintain decent manners. His plump lips (the ones Louis definitely isn’t staring at) stretch open in a wide grin, “Hi, I’m Ha–”

“Harry! You’re all here! Perfect.” Their introduction is cut short by an excited shout and a clap that comes from behind them. Louis cringes at the jarring sound. Honestly, does no one here respect how early in the morning it is?

“Mr. King, pleasure to finally meet you face to face,” Harry chirps, and twists in the direction of what turns out to be the Studio Manager and Louis’ boss, his eyes lingering on Louis for just a moment before. Ah, so that’s why they’re here.

“Please, call me Tommy. And the pleasure’s all mine! We’re all so excited to be working with you and your band here. The Cahoots is a very interesting name, might I add; so unique!” Louis’ boss speaks with the kind of early-morning enthusiasm that can be in no way natural. Or healthy, to be honest. His salt and pepper hair gives away how old he’s getting, and Louis thinks to himself that he probably needs all the positivity he can get, what with being in such a stressful industry for this long. Perhaps he is also a three-espressos-in-the-morning man. Louis doesn’t care much to ask, really. Also, The Cahoots? That’s who they are? What kind of name is that? Bloody weird, is what it is.

Louis hasn’t been working at this recording studio very long, but he definitely likes this one the most out of all the studios he’s worked at. The fact that he even has this job is a miracle, really.

It’s a step up from his last position, going from an Assistant Sound Engineer to an actual Recording Engineer, being able to sit at the audio console in the studio in the knowledge that he’s in charge of it, and responsible for how the song being recorded will sound like. He applied with such little faith that he would actually get it, with relatively not that much experience in the field in comparison to others applying. He had only been in the industry a few years - came straight out of uni into it. Tom must’ve seen something in him though, thank god, and, then again, he does surprise himself sometimes. So, yeah, maybe he shouldn’t have been as rude as he had been just now, all things considered, but something about Harry consistently casting glances his way tells him not to worry too much.

“Isn’t that right, Louis?” he’s pulled from his reverie when he hears his name, and looks up to see his boss staring at him expectantly. Harry is stood next to him, hands behind his back, sneering at him with a smug expression on his face, yet again. No doubt he’s realised that Louis wasn’t exactly paying full attention.

“What was that, Tom?” he asks with the most genuine looking smile he can muster, absent mindingly fixing his hair. God, this is tiring. He glances over at his desk with a feeling of desperation to just sit down and not talk to anyone for the next hour. He wishes it wasn’t an open-plan office so that he wouldn’t be able to see it right now, mere metres away, taunting him.

“I said, we can’t wait to start on helping this album. We’ve been looking forward to this one for ages,
haven’t we?” Tom gives him a look as if to say that any response other than an equally positive one isn’t worth voicing.

“Yes… so excited. If you’ll excuse me, I think I’m expecting a phone call…” Louis trails off, in his speech and movements, turning around and slowly making his way to sweet safety, also known as his desk. It’s right next to the mini kitchen area, which holds the kettle and coffee machine, so all the more reason to get there as quickly as possible.

“Hang on, Louis,” call-me-Tommy protests and Louis’ shoulders tense up. He slowly turns back around to face all of them.

God, they all look the same, all ripped jeans and wild expressions, so young and ready and untainted by the harsh world of the industry. Louis feels a sudden pang of emotion, something he isn’t used to, at the thought of them becoming jaded too soon. The business can be tough, and he’s seen what it’s done to people. How it’s changed them, shaped them into people that they swore they would never turn into. He hopes, silently to himself, that that doesn’t happen to them. Well, not to the other two anyway. Harry looks a bit more like he’d be alright; there is a certain melancholy in his eyes that makes it seem like he’s had his fair share of less than pleasant experiences. Louis wonders how he’s so sure of that when they’ve only just met.

Harry continues to stare, and Louis feels his eyes boring into him as he faces his boss. “I was going to ask you to sit in on our meeting today. We’ll be discussing our plans for the next month or so, and since you’ll be involved in some areas, I thought it would be a good idea to just have you all in together. Kill two birds with one stone, eh?” Tom speaks through a smile, and Louis could just whimper.

That idea sounds like the exact opposite of what he wants to do, especially considering how unsure he feels about his ability to control his wandering eyes being stuck in a small room with them all. (This is regardless of the fact that his eyes only seemed to wander to one person in the group in particular). It’s not that he is interested in Harry, it’s just that… Well, he’s nice to look at, okay? It isn’t every day that attractive men walk into the office, so sue him for taking advantage of the view.

“No, perfectly fine, Tom. I’ll just grab a coffee then,” Louis mutters, losing all strength to keep up his good mood. Also, if he’s going to have to sit through whatever this meeting was, he’s going to need some kind of crutch.

“Hmm. Had you pegged as a tea man myself. You seem the sort,” that low husky voice speaks again, and Louis turns to look up at Harry, who he hasn’t been purposefully avoiding eye contact with for the past few minutes. Not at all. Nope.

“Well, you’re wrong. Sorry I didn’t fit your stereotype, love,” Louis responds with a poorly contained eye roll. This guy has barely spoken to him and is already making assumptions about his hot beverage of choice? Thinks he knows him well enough to assume that kind of inherent fact? Ridiculous.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Harry starts with a sly grin, “You fit my stereotype just fine.” Whatever the hell that means. Louis feels like it was intended to be suggestive nonetheless.

“Right. Well. I’ll uh… Um, I’ll see you in there, then, Tom,” Louis stutters, furrowing his brows, still slightly affronted at Harry’s response.

He fits his stereotype? What? Of the tea-drinking, sarcastic, slightly grumpy in the morning, British man? Or of the witty and sassy, effeminate gay man? Louis has always been conscious of his sexuality, and how his actions come across to others around him. He’s proud of who he is, always
has been, but that doesn’t mean there weren’t nasty people just waiting to call you whatever offensive slur they chose based on the way they heard you speak, or the way they saw you were dressed. Although, in all honesty, the comment didn’t seem too alarming to Louis, and to be fair he could be over-reacting (he’s been known to before) so he isn’t feeling that threatened or pissed off just yet, however that can change very quickly.

As he walks towards his desk, finally, he hears the ends of the conversation filter through the air, as the group of them walk down the hallway that leads them to the meeting room at the back of the ground floor.

“...I tell him time and time again to call me Tommy, everyone else does, he just refuses though. He’s funny, our Louis!” Tom jokes, with only a slight bitterness to his tone. It’s not that he refuses to call his boss by his preferred name, it’s just that there is something about calling a man over fifty the same name a child of five that seems particularly unsettling to Louis. So, yeah, he’d rather just not.

“Yeah,” Harry, of course, responds. “A feisty one for sure,” his slow and monotonous voice carries across the room.

Louis can almost see the self-satisfied smirk that’s more than likely plastered over his face. Well, if Harry is going to form stereotypes, so will Louis. This hardly legal boy is surely just another Alex Turner-wannabe, who’s band Louis has never even heard of, by the way, and he probably owns too many vinyl records in the hope that they will heighten his indie status. He definitely, without a doubt, smokes too many cigarettes, and he also probably sleeps with a new woman, person, whatever, each night. Which is fine. Not that he’s jealous, or anything. That’s just what he’s assuming.

Jesus christ, he needs more caffeine.

Louis makes his way to the meeting room shortly after, warm mug clutched in hand and bored expression on his face. Honestly, he didn’t sign up for this, this babysitting or whatever it is.

He runs a hand through his hair, frustratedly. It’s getting a bit long now, curled slightly at the ends, brushing his collar. Louis likes to pretend it’s because he likes it, that it suits him, maybe, but actually it’s due to the fact that he hasn’t really gotten round to going to the hairdresser’s recently.

Regardless of his hair concerns, though, the fact is Louis was in the middle of finishing a song for another one of their more respectable artists last night, and he wanted to have it done by lunch today. That doesn’t seem like a possibility now, though.

He walks in and is met with an intriguing sight. To his left sits his boss, ready and waiting and hardly even on his seat, likening himself to a hyperactive puppy. To his right sits two of the three band members, quiet and relaxed and waiting. He probably has their names written down somewhere on his desk, abandoned, but he can’t for the life of him seem to remember them this early in the morning.

There is one who Louis can only describe as looking a little bit like a teddy bear. All soft, crinkly eyes and a warm smile, and a giggly, infectious laugh. He has sandy blond hair and is the only one of them all who’s wearing a leather jacket. He looks like he’s one of those people who are always happy. Louis likes him straight away.

The one sitting next to him has a darker, more olive tone to his skin, with chocolate brown eyes, and dark, dark spiky hair with a shock of hot pink tips at the end of it. Some stubble and a nose-piercing completes his unique look and, to be honest, he’s fucking gorgeous. It looks a bit like a model has walked in by accident. Louis is slightly intimidated but he seems alright. Didn't give off the arsehole
vibe quite like Harry did. They both look laid-back and cool. He probably would have been okay with coming to this meeting had it just been these guys. They seem nice enough. But, alas, the universe is not working in his favour. Yet again.

While everyone else in the room are sitting in their seats like normal people, just opposite the door, in front of Louis, sits Harry; or should he say, reclines. Feet on the table (in some sparkly black boots that Louis detests immediately) and hands behind his head, with that same smug grin as before. He is emulating the rockstar image he so obviously is desperately hoping to achieve. Dressed in ripped black skinny jeans and a silky jet-black shirt that may as well have just been left open completely, considering the amount of skin Louis can see. Skin that is littered with inky scrawls all up and down his chest and shoulders. Not that he’s looking, or anything.

Harry is laughing at something, probably one of those arse-kissing jokes that Tom makes to all their clients whenever he begins working with them. Harry turns to look at Louis, though, when he moves to take a seat next to Tom. Harry’s calculating stare does not go unnoticed, nor does the very obvious once over that he gives him either. Right, then.

“Well, now that we’re all here, I thought we’d discuss our game plan for The Cahoots and their time at Air Studios. Let’s see what the next few weeks look like going forward, shall we?” his boss begins, and Louis just knows his speech is going to be chock full of those hideous buzzwords that Tom likes to use. Fabulous. Louis wants to drown in his latte.

“What does he do? Why is he here?” Louis looks up at the sound of the interrogatory question and is met with those maddening kohl-outlined green eyes again. God, they’re like magnets; he is helplessly drawn to them.

It takes him a little while then, to catch up to the fact that Harry is referring to him, and not in an altogether polite way, either. Louis opens his mouth to retort, his face scrunching in mild offense, and Harry’s eyes shine with anticipation. But then Tom beats him to it and, well, that’s probably for the best.

“Louis here is our next star songwriter! He’s a Recording Engineer right now, works with the group of them that we have here and he’s doing a damn good job. He’s hoping to fly the nest soon though, and freelance in songwriting, aren’t you, Louis?” Tom doesn’t wait for a response, “I was actually thinking–”

“Oh, a songwriter.” Harry looks unconvinced. “Very interesting indeed,” he speaks in a tone that suggests he finds it quite the opposite. “We like to write too. Quite brilliant at it, actually. Don’t think we’ll really need any help,” Harry rocks on his chair, a tight smile overtaking his relaxed expression from earlier as he cuts Tom off. He seems determined to rile Louis up this morning.

“Well that’s just fine, considering I’m very busy and don’t possibly have the time to fit you in anyway. My sincerest apologies,” Louis begins, in the most sarcastic voice he’s willing to put on in front of his boss, looking straight at Harry with an equally controlled gaze. He isn’t about to be insulted in his own place of work by some arrogant little wannabe rockstar.

“Ah, well, you see, Louis, that’s one of the reasons I wanted you in with us today. I was thinking that, as the boys here will be with us for a while and still have to record a part of their album, and you’ll be working in the studio anyway, maybe you could help out a bit?” Tom bursts out, quickly, as if he knows it’s a risky question.

“Help out?” Louis and Harry blurt at the same time, both looking at Tom incredulously. This is so not how Louis had thought his morning would turn out. Why hasn’t Tom told him about this before? Why give him this job when he’s already working on so many other projects? And why on earth
does Harry seem so outraged at the idea? He has a lot of questions.

“We don’t need any help. We just need the recording facilities. That’s it. We don’t need a songwriter,” Harry growls with his nose upturned. Louis feels heat course through him. How dare he? He sounds like an ungrateful twat. “We have a couple damn good ones in our band already,” Harry continues with gritted teeth, his entire demeanour changing. And Louis absolutely does not find that determined attitude sexy in the slightest. Not at all. Him shifting in his seat has nothing to do with that non-fact either. Ugh. This is confusing. Harry is obviously a tosser, but he was also unfairly attractive. Louis hates everything.

“Oh but Louis is so good! And he needs experience. He’s wonderful, very versatile and extremely talented. I think you’ll all mesh so well!” Louis feels himself blush under the praise. He’s also shocked that his boss has enough faith in him to trust him with this. He’s obviously written songs before, but never for a band with quite the reputation or expectations attached. He knows he’s alright, but he can’t really take compliments very well. That’s an entirely different issue, though.

“And I’m sorry boys,” he continues, “But that was part of the agreement we made with your label. You putting one of our team members on your album credits was in the contract, due to the fact that you’re relatively, well… unknown. So far, I mean. Hopefully after this album is done we’ll be hearing you on the radio so often we’ll be sick of you!” Tom laughs, an artificial, hollow sound, that’s met with no response from the band, and Louis has to stop himself from sighing, “I do hope this isn’t the first you’re hearing of this?” As Tom’s sentence goes on, his enthusiasm depletes into something similar to dread.

Harry sighs, and moves to push his hair back but then is met with little to work with. He looks at the offending hand and gently shakes his head. Must’ve gotten it cut recently, then, and he isn’t used to the new length. Or something. Not that Louis cares. He definitely isn’t imagining him with longer hair, either.

“Harry, to be fair, we did know this coming in. Well, we knew,” one of the other boys says, the teddy bear. He’s referring to himself and their other bandmate sitting at the table. Apparently Harry is the only one who hadn’t read the contract before signing it. Why does that not surprise Louis?

“Why did no-one tell me this? I definitely wasn’t aware that this was the agreement.” Harry turns to glare at this bandmates, something akin to anger playing on his features. Louis, on this rare occasion, can’t help but agree with Harry.

The sandy-haired boy speaks up again. He’s still smiling, but there is frustration evident in his tone. Maybe this isn’t the first time this has happened, “It was in the contract! You had weeks to read it. Why does that not surprise Louis?”

“I was busy,” Harry quips, turning away to glare at nothing, and effectively killing the argument.

“But I was busy,” fashion model drawls, chiming in a response and tutting. Yeah, definitely not the first time this has happened, then.

The tension in the room is thick and no one really knows what to say. Louis looks over at Harry and sees that he’s visibly frustrated. He’s picking at his painted fingernails, a dark blood red, almost black, colour staining them; it’s a stark contrast to his pale, wan skin. Louis finds it difficult to look away.

He’s interrupted from his absorption with the boy’s fidgeting by his boss clearing his throat next to him.
“Right. Well. I uh, I hope this doesn’t change anything, lads. Of course we can contact the label and do this another day, perhaps? We’d really love to have you here though, and I’m sure Air Studios can supply you with the best equipment for your album to sound as polished as possible. We won an award for Best Studio a couple of years back, you know! From the Music Producers Guild, no less,” Tom announces, never missing a chance to promote the studio.

Honestly, they’re already here. It’s not like they really need more convincing. Louis feels he knows this industry more than his boss does sometimes. There is no way they’re going to walk away. If their label has already agreed and contracts have been signed, nothing is going to change. Louis then supposes that Tom is merely saying this as a formality, and give them the illusion that they have a chance of getting out of a contract, even though everyone knows how futile that can be. That, and also as an opportunity to plug Air Studios. Louis doesn’t care much for that artificial sort of behaviour, usually sticks to just watching on and remaining passive.

“No, obviously we’re delighted that we have this opportunity, of course it doesn’t change anything. I think we all just need to have a chat,” teddy bear reassures, taking on a leadership-like tone, looking pointedly at Harry. “Thank you so much, we really can’t wait to get started here, and we’d be so grateful for some help with the writing of the rest of the album too,” he adds, now looking towards Louis and Tom. Harry huffs in his chair, arms crossed, looking like a pouty child. Hm. Maybe that’ll be his nickname.

The pseudo-fashion model doesn’t speak again, just nods his approval, and Louis doesn’t blame him. He’s exhausted too. They haven’t been there longer than half an hour and Louis is already considering taking an early lunch to go home and have a nap.

“Amazing, well, that settles it then! I suppose the only thing left to discuss is time. The label said you would need only about a month or so in order to post-produce your existing songs and also finish creating the rest for the album. I’ve been told it’s fairly short, and you’ve got about half done, and only a few songs left to record, so that sounds good to me. That sound about right to you lot?” Tom is still going with his happy-go-lucky attitude. If nothing else, Louis has to admire his determination.

The boys nod. Well, all except Harry, who has now taken to relentlessly tapping his short fingernails against the wooden desk. He seems agitated, all tense and jittery. Louis has no sympathy. Any chance of that flew out the window the second Harry questioned his song-writing capabilities. Harry is almost off his chair with how tightly-wound he looks, ready to spring away at any given moment.

He suddenly turns towards them then, jumping out of his chair into action, after staring blankly at the wall for god-knows-how-long. In a quick and jumpy voice he snaps, “Cool, well, now that that’s done I think we’ll be on our way boys, right? We’ll see you all very soon, I imagine. Goodbye.”

And then he’s out the door like that. Immediately, it seems.

Louis has never seen anyone move so fast this early in the day, or be so eager to leave this room. He’s probably off to chain smoke his way through the rest of the morning, or something along those lines, if his antsy behaviour before was any indication.

“You’re welcome,” Louis mutters to himself, not missing Harry’s lack of thanks. It’s fine. He doesn’t care. Really. Just feels like a little appreciation wouldn’t have gone amiss. Obviously, he was wrong earlier when he assumed Harry had manners. This isn’t the first time this has happened at his job, and Harry isn’t the first spoilt wannabe rockstar to not show their gratitude, but still.

Louis complains a lot, but he loves his job, and he has been at some pretty creative and mind-blowing meetings in this particular meeting space. He’s been in the presence of icons in this room before, and has always wanted to stay in the moment for as long as possible. Obviously Harry didn’t share the same sentiment as him, as demonstrated when he jolted out of the room in record time.
The two other band members just look at each other a little helplessly, both minutely shaking their heads and sighing. So Harry is always a bit of a handful, then. Of course he is.

They stand up and shake hands with Louis and Tom, thanking them profusely, with promises of tickets to their gig coming up that weekend. Louis tries to look more excited than he feels.

They all leave the room and Louis has no idea where Harry has gotten to. He has probably left already. Louis doesn’t care. He’s sort of too overcome with a sense of unease and confusion.

“So, that went well then!” Tom turns to smile at Louis, and Louis almost feels bad for him and his unmoving positivity. Oh, the amount of stress-inducing effort that he knew they were going to have to put into this album with a problematic frontman like that. Louis almost shudders at the thought.

Tom claps him on the shoulder and makes to leave, the same way the rest of the boys had. He disappears, off to go and do his job, probably, something that Louis should be doing too. He stalls, though. Now it’s just Louis alone with his thoughts as he stares out the window. He tugs at his hair in frustration, wondering what on earth he has just gotten himself into. It’s a sunny day in North-West London. Peaceful. He better make the most of the tranquility now while he still has it. Christ, Louis thinks as he swirls his now-cold coffee, he just knows for sure that it is going to be a tough month ahead of him. This feeling right now is, without a doubt, the calm before the storm that is Harry Styles.

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Louis grumpily huddles into his hoodie as the sun sets in Camden. The breeze is starting to get to him, while he’s sat on the cool bench in the packed beer garden that he’s currently in. British summer happens for about three weeks a year, and his fellow patrons are evidently taking full advantage. It seems relatively busy for a Thursday night, lots of people milling about on the streets. When he voices his thoughts, his ever so kind pub partner suggests that maybe Louis is just getting old.

“Anyway, he’s just awful, Niall, an absolute nightmare. I can’t believe that my next month at work consists of dealing with that disaster and his band,” Louis complains, electing to ignore the prior comment, and picking up on an earlier conversation. He sighs after taking a rather large sip of his pint. He’s halfway to being tipsy and he wants to get there as soon as possible.

“Hey! I’ve heard their music, it’s sick. A little indie, maybe, but they’ve got some smashing tunes. Count yourself lucky to be working with them.” Niall is defending them. His only friend already on the dark side. Brilliant. Louis rolls his eyes for what felt like the third time that hour. The conversation is tiring when he isn’t grumbling away.

“And he doesn’t sound too bad, mate. Just a little rough around the edges, a bit of a loose canon. I’m sure you’ll figure out how to get on sooner or later,” Niall replies, eyes wandering towards the direction of the backdoor to the dimly lit pub, probably in search of the footie match that’s playing on the telly inside. United isn’t in this game so in all honesty, Louis isn’t interested.

“That’s easy for you to say, you bloody Irishman. Everyone adores you! You could make friends with a serial killer if you tried hard enough,” Louis whines, looking over at his best friend, trying not to sound too jealous of his unfair ability to make everyone who meets him fall at his feet.

“Oh, you mean Charlie?” the blue-eyed brunette pipes up. “I visit him sometimes in prison, he’s doing well,” he grins at his joke. Louis scowls.

“Oh shut up, you insufferable twat.” Louis takes another swig of his beer in an attempt to hide a slow smile. He can never stay angry at Niall for longer than a few minutes. Must be part of that enviable Irish charm.

Niall and Louis have been friends since before uni, attached at the hip, really. They had parted ways for a few years while Louis went to Goldsmiths to study Music Computing, and Niall went to Bristol to study Law. They found their way back to each other though, of course, and they’ve been living in London near each other, by total coincidence, surprisingly, ever since they finished school. They each have a tiny flat in Chalk Farm, a couple of roads away from each other, not far from where they were now. It’s in a good location, only about 2 stops on the tube away from where Louis works. It comforts Louis, then, to know that his warm bed is only less than twenty minutes away, give or take, as right now he feels like he’s freezing his arse off right there at that table.

Niall’s job, on the other hand, is about twenty minutes in the opposite direction, so they usually meet here, a perfect halfway point between their places of work. Niall’s position is a Law Clerk at a law
firm in Soho, under his father’s leadership no less. He’s told Louis before that the job is stressful, but
watching his friend down three shots of tequila in a row at barely 10pm on a Thursday evening really
drives that particular confession home. Perhaps the inebriety is to explain why the Irishman is being
particularly unhelpful tonight.

“And the worst part is, I don’t even get a break from him this weekend! I’ve got to go see a bloody
gig of theirs tomorrow night, when I’d much rather spend that time gauging my eyes out with a fork,
quite frankly,” Louis huffs, mostly to himself. Niall has lost concentration, of course.

Louis knows he’s laying it on thick, but he’s frustrated. He’s already stressed and it’s only been a
couple of days since The Cahoots had come to the studio and torn through it like a hurricane. Well,
maybe that was just Harry.

Harry. Louis can’t really stop thinking about him. He’s made peace with himself and admitted that he
did find him rather attractive, from an objective perspective. That doesn’t mean he’s attracted to him,
though. Not at all. Nor does it excuse Harry’s unpleasant behaviour. In fact, it makes it even worse.
No one with a face as nice as that should be so curt. It’s unsettling.

He had found it difficult–is still finding it difficult–to shake the image of the tattoos on Harry’s pallor
chest that he had chanced a glimpse at, all small scrawls and murky, dark designs and– and probably
all meaningless too, knowing Harry. Probably just all for the rockstar effect he was going for. The
fact that Louis is finding it hard to forget this particular sight has nothing to do with how visibly
sculpted he remembers Harry’s chest and shoulders had been, all harsh edges met with soft skin. (So
maybe Louis isn’t trying his utmost hardest to forget. Maybe.)

“Whas that ‘bout a gig, you said?” Niall slurs, the alcohol finally catching up to him. Louis dreads
having to drag him home later that evening. He knows it’s going to be nothing short of a mission to
dissuade him from inevitably offering to do yet another rendition of some classical Irish folk song, a
performance that the pub definitely did not need to see for a fifth time that month. Louis is surprised
that they’re still allowed within the vicinity after that behaviour.

“Oh, so now you care. Just when my job becomes interesting you pipe up, is that it? God, the pure
cheek of you, Horan,” Louis chides, with no heat in his words. It isn’t fair to torment a drunk Niall;
he gets rather slow on the uptake, and can never understand why he’s the only one not laughing.
“There’s a gig, on Friday– that’s tomorrow, Niall, are you keeping up?” Louis continues
condescendingly, and that earns him a slap on the head. Yeah, he did kind of deserve that. “Sorry,
sorry!” he giggles; maybe the alcohol was hitting him too. “There’s a gig tomorrow, basically, and I
have to go, and that means I have to stay there for at least 3 hours while I watch their set and then
meet with them after. My boss was talking to me about it today. Hey, actually, what are you doing
tomorr–”

“Yes! Yes I’ll come wi’ you!” Niall suddenly cuts him off. “Please, fer the love of God, I haven’t
gone out properly in two weeks, and if I have to research that old Tort Law case about a snail found
in a bloody ginger beer bottle eighty years ago for the fifth night in a row I’m going to scream.” Niall
has really perked up, it seems. Louis can’t help but chuckle.

“Alright, alright. Relax! It’s gonna be a pretty unspectacular night, I can guarantee that. I can already
imagine how pretentious he’ll be acting on stage. I suppose it may be better if you tag along,
though…” Louis manages to get out, finding it hard to admit that he maybe needed his best mate to
come with him in order to make the evening more bearable.

“Aww Lou! You want me to come! You love me!” Niall sings, sloshing his beer about in jubilation,
and grinning from ear to ear.
“I tolerate you,” Louis deadpans. He was never good with telling his friends he loved them flat-out, even when did feel that way. He’s better at expressing his emotions through sarcastic comments. He’s almost certain that it was always clear what he was really saying. He hopes so, anyway.

“And you coming along is purely for my benefit. I need some kind of buffer between me and them. Him,” Louis finishes, with an air of good-natured teasing. He usually finds it difficult to admit he needed help of any kind, due to a fear of embarrassment, of seeming weak or incompetent in any way, or something ridiculous like that. It’s pathetic, and it’s something he needs to work on. But after knowing Niall for so long, he feels fully comfortable asking something of him without any anxiety attached. Also, Niall, of course, bless him, knows just how to make him asking seem like not such a big deal. So, that’s also reassuring. (Okay, maybe he did love him a little bit.)

“Whatever you say, mate. We’re going to see The Cahoots! We’re going backstage! Can’t wait to tell the lads at work about this, it’ll be the most excitement they’ll have had in weeks!” Niall cheers, and Louis already has a headache.

Smoke assaults Louis’ nostrils the second he saunters into the venue. It’s overflowing with people, all dressed the same; dark, ripped clothing, and lots of leather. They’re the fans, then, he guesses. He wasn’t aware that this band had such a reputation. Then again, they’re as far from mainstream as it could get, and working at a studio which only usually helps record albums for already well-known acts, meant that Louis wouldn’t have had many chances in the past to come across them. All things considered, Louis is very much not looking forward to the next few hours of his life, knowing full well that his current relatively good mood won’t be here for long. Not when there’s a certain Harry Styles in the vicinity.

He looks around him, the dingy and stuffy room making him feel even more on edge. Why did the person who designed this place not believe in any kind of ventilation system? Louis is sure he’s getting a second hand high from just standing here. Aren’t there rules against that sort of thing? Does anyone care? Probably not. It’s dark as well, he can barely make out the outline of bodies standing in front of him, has to keep making sure Niall is still next to him every few minutes and hasn’t been whisked away by some exotic looking (and completely out of his league) leather-clad woman. The neon letters lit up in the corner of the room, spelling out the word ‘Bar’, are enough to slightly ease his slowly darkening demeanour. A beer or two will perhaps make this whole excursion slightly less torturous. He makes his way over, Niall still in tow (astonishingly), and orders them some drinks.

“Hi, just four pints of beer please,” he begins, placing his arms on the table top to cage himself in, slightly breathless from having to push towards to front, multiple already-drunk bodies had made that task a bit more difficult than he anticipated. Maybe he had to elbow a few people out of the way, and, yes, maybe he did spill a few drinks in his impatience to get to the bar, but he would deny it vehemently if anyone asked. “Whatever you have on tap that’s the cheapest would be great.”

“That’s quite a few drinks just for one person, innit? You’re only little...” a voice from behind the bar teases, as they start pouring the drinks, and is that a giggle Louis hears?

Louis doesn’t know what to say. Is this faceless person... flirting? God, it’s been a while. He almost isn’t sure. Also, he isn’t little, thank you very much. He regains his composure and is about to tell them as much when the boy steps into the light and Louis gets a proper look at him. He’s quite fit. Louis is pleasantly surprised.

“Uh… they’re... for my friend, too,” Louis stutters, making some sort of aborted gesture towards Niall’s general direction, keeping eye contact with a pair of illuminated hazel eyes. He’s a bit stunned and as a result completely lacking in his chat-up skills. What kind of response was that? The
The bartender was obviously joking, he knew they weren’t all for Louis, it was just a line. Well, Louis hopes so. He hopes the man doesn’t think he has some sort of problem or something.

“I’m not an alcoholic or anything!” Louis splutters out quickly. And what? Why? Why did he say that? Now he definitely thinks he’s mental. Christ.

The man laughs again, to Louis’ shock, and hands over the pints. God, he must really be taking pity on him. That was absolutely tragic.

“Yeah, if you were I wouldn’t think a few beers would quite satisfy your addiction, anyway. Maybe just give you a sore tummy,” he smiles, an amused glint in those pretty eyes. He had said ‘tummy’. Why is Louis so endeared? Also, aren’t there other customers the man needed to attend to? He needs to go, surely the show is starting soon. Louis doesn’t need beautiful man stress on top of everything else. Honestly, the universe is really doing a number on him this week. The guy’s name is Will, he finds out, and he’s really being much too nice to Louis than he deserves.

“Louis. Nice to meet you. Sorry about the alcoholic thing. That was weird,” oh for fucks sake, why did he acknowledge it? Will seems like a nice enough guy, he probably would have pretended it hadn’t happened if Louis hadn’t said anything.

“But weird. Cute, in my opinion. But if you are actually looking for something a little stronger, maybe a tequila shot would suffice? Or four? On the house.” Will winks. He’s teasing him. Louis finds himself smiling. He looks around, and of course Niall has now chosen this as a perfect time to disappear.

“Uh… just one would be good… thanks, Will,” Louis replies. What was he doing? He’s technically at work, meant to be watching *The Cahoots* play in a minute. Meant to be watching Harry. Harry. He’d almost forgotten about that whole situation. “Maybe two actually, on second thought, thanks.” Louis looks towards the stage, and wonders how soon they’re starting. Wonders what they’ll look like. What Harry will look like.

Harry has been occupying Louis’ thoughts a lot in the past few days, even more so since going to the pub with Niall, after their chat, or on Louis’ part, complaints about him. There’s just something so intriguing about him, something Louis can’t quite put his finger on. The way he’d acted before, his mood changes so swift, going from charming to cutting in a blink of an eye. It made him seem like a bit of an enigma. Louis can’t decide if he was up to the task of decoding him or not.

“Louis?” he hears his name, and turns back towards the bar to Will’s waiting gaze, hands holding out two full shot glasses with lime segments balanced precariously on the edge.

He shakes his head out of his Harry haze, accepting the drinks and draining one of them immediately, on account of him now being slightly desperate for the alcohol to course through his bloodstream, in order to hopefully bring his rapid heart rate down.

Why is he even having this reaction to just the thought of Harry? Louis doesn’t want to think about that, instead choosing to have the next shot, only grimacing a little bit, too distracted by his attempts to keep an eye on Will and an ear out for the inevitable cheers that will resound when the band finally comes out. Their staring contest is interrupted by someone bashing into him, and he turns to have a look at whoever is responsible.

“Hey mate! Did you get us our drinks? I’m parched. Also we should probably get a good place at the front, I think they’re coming on soon.” Of course it’s Niall. All red-faced and enthusiastic already. Louis hopes after these shots kick in he’ll be nearing his level.
Louis’ reminded that he should probably pay for the drinks before he slopes off, and says as much to Will, who’s, yep, still watching him. The bartender says that it’s on the house, however Louis’ general cynicism for the world comes in handy when Will quickly adds that this is only under one condition.

“And what might that be?” Louis is almost sure he knows what’s coming, but it never hurts to ask. Plus, this guy is attractive. Not overwhelmingly so, but that’s never stopped Louis from flirting back before. It’s all for fun, anyway.

“Go out with me.” Oh. Louis is a bit stunned. He was expecting for Will to ask for his number, not on a date. He isn’t used to guys being so forward with him. Niall tuts quietly next to him, and he can almost see the exasperation on his friend’s face. For Louis, though, this hasn’t happened in such a while. Niall will just have to deal with it.

“Um, okay,” Louis begins, finally lifting the drinks off the bar, which proves to be quite difficult considering it’s four pints and he will admit his own hands aren’t the largest he has ever come across. Harry, however, has rather large hands, he remembers. Anyway. “Find me at the end of your shift. Maybe I’ll give you my number.” Louis winks. He winks! He’s getting his flirting finesse back, it seems. That gives him a bit more confidence.

He turns away, and deposits two beers into Niall’s awaiting arms, not missing his quiet fookin’ finally took you long enough under his breath. He chuckles and ambles towards the front of the room near the stage, and makes his way into the crowd, but not before hearing a stunted reply from behind him, “Oh, I will!” cheekiness evident in the voice. Louis smirks.

He had forgotten how fun this was.

They eventually make their way to the front, after a couple of excuse me’s and so sorry’s, and Louis is overcome with the intensity of it all. The room is alive, everyone waiting in anticipation for the performance, all slightly buzzed, too, with eyes locked on the stage, so as not to miss a thing. Louis can’t help but do the same, despite his preconceived notions. He feels his blood pumping, and he’s unable to stand still, waiting for something to happen. So, okay, maybe he is a little bit excited, but this happens at every gig, this has nothing to do with anything tonight specifically, and certainly not to do with anyone by the name of Harry Styles.

Almost as if he can hear Louis’ thoughts, that is the moment Harry decides to step out, and the crowd goes insane. Screams and cheers can probably be heard a mile away, at least that’s how it feels. He had no idea that this, here, is the kind of wild reaction Harry would trigger.

The light display spurs people on even more, and music starts playing, and that’s when the other two appear as well, Zayn and Liam, Louis had found out their names were called (from Niall, of all people). Louis isn’t focusing on any of that though, only on the absolute vision in front of him; the tall and lean boy, dripping with sex-appeal, standing behind a microphone. Smirk on his face, ruby-red guitar slung lazily over his body, adorning sinfully tight trousers. His eyes are perfectly smudged with eyeliner, black hair artfully tousled, and Louis feels slightly overwhelmed. Harry’s wearing a sheer black shirt, rolled up the sleeves, and are those flowers printed on the back? Louis closes his mouth. Hadn’t even realised it had been open. He hopes Harry hadn’t seen him like that. Not that he cares, or anything.

Harry strums a few cords, and Louis realises where he is. He stands up straighter, glances around him. Everyone looks like they’ve just won the lottery, elated smiles on their faces, all drawn to the same view Louis has just been staring at. He doesn’t blame them.

“Evening, lads and ladies. Lovely to see your beautiful, beautiful faces tonight,” a slow drawl rings
out through the speakers, and Louis rolls his eyes. Of course the classic Harry Styles charm would be switched on, how could he forget.

He looks back up at the stage, and at once falls into some sort of daze. Glimmering sea green eyes catch his own shining blue ones, not before catching the light surrounding them. They’re beautiful, stunning, the kind of eyes Louis could get lost in. Forever, maybe. The kind of eyes that beckon questions, a slight glint in them, like they know something you don’t. Louis is drawn to them, and he doesn’t mind. He doesn’t mind who they belong to right now, because, at this moment, they’re the most exquisite sight he has ever had the pleasure to see.

Louis lets out a breath he didn’t realise he’d been holding. Harry seems to do the same. They both look away.

“Mate… what the fuck was that?” he hears from next to him, and oh yes, Niall is there. Niall is there with him because they’re at a gig, and there are also other people around, lots of people in fact; he can feel all their eyes on him. It’s not actually just him and Harry in the room. Louis could have been fooled.

“I think they’re starting now,” Louis says, glancing at Niall and ignoring the question because in all honestly, Louis doesn’t know what that… moment was and he’d rather not dwell on it. Niall, the good person that he is, decides to drop it after that. Louis is often reminded why Niall is his best friend, and this is one of those times.

The band begins playing the opening music to a song Louis doesn’t recognise, and Harry starts writhing about on the stage, features contorting as he croons out the first few lyrics. He’s singing about life and death and the injustice in the world, or maybe it’s something along those lines, because in all honesty, Louis can’t hear the lyrics over the determined voice in his head telling him to look away, and stop staring, and bloody hell remember to breathe. Louis gulps the rest of his beer down, trying his best to pretend like he isn’t having some sort of internal crisis.

The next few songs come and go, and with them comes Harry behaving even more outrageously, at one point even grinding on the mic stand, which was not in any way good for Louis’ health. Harry is in his element on stage, Louis has to admit, beaming through the lyrics, interacting with the crowd, completely putting on a show. He looks happy and alive. Louis feels a sense of warmth overcome him at the sight, and tries his hardest not to think anything of it.

They don’t catch eyes again, but in the moments when Louis is watching Zayn or Liam, or even some light fixture, because he gets that desperate, he can feel Harry’s eyes boring into him, like they’re emitting beams of light that he just can’t ignore. Harry is actively looking out for him and watching him, he begins to realise, and Louis becomes increasingly flustered at the thought.

The final song plays, a rare ballad for the band, about a girl who the songwriter, presumably Harry, had fallen in love with but has never seen again. Hm. Given the fact that this tragic love story isn’t exactly at Shakespearean level, Louis can’t really bring himself to feel that sorry for them.

“Thank you, thank you so much! We had so much fun tonight,” Liam gushes, after the final note rings out, his grin taking up half his face. He was such a teddy bear.

“Yes, we did,” Harry continues, eyes dancing throughout the crowd, finally landing on Louis’ before he speaks again. Louis inhales sharply. Fuck. Those eyes are lethal. “We hope to see you all again, very very soon,” Harry finishes, pointedly staring at him now, and Louis can’t bring himself to look away, not even for a second.

Their second staring contest of the night is interrupted by someone gripping Louis’ forearm, warm
fingertips against his goosebumps. Louis sees Harry’s eyes flash with something, he isn’t sure what, and his eyebrows furrow, too. He sweeps himself offstage, leaving Louis in the dust.

“I found you.” Louis is reminded that there is someone attached to him, is half aware of Niall leaning in and whispering something and then leaving, but he doesn’t catch what it was. He needs to not make these Harry hazes a habit.

He finally turns towards this person, and oh. Will. Of course, the bartender from before. He had almost forgotten.

“Hi there. You did indeed,” Louis replies breathlessly, struggling to form his speech correctly. All he can see in his mind is kohl-lined green green eyes, and he’s finding it hard to think of much else. Louis shakes his head at himself. He needs to get that image out of his brain, the implications of it being there too intense for him to handle. There’s no way he could fancy the arrogant, over-dramatic and quite frankly rude Harry Styles, no matter how pretty his eyes may be.

“You okay? Those shots too much?” Will jokes, and Louis finds it in himself to laugh back, playfully shoving Will’s shoulder. He can do this. He’s fine.

“Takes something a little stronger than a few tequila shots and beer to get me paralytic, love. Don’t worry about me.” Louis winks again. He’s really making a huge effort tonight.

“Oh but I do worry. I worry that I don’t have your number when I’d really, really like it,” Will responds, and he really doesn’t hold back, does he?

“You’re persistent, I’ll give you that,” Louis praises, facing towards hazel, but maybe possibly brown eyes, that actually don’t seem quite as astonishing as before.

“So is that a yes? Can I have it?” He’s like an excited child, and it strikes Louis that this guy might be a little younger than him. Not by too much, maybe, but enough that the maturity levels are probably noticeable. It doesn’t matter much to Louis though, it’s not like he wants a boyfriend. Sort of hates that idea, actually. He wants to have fun though, would love that, so he gives Will his number and waves goodbye. Will looks overjoyed, and Louis feels flattered. Not excited really, but flattered. He’s sure that that minor difference doesn’t matter.

Louis looks around, and sees that mostly everyone has left, bar a few stragglers waiting for their friends. One of those people is actually Niall, waiting by the stage, chatting to a security guard. The guard in question has probably already fallen in love with him, knowing Niall and his charm. Louis makes his way over, a comfortable expression on his face.

“Louis, there you are! Took your bloody time! This here’s Gerard, he’d gonna take us to see the boys,” Niall greets, already halfway through the door leading backstage.

Louis’ brow furrows, and he suddenly remembers. Right, they’re meant to go and see them after the show. Meant to go and tell them ‘how great they were, etc’, Louis’ boss had told him quite eloquently. He’s almost nervous about this prospect, had forgotten that they were going to see them, see Harry, so soon after the show. After whatever had happened between him and Harry. Louis still isn’t sure.

“This is Zayn and Liam’s room, here, and the loo’s that way, fella,” Gerard announces, as they come to a stop within the winding corridors, tilting his head towards Niall at the second part of the sentence.

“Right you are, my friend! Lou, I’ll meet you in there, yeah? Won’t be a minute!” and Niall is off,
and suddenly Louis is alone.

He knocks on the door and walks into the room. Immediately, he comes to realise that it definitely
does not belong to Zayn or Liam.

There on the sofa, is Harry. Shirtless. Of course. Of course this would happen to Louis.

He almost doesn’t notice Harry snorting coke off of something red, he can’t really see, still slightly
stunned by turning up at the wrong room to a half-naked Harry. When Harry finishes the third line,
however, and looks up from his task, they lock eyes for the third time that evening. Louis snorts and
rolls his eyes, again, at the sight of the white halo around Harry’s nostril. How classy.

Louis tells Harry as much, and Harry smirks because that seems to be his default expression when it
comes to Louis.

“What are you doing here, petal? Enjoy the show? You know, when I said we’ll see you very soon, I
didn’t mean it quite this literally,” Harry mocks, and fuck him, really. Also, petal?

“Don’t flatter yourself, love, I’m here because I have to be,” Louis’ softer voice takes on a frustrated
tone. “Would be at home right now if I wasn’t forced to come,” he muttered, agitation evident. Harry
seems to be able to rile him up so quickly and so effectively, and Louis isn’t remotely happy about it.
Not even at how hot it kind of is.

“Aw, let’s try and play nice, kitten, it would break my heart to know that I was the reason for your
displeasure.” Harry in fact looks positively ecstatic at the idea, cheshire cat smile taking up residence
on his face, which only angers Louis more. And what is with the nicknames?

“I’m fine, actually. Had a good time in fact. There was a fit bartender, gave him my number, too.
We’re going on a date actually, so I should be thanking you. Wouldn’t have met him if I hadn’t have
come here tonight.” Okay, yes, maybe that all isn’t strictly true, but if Louis was debating over
whether to accept Will’s offer of a date before, he sure as hell isn’t now. Louis’ need to regain the
upper hand is strong, and so if he has to tell a tiny white lie then so be it. The crack in Harry’s
composure at the comment is completely worth it.

“Hm. Yeah, I saw that. Him. Bit young for you, don’t you think?” Harry begins, and oh. Is he
implying Louis is old? He’s only a couple years older than Harry! Not that he checked specifically
on Harry’s wikipedia page, or anything. (Okay, that was exactly what he’d done. He was just
curious. It means nothing.)

“Well. I’m happy for you.” He continues, stretching out further on the sofa, “What, first date you’ve
got in a while then? That why you were so eager for his number?” Louis’ mouth drops without his
permission; the audacity that Harry possesses is absurd. Harry’s features smooth out again, in the
knowledge that he’s now winning this verbal back and forth. He relaxes his arms over the back of
his seat and Louis can’t help but notice his bulging biceps as he did so. What a twat.

“This is all very cliché you know, even for you.” Louis elects to ignore the previous comment,
instead hoping to tap into an insecurity or two. “You’re playing the wannabe rockstar role very well,
doing drugs alone in your dressing room off of your probably very expensive guitar. It’s a bit sad,
really. I’m sure somewhere Mick Jagger is cringing at the thought of this being the image of the next
generation of so-called Rock ‘n’ Roll,” Louis bites out sarcastically, leisurely making his way
towards Harry, ever so slowly beginning to tower above him. He is slightly aware that maybe that
was a tad too vicious, but then again, Harry seems to bring out the worst in him.

Harry head snaps up at him, and anger flashes in his eyes. Gone are the pretty pools of light green,
and in their place pure stone cold rage. He leans down and fiercely snorts another line, Louis hadn’t even seen him prepare it. Was too busy trying not to get distracted during his little speech by Harry’s extensive array of body art that litters his chest, and his shoulders, and his stomach. Fuck. Harry is maddening.

“Are you done now?” Harry quips, standing up with clenched fists and leaning above Louis so that he’s the taller one now. Louis can feel Harry’s breath on his face and he suddenly feels very small. “I’d like it if you left. I don’t have anything more to say to you,” Harry hisses, playful mood no more. He has yielded, effectively ending the argument, or heated conversation, whatever it is. Louis has technically won, but it doesn’t feel that way. He’s actually feeling more frustrated and annoyed, than anything.

Louis opens his mouth to say something else, he isn’t sure what, but is interrupted by the door behind him opening. Probably Niall showing up, finally.

“Hey, Haz. I missed you. You ready?” that croaky female voice most definitely is not Niall. Louis twists around, and sees a woman. A rather scarcely dressed woman, Louis notes curiously. She’s tall, and curvy, and pretty for a girl, and he assumes she’s Harry’s type. Maybe she’s a groupie or something. Louis doesn’t care.

“Hey babe,” Harry looks over, anger all but vanished, and steps away from Louis, a slow smile taking over his face but still a hint of tension in his body. He can see Harry’s muscled back and shoulders; they look tight and wound up. Louis tries to ignore the urge to go over and knead the knots out of Harry’s back right then and there. He will never understand how easily this boy can change his mood. It’s terrifying and fascinating all at the same time.

“Missed you too. Loads. You won’t believe how much,” Harry enthuses flirtily, while walking over to her, and bypasses Louis as if he isn’t even there.

Suddenly Louis itches to leave.

He sees Harry take her in his arms, hands roaming all over her, and Louis can’t quite explain why but he really doesn’t want to witness this any longer. There’s a white hot, uncomfortable feeling in the pit of Louis’ stomach, which he doesn’t quite feel like investigating at all.

Louis walks past the embracing couple to the door, his intent to leave having grown in the last minute or so. He silently scoffs at the sight of them. Honestly, it’s not like Harry’s just come back from war or something. He puts his hand on the handle, and starts to twist it open.

“Yeah, you’d better leave, Louis. Think we need our privacy,” Harry giggles, glazed eyes accompanied by a fake smile. Louis tries not to think about how he can already recognise Harry’s real smile from his artificial one.

He strides out the door and hears the sounds of their laughter slowly ebb away.

He makes his way further down the hallway and begins to catch another set of people laughing, one laugh that certainly belongs to…

“Niall! There you are, you tosser! You left me all alone, with him,” Louis barks, only half heartedly, as he makes his way into what seems to be Zayn and Liam’s actual dressing room, and it’s only now occurring to Louis to wonder why they shared.

“Louis, sorry mate, got a bit carried away,” Niall begins, permanent smile plastered on his face. Louis doesn’t know how he manages to keep up this perpetual good mood. “What were you talking
about with Harry? You were in there a while.”

Louis tries to level his voice. “Nothing, really. Just had a chat. His girlfriend or whatever arrived so I left. Nothing major.” Cool. That was fine. He sounds fine. Why is he worried?

“Girlfriend?” Liam questions, and oh yes, Zayn and Liam are here too. Sitting on the sofa together. Holding hands. Interesting. Perhaps that explains the sharing.

“Partner, whatever. They seemed close,” Louis replies, watching Liam’s face contort in confusion.

“You mean his dealer? Ericka? Blonde hair?” Liam persists, and Louis is the confused one now.

“Yes? I guess so. I didn’t get her name but she was blonde,” Louis responds. His dealer? “But they looked pretty friendly if you ask me.”

Zayn chuckles, and Liam joins him. Niall does too, eventually. Louis is obviously missing something.

“What? Why are you laughing?” Louis implores, desperately seeking the answer.

“Man, it’s not really my place to tell you. But let’s just say… Harry, Zayn and I, we all have similar preferences,” Liam simpers, cheeks reddening. “If you know what I mean,” he finishes, and Louis’ eyes travel to Liam and Zayn’s linked hands. Right. Harry is… into boys. He’s filing that particular information away safely. Then what on earth was that behaviour? Louis feels bewildered. He has a few questions, but has neither the time or effort to ask them now.

“Right lads, on that note, anyone up for a drink?” Niall coaxes, expertly changing the subject, and Louis is reminded yet again of why he is his best mate.

Louis, Niall, Liam and Zayn all shuffle into some gloomy bar they find that’s close to the venue, all seeking alcohol desperately enough to not really bother with going anywhere that might be a bit more pleasant. They all squeeze into a booth in the corner, except for Niall, who so kindly has offered to go to get the first round.

Louis fiddles with his phone, while surreptitiously trying to observe Zayn and Liam together. They’re sweet together. It doesn’t really come as a surprise to Louis, now that he thinks about it. The way they had spoken for each other before, the way they look at each other now, contentment evident in their eyes. It almost makes Louis believe that this is what he wants, before he swiftly reminds himself that relationships and feelings and the L word just aren’t for him. Not at all. Some people deal well with them, and some people don’t. Louis is in the latter category, he has come to realise.

“You can acknowledge us, you know. I mean, it may have to be kept quiet later on, depending on what this deal turns our band into. But right now it’s not a secret or anything.” Liam tilts his head to Louis, makes sure to meet his eyes. Liam is so gentle, always making sure everyone feels included and welcome in the conversation. Louis knew his instincts were right when he liked him straight away.

“Oh, right. I wasn’t sure,” Louis gives him a small, self-conscious smile.

It’s not that he doesn’t want to talk to them about their relationship, or whatever it is they are (Louis had yet to find out), it’s that he isn’t sure he will be able to understand it. Louis has never been in love, has never experienced that feeling. Has never felt like being in a relationship is something he
desired, and so talking to someone else about their partner feels strange, almost, to Louis. Almost like it isn’t his information to know.

Louis knows that that’s an odd perspective to have, to not want to hear about his friends’ love lives, but he’d felt that way his whole adult life. Maybe it’s just because he was quite a private person. Maybe it’s also because he’s cynical about love and has no desire to change that outlook. He’s stubborn in his belief that it is a rare and difficult thing to find, and that only the luckiest people obtain it. He evidently isn’t one of those people, and that’s fine. He’s okay with that. He has to be okay with that.

Louis is snapped out of his musings by Zayn, of all people, carrying on from where Liam left off. “We’ve been together quite a while. Just as the band started, really. Harry didn’t mind, kind of encouraged us, actually. I think he knew it was gonna last even before we did.” he catches himself there and smiles, secretly almost, and looks over at Liam. There is just pure love between them, eyes only for each other, and Louis feels a pang in his heart. Some people, he thinks, are very, very lucky.

“That’s really nice guys. That’s cool that you feel so sure about each other. I think a lot of people wish for that sort of sense of security,” Louis replies, smiling at them. Trying not to think about how he’ll never have what they have. He’d come to terms with it long ago, and became an expert in quashing his feelings about it, but. Sometimes, especially being in situations like this, it still made him feel slight stings of longing. But it’s fine. He’s fine.

He sees Niall blazing through the masses out of the corner of his eye, noticing that the bar has become more and more busy as their conversation had gone on. His friend is expertly carrying a tray of beers and shots in one hand and a handful of lime wedges and a rogue salt shaker in the other, looking like a real patron.

“Move everything out the way boys, coming through. I hope you’re all ready to drink yourselves silly. I’m Irish and you’ve all got to keep up with me,” Niall chimes, handing round the drinks with a pleased grin on his face.

“For the last time, Niall, just because you’re Irish doesn’t mean it gives you some special sort of superhuman tolerance level—” Louis begins, but is cut off, of course.

“You take that back, Tommo! That’s not what me mam says, and also, who’s the one who’s always drinking the other one under the table?” Niall interrupts, satisfied expression still present.

“Apart from the times where I’m draggin’ you home, yeah?” Louis counters, leaning forward in his chair towards Niall, a cheeky look on his face.

“That was maybe once or twice,” Niall argues, smile fading slightly, although Louis knows he’s still just on the edge of laughter.

“Try five or six times, love. In the past month,” Louis clarifies, taking a swig of his beer to bury a giggle.

“Fine, fine, we’re both just as bad as each other, Tommo. What about you guys?” Niall concedes, turning towards Zayn and Liam. “Do you all drink a lot?” he’s presumably referring to them all as in them plus Harry. Louis had almost not thought about him for an hour. A new record.

“Uh, well, we don’t, really. Not that much, anyway. Harry on the other hand…” Liam is cut off by Zayn squeezing his thigh in a warning. Louis supposes it was meant to be a subtle gesture, and so pretends he hasn’t noticed. How strange.
Each day, Harry is becoming more and more of a conundrum, and, equally, Louis is becoming more and more captivated.

“Speaking of Harry, did you guys see him and Louis stare at each other during the show tonight? Looked like they were about to rip each other’s clothes off!” Niall chuckles and oh dear god, why did he have to bring that up? He’s trying to forget that moment, that torturous moment, where he became hypnotised by Harry, something he will try to never experience again if he can help it.

“Niall, I’m sure they didn’t, we just caught eyes, it wasn’t—” Louis begins, shaking his head, but is cut off again.

“Oh so that’s what we’re calling it, yeah?” Liam sarcastically says, smirking, a highly amused look on his face. He’s taking the piss now.

“Oh pipe down Liam, you don’t even know what you saw. You were probably too busy with your warbling solos for Christ’s sake. We just shared eye contact for a few seconds, don’t be so dramatic,” Louis huffs, half aware of the fact that he’s really the only one there being dramatic at the moment.

“Don’t try and avoid the subject, dear Louis…” Niall chimes in, poking him in the ribs and for God’s sake, he’s already being ganged up on.

“Look, I don’t know why you’re all making such a fuss. It was a tiny moment, nothing special. I blame the alcohol, and the atmosphere, or something. I dunno, it was weird and it’s over now. Okay?” Louis takes a shot then, cringing at the taste but satisfied that he seemed to have closed the topic. Of course it wasn’t that easy.

“So there’s nothing… You didn’t feel anything…” Liam begins, and Louis’ eyes bulge.

“I really don’t know what you think you’re implying, Lima,” he tries joking, hopes that maybe it will help to calm his increasing heart rate. “But no, it wasn’t a… big thing, or whatever,” he continues, fidgeting fingers hidden beneath the table, “nor did I feel anything. At all,” he lies. Louis knows he felt something, how can’t he have, when it was those all-encompassing green eyes his were locked to? But he’s in no state to try and figure out what that something was, and so is definitely in no state to tell the boys so that they could maybe try. Like Louis had acknowledged before; he is a private person. He’s allowed to keep some things to himself.

“Okay man, hey, we can stop talking about this if you want. Why don’t we drink some more, and you can tell us about how you two met?“ Zayn assures, gesturing between him and Niall, and placing a comforting hand on Louis’. He feels himself relax. There’s no need to get so vexed; he’s out with friends and he should act like it.

Louis smiles, relieved, takes another shot, and turns to his friend. “Whaddaya say, Nialler?” he begins in a teasing tone, “shall we tell them our life story?” He puts his arm around his friend, the previous subject all but forgotten.

He sits there for a few more hours, regaling tales of the past, with his old friend and his new ones, and for the rest of the evening he does not spare a single thought for Harry Styles. Not one.
Chapter Summary

Just a quick disclaimer: I don’t own or claim to own any of the songs used in this work, all rights go to the respective owners.

Chapter Notes

Track: Scar Tissue - Red Hot Chilli Peppers

The weather is crisp as Louis makes his way to the studio that Thursday morning, a light breeze eliciting goosebumps on his bare arms. Louis runs a hand through his damp hair, chiding himself for not leaving enough time to style it before he had to leave for work. He doesn’t usually do anything special with it, not every day anyway, but today is the first studio session with The Cahoots, and he had wanted to make a good impression.

This was regardless of the fact that he’s already met them before (and the fact that he’s only truly concerned with the impression he makes on one person in particular). He’s just still a tad… confused about Friday night. He’s had a few days to think about it, and he does feel slightly guilty about how he had spoken to Harry.

He’d had a mini panic attack that particular evening when he got home, realising that Harry could easily relay their conversation to Louis’ boss which would certainly not go down well. The angry phone call from Tom never came, though, quite surprisingly, so Louis thinks he owes it to himself (and, yes, maybe to Harry as well) to be pleasant today and maybe try his very best to hold his tongue whenever necessary, however difficult that may be for him.

Louis readjusts his shoulder bag as he trails along the short walk from the tube station, a shiver overtaking him as the doors to the studio come into view. It must just be chill in the air that’s responsible for the tremble running through him. Never mind the fact that it’s summer and there’s barely a breeze today. He isn’t nervous to see them all, or anything. Although, he will admit that he does sort of wish Niall were here.

The glare on the glass of the front doors prevent him from seeing into the lobby of the building, so when Louis walks in he almost feels like he’s experiencing déjà vu. It’s like that first day all over again, which feels like an age ago when in fact it hasn’t even been a week. He’s confronted with a similar sight as before; Harry, Liam and Zayn all there in the lobby, sitting instead of standing this time, waiting and ready on a comfy sofa at the edge of the room. They look a lot less lost than last time, more relaxed, more tamed. Like they almost know what they’re doing now, despite this being only their first session. Louis admires it. He feels his shoulders slacken, and he takes a deep breath. Maybe this would all be just fine.

Louis had decided on the tube over there that he would try his best to start this whole thing off positively. There’s nothing worse than butting heads with a client, having to sit in a room for hours upon hours squabbling over a certain lyric or melody, whilst simultaneously trying to refrain from
pulling his hair out in a fit of frustration. It’s a blatant waste of his time, really, and the studio’s time. Louis is determined for this not to happen with them. With Harry. It’s Harry especially who he had gotten off on the wrong foot with, and so he hopes that by being bright and breezy from the get go, they can all just silently agree to get on with it and work hard.

Naturally, with Louis’ luck, a small part of him knows that he’s asking for too much.

“Morning, guys. You ready to do this?” Louis enthuses, eyes lit up and a small smile on his face, facing the bundle of boys on the seat in front of him. He observes them, spread all over each other in an untidy, tactile heap, legs over laps and heads on shoulders, hands linked in between. It seems like this is something they’re used to. Louis vaguely registers how sweet the sight is.

“Hey, man! Nice to see ya. Ready boys?” Liam exclaims excitedly, removing himself from under Zayn’s arms and legs and sitting up, turning to the other two, eyes twinkling and smile radiant. His warmth is so infectious that Louis can’t even bring himself to be annoyed by the level of cheerfulness this early. He has a good feeling about this.

Zayn supplies less of a zealous reaction, although after a yawn he does manage to muster a small twitch of his lips which, if he squinted, Louis can translate as a Zayn smile, and so he counts that as a win.

Harry is where Louis’ eyes land last, and he sort of wishes he’d bypassed that destination altogether. Harry’s shoulders are slumped, eyebrows furrowed and arms crossed, body and eyes turned away from the rest of them. Louis can see the tension all over him, in his white knuckles and the taught muscles of his arms and oh– there’s also a tattoo that he hasn’t seen before. It’s a small one, peeking out from under Harry’s short shirt sleeve, situated just under his bicep. Easy to miss. Must’ve missed it even when he was topless in front of him. Louis unconsciously leans forward, trying to make out the tiny print. It’s… a letter? An ‘E’ maybe? He moves closer.

“Are you finished, yet?” Harry barks at him, ending his eyes’ exploration. Louis looks up, and is met with a glare. A hardened stare so different to the one from Friday night. He tries not to think about why his stomach drops at the sight.

“Yeah, sorry I–” Louis shakes his head. Stupid. So stupid. He needs to stop getting caught up like this, always finding something to study when it comes to Harry. Harry, with his silky black hair that’s actually a dark mahogany under the golden sunlight. Harry, with his pale skin a stark contrast to the almost navy coloured designs scattered across his lean but brawny body. Harry, with his emerald eyes that remind Louis of his favourite colour, even though up until then he’d always been sure he preferred blue to green. Bright and inviting when he wants them to be, and cold and harsh when he doesn’t. He’s fascinating, and Louis can’t help it. “Quite finished, yep. Let’s, um, let’s go,” he ends pathetically, and Harry quirks an eyebrow, looking entirely disinterested. Perhaps this won’t be so simple after all.

As Louis leads them down the hallway, finally, he silently berates himself. He really, really needs to get a grip. Whatever this captivation is that he harboured, it needs to go. Louis is at risk of embarrassing himself, and he dare say that he’s already passed that point. Christ. He doesn’t understand. Harry is a literal prick, had been a prick to him not a few days ago. So why is he constantly so enraptured by him? He needs a coffee and to not see Harry Styles for at least a few hours. Tragically, he knows that only one of his two wishes could be granted, and he defeatedly accepts this as he opens the studio door and shows them all in.

The room’s walls are awash with dark red, and patterned rugs adorn the floor. A piano sits in the corner of the room, Louis’ favourite element to his studio. There’s no natural light that gets in, and
Louis likes the cosiness feel to it. He gestures to the large writing table in front of the doorway, complete with plush black leather chairs, hoping the boys get the message. He avoids their eyes (Harry’s eyes) when he offers them any drinks, and shortly afterwards spins out of the room to go and acquire caffeine in some form. After the minor yet somewhat hostile and cringe-worthy exchange this morning, he dreads to imagine what the rest of the day will bring.

“So what’s this song about then? ‘Bridge Burn’? What sort of vibe are you going for?” Louis asks, stretching his legs out under the dark wooden table in the centre of the room, and sighing silently. They’ve been here for a few hours and it’s proving to not be a very successful session. Nevertheless, Louis keeps his ears open and ready, hoping to receive any kind of inspiration for some lyrics.

“Hmm,” Harry begins, tapping his chin with his long, ring-clad fingers in mock deliberation. Louis can just about refrain from rolling his eyes. “I’m afraid that’s a secret. Sorry,” he chuckles, shit-eating grin taking over at least half of his face, sounding like the least apologetic person on the planet. Zayn and Liam just sigh wearily.

“Well I’m afraid, Harold, that you’re going to have to tell me the meaning behind at least one of these unfinished songs if we’re ever going to get anywhere. How am I supposed to help write your music if I know nothing about you?” Louis cradles his chin in his hands, elbows resting on the table, ever the image of (somewhat sarcastic) apprehension.

He’s been trying his hardest not to be sassy at all but it’s proving to be difficult when someone like Harry is just sitting there, feet on the table, all smug and frustrating, practically asking for it.

“Harold? That’s new. Never gotten that one before. Tell me, do you think calling me names is the best way to get what you want?” Harry questions, smiling sweetly, and Louis blanches, unsure of how to respond. He’s hardly called Harry a name, he’s called him his own name, for Christ’s sake. Well, with a minor modification. He doesn’t appreciate Harry’s sarcasm, either. Louis’ frustration only grows along with the furrow in his brow. He looks at Zayn and Liam for some kind of assistance but both of them appear to have checked out of the conversation long ago.

“It was hardly name-calling, and I only want you—” Louis begins, helplessly attempting to move on but is interrupted, for what feels like the hundredth time.

“You only want me? That’s a bit forward, petal. Maybe save that for later this week,” Harry fucking winks, and Louis blushes. He blushes! He hates himself, honestly. How does Harry manage to fluster him so easily? Also, that bloody nickname again. This is too much. He grits his teeth and tries his best to ignore whatever else it was that he felt in reaction to Harry’s comment.

“Look, I— all I want, need, is for you to tell me the basic meaning behind a song that you’ve written. Any song. That’s it. I don’t want to play games, alright? We’re on a strict time schedule and we’ve only got this studio for a couple more hours before the next client arrives so can we just.” Louis takes a deep breath, and looks at all of them one by one as he speaks. “Can we please just concentrate? Please?” Louis pleads, dignity and pride all but gone.

A pause. The tension in the air is almost palpable to Louis.

“Fine,” comes the short and succinct response from Harry, stale mood a far cry from his jovial one moments ago. Louis’ no longer surprised at these quick switches.

“Fine,” Louis replies, and sees Zayn and Liam nod with sheepish looks on their faces, as if any of Louis’ outburst was their fault. Which it wasn’t, obviously. There’s only a certain black haired man
to blame for that. Louis takes another deep breath, and sits up in his chair, hoping that now they can finally get somewhere.

“Okay. How about we just have a listen first, and then see?” Louis examines the list he has in front of him, titles to songs by The Cahoots that were yet to be completed. Bridge Burn is the first track on it, so it seemed natural to choose it to start with.

Louis’ met with three slow nods, so he takes that as confirmation enough. He turns his chair from the group of awaiting faces, and plants his hands on the control panel. He suddenly feels at ease, staring down at the sea of different switches and buttons, some with certain colours and patterns on them which meant nothing to him when he first started out in this job, but as for now, he’s confident he could do this with his eyes closed. He’s at home here, in the studio, he feels like this is where his potential truly shines. Any sense of insecurity ebbs away as he begins to ready himself to tinker with this song.

He pushes a button, and the room is at once shrouded in song, an almost-quiet and quick build up to a mix of short airy plucks of an acoustic and bass guitar, that meet the resonant lyrics almost immediately. It gently builds up, the music moulding together, different instruments layering over each other perfectly into a full, warm sound. The soft melodic voices start all together, harmonising flawlessly already, one voice in particular being noticeable to Louis. Drums come in, but only in the background, a slow beat, quiet and unassuming. Louis is impressed, and he’s only heard about thirty seconds.

The shore, the shore

It is a metaphor

For every moment

That has ever passed between them

The way the rays

Repeat upon her face

Is their monotony

She says, We need to bridge burn...

The lyrics are… quite lovely, actually, Louis has to admit. It’s a break up song, but he’s not focusing on that, he’s more interested in how genuinely bloody good they all sound. And, okay, yes, he had already seen and heard them in concert, however he was a tad distracted that night. Sitting in this room, with no interruptions, no reason for Louis to lose concentration, he can instead lose himself in the music. It’s good. They’re all good. Fuck. Harry’s really good. Suddenly Louis wishes he didn’t enjoy it so much.

So now her heart's

A mirror from the start

That leaves the empty space that ever grew between them

He holds her near

The sun appearing sheer
We need to bridge burn
They need to bridge burn..
We need to bridge burn
They need to bridge burn..
We need to bridge burn
We need to bridge burn

Bridge burn

The song ends, and Louis sits there in silence for a bit, and realises quite how unprepared he was to discuss it. It’s almost perfect, he has to admit, but it does need some minor modifications. Some different lyrics, and it needs a bridge, of course, but… he’s extremely pleasantly surprised.

“Lads, this is… really good. Really, really good. You didn’t perform this at the gig, right?” Louis asks, hoping he’s right in his assumption because he really doesn’t need to give Liam and Zayn any more evidence that he was only paying attention to one thing that evening, and it definitely wasn’t the music. A pair of deep, enchanting, glowing green eyes, instead.

Anyway. That’s not important right now.

“Nah, this is a fairly new one. Harry finished it off last month I think. We ‘aven’t performed it live yet. I’m sure that we’re all glad that you like it,” Liam replies, sporting a big, proud grin, looking at his bandmates for confirmation.

Zayn has a small smile growing on his face, visibly pleased at his reaction. As he’s a man of few words, Louis takes this response positively. When Louis looks over opposite them, he sees that Harry’s already got those alluring eyes locked on him, and Louis finds it difficult to tear his gaze away yet again. He notices, though, that Harry looks like he’s fighting some sort of internal battle, tension overtaking his features, trying not to let any stray flickers of emotion betray the mask he’s hiding behind.

“Don’t hurt yourself, mate. It’s okay if you’re happy that I liked it, s’not a big deal,” Louis starts, trying his best not to let a laugh slip. He does find Harry’s determination to not be affected by Louis’ praise quite entertaining, though.

“‘m not,” Harry mumbles petulantly; he’s such a child. There’s no heat behind it, though, and Louis thinks he catches Harry’s lips curling in amusement at Louis’ comment, a tiny smile appearing. Louis finds himself unconsciously smiling back at him, finding his response pleasing. There’s a tiny, insignificant feeling of endearment prickling at Louis, but it doesn’t mean anything, it doesn’t.

Harry crosses his arms and starts picking at his nails again, a nervous habit of his that Louis has come to recognise. His nails today are dark, a close match to his sweeping, soft black hair that he’s always running his unfairly long and spindly fingers through. They’re a deep navy, Louis thinks, and when they catch the light as Harry flicks his hand, he can see tiny specks of glitter swimming through the blue.
Louis shakes his head. Jesus, he hears Harry’s voice in one song and realises he’s actually quite talented and suddenly he’s thinking about his hair and his fingers, and gets overly interested in his nail colour of choice? This is ridiculous. It’s Harry, for Christs’ sakes. Harry, the twat, who’s rude and unruly and disruptive and— and who’s also becoming increasingly more attractive to Louis as the hours and days go on. Fuck.

He’s just opened his mouth to attempt to rid his mind of the subject, and to hopefully start writing something, when he hears the door open from behind him.

“Louis!” Tom, for some reason, has appeared in the doorway. “Sorry to interrupt, dear boy,” he jokes, and Louis notices that he’s still trying to make ‘dear boy’ a thing between them, some kind of weird friendship moniker for each other. He supposes he himself makes it quite hard for that to happen when his boss is the only one actually using the expression, but Tom doesn’t seem to mind. He’s a persistent man, Louis has to admit.

It’s this train of thought that prevents Louis from noticing the other two people who have joined his boss. It’s a man and a woman, and, oh, they’re both wearing suits. How fancy. Louis looks down at his holey white t-shirt and ripped baggy jeans combo and chuckles at the contrast, welcoming this odd but intriguing distraction.

“No worries, Tom. What’s up?” Louis is a bit confused at this interruption, but he’s also tired. He feels spent after working so hard on this session and getting almost nowhere until a minute ago, so he’s finding it rather difficult to muster up enough energy to care why two strangers are suddenly just in his recording studio.

“I have a few guests I’d like you to meet, we’ve been expecting them,” Tom begins, a tight smile taking over his face. Interesting. These people must be important, then.

“Sure, I mean, we’re kind of busy right now but…” Louis starts, but then trails off once he catches his boss’ widened eyes from behind the visitors, a clear signal to change his tune immediately. “Uh, I mean, of course. Come in,” he finishes, gesturing to the room around him and looking over at the boys to gauge their reactions. They don’t seem too blindsided, to be honest, and Louis isn’t really surprised. They probably knew about this little visit. Looks like Louis was kept in the dark again. He can’t really complain, though, it’s not like they were in the middle of any groundbreaking songwriting before these people intruded, anyway.

As it turns out, the ‘guests’, as Tom put it, were actually label executives, sent to sit in on The Cahoots’ studio session to overlook the writing process and make sure it’s all going in the right direction. That’s how they phrased it; to Louis they were just being nosy buggers. He couldn’t exactly say that to their faces though, for obvious reasons, so now, as Tom has just left and the man and woman have both taken a seat, he’s being forced to carry on his already failing studio session under the pressure and prying eyes of some higher-ups. Louis briefly wonders to himself how he ever could have thought that this day would go well.

They’d sat down quietly on the leather sofa in the back, located just beside the actual recording booth. Right now they’re both sitting up straight and attentive, and it’s really quite irritating, makes the back of Louis’ neck crawl with unease. They’d told Louis to just ignore them, and carry on as he was, but that just makes their presence even more noticeable to him.

The room is quiet, and Louis indulges his urge to stretch his arms up and crack his back, after having sat in the same position for so long. He turns to the boys, all of them looking how Louis feels, with equally anxious expressions on their faces. He almost feels bad, but despite that, he's now intent on making some progress for literally any song at this point (he's not picky) just so that this entire studio session isn’t a waste.
“So,” Louis starts, breaking the awkward silence. “While we were listening to the song, I sort of just… made some suggestions as I went. These obviously don’t have to be solid changes, of course, but. I’ll show them to you anyway.”

Zayn and Liam lean forward in obvious interest, and Louis’ vaguely aware of the label execs doing the same. Harry stays leaned back in his chair, however, cool expression on his face. Louis can tell he’s listening just as intently though, if his stilled fidgeting movements and concentrated eyes are anything to go by.

“So I thought we could change the lyric that leaves an empty space that ever grew between them, to ‘evacuates’ instead of ‘that leaves’? Just sort of, flows better to me,” Louis offers with baited breath, prepared for his suggestion to be rejected immediately by Harry.

Before anyone else can say anything, a low voice speaks up.

“Yeah, actually.”


“Ri-right. Yes. Cool. Uh, thanks.” Pull yourself together, Louis, Jesus. This is how normal songwriting sessions go, he should be used to people agreeing with him by now. Except, he’s not used to being in sessions with impudent pop stars who up until a few seconds ago Louis was sure was going to give an entirely different response.

“Got any more?” Harry asks then, and even Zayn and Liam look surprised at this. He’s looking up at Louis, now, eyes are wide with curiosity, and Louis’ just not going to question it, not going to ponder where this sudden change in attitude has come from. Maybe it was because he said he liked his song. Maybe it was because he made him smile. Louis doesn’t have time to get to the crux of Harry Styles, however, not when this mood is likely very fleeting. So Louis dives back into his notebook, focusing entirely on reciting lyric changes and additions to the eager face, eager faces, he corrects himself, waiting in front of him.

—

“How about we play another one through then, and see what we think? If it needs any changes to the melody or lyrics?” Louis realises that after the somewhat successful lyrics discourse that they’d just had, maybe they were on some sort of roll, and he’d like to take full advantage of Harry’s rare, open attitude.

He’s met with a chorus of nods across the room, and also a small voice from his right murmuring, “Yeah, alright,” and he finds has to keep stopping himself from keening at Harry’s change in tune.

“What about…” Louis begins, perusing the list in front of him. “‘Song for Edie’. Sound good?” he offers, eyes glued to the page but his chin lifting with intent to ask them all for confirmation.

“No!” Harry blurts suddenly, and Louis snaps his head up, stunned. Harry’s eyes are awash with intense emotion where just a moment ago there had been nothing but laid-back contentment.

“I mean, um. No, that one doesn’t need fixing, or, changing, whatever,” Harry stutters, his rose-petal lips round and outlined-eyes frantically blinking, seeming so childlike and vulnerable in that moment; so unlike himself. Or, so unlike the Harry that Louis knows. For a moment, he’s reminded then of how much he doesn’t know Harry at all, in stark contrast to how he feels like he’s already old friends with Zayn and Liam, after spending only a few hours with them the other night. It unsettles Louis.

“She— It shouldn’t even be on that list. Take it off,” Harry finishes, eyes narrowing and his tone
transitioning from shaky and silent to hard and harsh, his northern accent becoming even more pronounced.

Louis finds himself scratching a line through the words on the page without even realising it, wondering what on earth had just happened.

Obviously the song means something to Harry, but his reaction was something else. It was like Louis had uncovered a secret that he had no right to know, and as he looks up at Zayn and Liam’s heavy and concerned looks directed at Harry, he can’t help but feel as though he’s found himself in a moment that he was never at all welcome in. Louis’ reminded then of the tiny ‘E’ tattoo of Harry’s that he had seen earlier. Interesting.

He peers back over, and Harry is fidgeting. Again.

“I, um. I’m just gonna go to the loo. I’ll be back, in a bit,” Harry rushes out, suddenly jolting out of his chair, palming his pockets and avoiding his friend’s stares. Avoiding Louis’ stare, too. He makes towards the door, frenzied movements a contradiction to his previous sluggish attitude.

As Harry speed-walks out of the room, Louis swivels his chair back in the direction of the two remaining band members. He’s positive that his face just begs the question of what the fuck was that?

“He’ll be fine, just give him a minute,” Liam speaks gently, with a tight smile that Louis realises is meant to be reassuring but really just puts him more on edge. Was that a regular thing? Louis knows Harry has his moments, knows he has a penchant for the theatrics but this is… something different. It doesn’t feel like he was putting on a show for anyone, unlike all the other times Harry has suddenly changed mood. It felt raw, and real. The look on Harry’s paling face is something Louis never wants to see again if he could help it. He can’t tell if that particular feeling is because of the shock of it, or if it’s because of something else.

He doesn’t have time right now to ponder the particular issue of why he cares about the way Harry feels, instead choosing to bury it within himself, like he does the rest of his feelings. It’s fine.

They wait for a bit, in silence, all unsure of what to do. Everyone in the room sort of staring at each other, waiting for someone to come up with something to say.

It’s a little while after that that the room is breached for a second time in the last hour, however that’s where the similarities to the prior intrusion end. The door clangs open, crashing into the control panel that sits adjacent to the entrance, and Louis finds himself quickly praying that nothing’s broken because of it. The equipment’s a pain to replace, and bloody expensive too. The first stirrings of anger start to brew inside him, and he turns away towards the door to face the culprit of the disturbance.

Harry, of course, comes stumbling in. Face pale as a sheet, eyes glassy and pupils blown, a slow grin spreading on his face.

“Oops,” he chuckles, sparing a glance to the damage he’s just caused, feet dragging as he makes his way to his seat. Louis dreads to wonder what the label execs are thinking right now, as they watch an obviously intoxicated boy walk in.

“Hi,” Louis grits out, hoping his tone conveys how pissed off he is, knowing he can’t say what the fuck are you playing at out loud.

Harry stops and makes to sit down, flailing his limbs about, bringing out the dramatics yet again.
This wasn’t before tucking something small and white, a glass vial, maybe, into his pocket. Louis wishes he could say he’s surprised. Of course Harry had to go and get fucking high, for whatever reason, just as Louis had begun to think this session was going well, too. Him and Harry had almost just been getting on then, and now he feels exasperation settle in his bones at the sight of him. And of course the label had to be sitting there, witnessing this mess, no doubt making notes of it all to tell the label head. In any other circumstance, Louis would have already been unleashing his wrath at Harry, but alas, such a reaction would be frowned-upon, not to mention alarming and possibly worthy of him getting the sack.

Harry’s sparkling eyes are wide and bright, cheerful, as he leans back in his chair with an artificial, elated smile. There’s something else there, though, something hidden behind his eyes, something left over from earlier when the colour had drained from his face at the mention of that song. Louis’ seen this already, seen the way sober Harry before had put up a front after an issue arises, and he supposes him using drugs to do it this time is no different, really. Probably easier, and quicker to help Harry switch his moods, now that he thinks about it. It’s what Louis has noticed about him, how sometimes Harry walks into a room and demands attention, visibly craves it, welcomes it with open arms. Only now Louis’ come to realise that perhaps Harry uses this particular technique as a distraction tactic more than anything. For himself just as much as everyone else, it seems.

“You look like a little disgruntled kitten, Louis. So sweet! Come on, smile, we’re making music!” Harry beams, loud and alive and over-exaggerated. He claps his hands, exuberant behaviour no doubt due to the substance currently running through his bloodstream.

Louis rolls his eyes and tries to relax, and definitely does not feel his cheeks heat up at Harry’s comments. He does not look like a kitten, thank you, nor is he disgruntled. Frustrated, maybe, at the severe lack of judgement Harry seems to possess considering he just went and got high in the middle of a studio session, and is currently making no efforts to conceal this fact in front of the studio executives in the room.

“You love doing that, rolling your eyes at me, don’t you? Ya can’t stand me!” Harry booms with laughter, almost hysterical, leaning forward in his chair and facing Louis. He doesn’t know how to respond. “It’s fine, though. I love a challenge,” Harry winks, and yet again Louis is speechless.

“Can we just– just get on with the music? Please? Like we’ve just been doing?” Louis finally finds his voice, desperate to derail this conversation. Wherever on earth it’s going, Louis can be sure that it’s not where he wants it to be, and he’s also aware that the label people are watching every minute of this.

Harry smirks, pauses, a look of pure delight on his stupid face and oh God, Louis really just wants this little chat to be over.

“I love it when you beg,” Harry purrs lowly, just loud enough for every-fucking-one in the room to hear. His eyes are dark, deep and bore into Louis’ own, and they’re like magnets again; Louis cannot for the life of him look away. He’s accosted by a plethora of emotions at once, immediately lightheaded, and frustrated, and he can feel a cold sweat starting to drip down his back, and his jeans suddenly feel tighter around his crotch, and his throat is going dry and fuck, he really needs to remember to take a bloody breath.

Louis gulps and, after silently praying it hasn’t been an embarrassingly long time since anyone has said anything, tears his eyes away and turns to face the other boys. He’s just going to have to ignore Harry, whatever he thinks he’s doing. Louis knows he’s under the influence and probably talks a lot of shit like this when he’s high, but Louis really can’t find it in himself to humour Harry with a response to that comment. He also wishes that Harry wasn’t so bloody attractive, then maybe this
would be easier. Also, privately, Louis’ worried that if he tries to reply to something that suggestive, whilst having to look into Harry’s pools of pale green, his voice wouldn’t come out as more than a squeak. He would never admit that fear if anyone asked, though.

He finally takes a breath and changes the subject, asking about end rhymes or something, he can’t remember, just anything to lose the feeling of Harry’s eyes on him, anything to get as far away from whatever involuntary reaction his body had just gone through, anything to stop himself from pausing and asking himself, what the fuck was that? Louis would rather not think about it.

Harry’s mood swings aren’t anything new to Louis, not really. It still manages to catch him off-guard every time though. It’s like one step forward, two steps back with this boy, and Louis doesn’t quite know how to fix that. Doesn’t quite know whether Harry wants that fixed. He sighs. It’s fine.

—

“Uh, so anyway, I was thinking that maybe I could take this song back home with me, listen to it a few more times, and then next session I could offer my suggestions? Sound good?” Louis offers, eyes wide and expectant, speaking to the whole room. It’s later now, the session having gone absolutely nowhere after Harry’s reappearance, unsurprisingly.

Before anyone can reply, Harry stands up, making a show of it, of course, stretching his legs out before him and his unfairly toned arms above his head, his previously pale skin almost glowing under the warm light. What was Louis talking about?

“Well as wonderful as this session was, I’ve got plans, people to see, shit to do. We’re done here, yeah? I can leave?” Harry starts, ignoring what Louis has just asked. He has a knowing smirk on his face when Louis’s eyes finally land there, and Louis realises he’s been caught perusing the boy’s body. It’s this revelation that almost (but only almost) distracts him from how blunt Harry had just been. Of course Harry, being the on-the-cusp of fame pop star that he is, must have many a people to meet and socialise with, no doubt a perpetually packed schedule.

It’s not that Louis’ bitter or anything, it’s just that he’d just spent the past few hours working with Harry and his band and he doesn’t even get a thank you? He thought they’d almost connected while adjusting those lyrics, thought Harry was beginning to realise that Louis does actually have some semblance of talent at what he does. He supposes it’s his job so he’s got to do it anyway, but. It’s still a bit shit to realise that while Harry’s going to go and party the night away, presumably somewhere in Soho, Louis’s going back to Niall in their two bedroom flat in Chalk Farm, and he’ll probably order a curry and be in bed by 10:30pm. He never usually gets affected by the obvious differences in lifestyles between him and his clients, so he’s not quite sure why it’s hitting him so hard today.

“Uh, yeah,” he starts in a small voice, “Yeah, I guess you can go.” Louis feels a bit put-out, but that’s not because of Harry’s dismissal, it’s not. He’s just tired from the session. That’s all.

Not a second later, Harry glides from the room, disappearing, and Louis wonders if that was a good decision on Harry’s part, considering the label people are still here, and they came to see the band in particular. Harry’s a big boy, though, he can get into his own trouble if he wants. Louis doesn’t care.

“Thanks everyone, think the next session will be in a few days, I’ll let you know.” He most certainly would not be letting the label execs know, but they can sit in blissful ignorance for now. Honestly, having them here, on top of having to deal with the chaos that is Harry, almost filled his entire stress quota for the month in one day.

The suits leave, finally, without uttering more than a few words of thanks. Well, at least some people have some manners. He glances at the other boys before he starts packing up his stuff, assuming
they’re about to leave too.

“Hey, man, sorry about… him.” Louis looks up at Zayn’s voice, sees him and Liam looking at him with kind eyes, perhaps a bit of pity in them too. God, was Louis that visibly affected by it? So much so that he has Zayn of all people piping up to apologise on Harry’s behalf?

“It’s fine, I don’t care, really,” he begins, hopefully smoothly, slowing his movements. “I just wish he was a bit more… compliant. Would make this all a bit easier.” Louis finishes with a small, reassuring smile to the boys. Bless them, they’re both so lovely.

“It’s fine if you do, honestly, he gets on our nerves sometimes too,” Liam laughs bashfully. “But he’s our brother, at the end of the day. We understand he can be difficult, though. Thank you for all your help, really. We really do appreciate it. Harry will too, I’m sure, he’ll just… take a bit more time to show it.”

Louis feels touched by Liam’s little speech, and a tad more appreciated because of it.

“Thanks, man. That’s very kind of you.” Louis’ smile grows into something more real, his eyes no doubt crinkling at the sides like they do every time he’s genuinely pleased. “Is there any particular reason he behaves that way? Or does he just hate me in particular?” Louis asks, with a jovial tone but personally he knows that he’s only half joking.

Liam and Zayn glance at each other for a beat, sharing what seems to be a whole conversation in one simple look. Oh. Maybe Louis wasn’t so far off the mark, then.

“It’s sort of complicated,” Liam begins, turning back to Louis, lip caught between his teeth and brow furrowed in concentration. “He doesn’t really… he’s not very mad about the music industry, our Harry. Music, he loves, obviously, but the whole industry, and all it stands for… Harry’s not really a fan.”

Louis starts, confusion etching his features. “So he hates me on principle, then? Just because I work in the music business? That’s not entirely fair, is it?” Louis can feel the stirrings of frustration froth up inside him, he takes a deep breath to try to relax.

“No one said he hated you, mate. Relax. You know he doesn’t. We all saw you getting on at the start of the session, before it all went to shit. Maybe even a bit of flirting,” Zayn says with a quick smirk and oh, no, they’re not talking about *I love it when you beg* right now.

As if reading his mind, Liam murmurs, “That’s irrelevant right now, Zaynie,” and Louis can’t even find it in himself to titter at the pet name he’d used.

“Well he definitely doesn’t like me. Loves irritating me for a start,” Louis grumbles, directing his eyes down, suddenly becoming very interested in the tiny branching lines on the surface of the wooden table. He’s half expecting a joke to come in response to his protests, a playful I would have to disagree from one of the boys, and he’s fully praying he doesn’t get one. He’s not in the mood.

“It’s more that he’s using you to take his frustration out on. Honestly, just a bit of bad luck, really,” Liam reassures, his voice as gentle as ever. “He just has seen some shit, within the industry, and he’s a bit cynical about it, and so that’s why he acts out. We can’t really tell you the whole story, it’s not ours to tell, but… just maybe just give him a few more days? A few more chances? He’ll warm up to you properly eventually.” He doesn’t sound so sure, but for the benefit of them finally being able to leave this room after however many hours, Louis just nods his understanding and leaves it at that.

Zayn and Liam seem to accept Louis’ response, and with nods shoulder pats, they leave too. Louis’
alone with his thoughts, again. He sighs, attempting to process all this information. So, it seems that something happened with Harry to make him sceptical about the music business. He wonders what it was. It sounded bad, the way Liam and Zayn were talking about it. Something tugs at Louis’ heart then, the idea of Harry experiencing something so unpleasant as to make him untrustworthy of an entire industry perhaps being responsible.

Harry may be a little shit, but he’s also young. The fact that he’s probably gone through something quite intense already makes Louis feel a little bit uneasy. Louis’ instinctual protective feelings overcome him again, it happens a lot to him considering he’s from such a large family. With lots of younger siblings, he can’t really help the need to want to shield younger people from any type of harm, whoever they may be. This reminds him of when he first saw the boys, that first day in the studio. That feeling he got when he looked at them, how he hoped that they wouldn’t become jaded too soon. Looks like that fear came a little late in terms of Harry.

He’s distracted from his thoughts by the sight of a something brown resting at the end of the table, almost camouflaging into the mahogany. At further inspection he realises it’s a leather journal, bound by a strip of the same material, looking weathered and soft. He reaches out to touch it, and notices scrawls up and down front, doodles and words he can’t quite read. There are initials, too, written delicately on the spine. H E S. Louis faintly traces the letters with his fingers. There’s no prize to Louis for guessing who it belongs to. Harry must’ve left it here, in his rush to go and live his extremely fabulous life. Louis wonders what’s inside it, wonders what secrets it might hold, wonders if he read it he would come closer to solving the enigma that is Harry Styles.

He retracts his hand, letting it fall to his side. No. That would be an invasion of privacy. As much as Louis is desperate to get some level of answers, this isn’t the way to do it. He’ll walk away, walk home, pretend he didn’t notice it lying there, inviting him to take a peek. But then again, maybe one look wouldn’t hurt–

His internal battle is interrupted by his text tone going off, a shrill ring in the silence of the room. He looks down at his phone, and sees an unfamiliar number has popped up.

Hi louis, it's will, from the other night?? just wondering if you still want to have dinner, would love to take u out soooooon

Oh. He’d almost forgotten about the ever so keen bartender from the other night. (If he was being honest, he'd completely forgotten about him.)

Louis glances over at the journal splayed out on the table, and makes a decision.

hey will , yes , i would love to . does tomorrow work for you ?
Louis gazes out the window, watching the sunset chase the clouds away, the sky transforming from clear, cerulean blue to rosy pink and glowing crimson within minutes. He forgets where he is for a minute, wondering how long it will take for the stars to appear on this mid-summer evening.

“You’ve got lovely eyes,” a voice speaks, and oh, right, Louis’ with someone. He’s at dinner with Will. Nice, complimentary Will, and now Louis’ thinking that perhaps he was being slightly rude just then by staring at the sky, zoned out like some nutter.

“Uhh, thanks very much,” Louis responds, feeling flattered more than anything, and looks over at his date, a slow smile forming on his face. Will looks absolutely delighted at the notion of pleasing Louis, eyes shining and toothy smile on display, and Louis almost chuckles at how sweet and keen this boy is.

They’ve been there for about an hour, in a dinky little italian restaurant tucked into a side street in West London that Louis definitely wouldn’t have chosen had it been up to him. He can’t afford to be picky, though, not when he barely gets dates as it is. Hopefully this one’s going well; Louis can’t tell, really, hasn’t been on one in so long. They always feel so forced to him - sitting at a table somewhere unfamiliar, opposite someone even more unfamiliar, trying your hardest not to feel uncomfortable at all but always, always, inevitably experiencing an awkward moment or two. So, yeah, dates aren’t really Louis’ thing, but he tries.

It’s after this musing that Louis realises that Will’s looking at him expectantly, and oh, shit, did he say something?

“Sorry, just um, zoned out a bit there. What was that?” Louis asks, hoping he looks attentive and engaged, and praying his playful grin is enough to charm the boy in front of him into believing that Louis isn’t completely hopeless.

“I said, you seem a bit distracted,” Will responds with a knowing look, lips curling at the edges slightly, and Louis finds himself mirroring a real smile back. He’s sweet, this boy.

“Sorry, uh yeah. Just a bit,” Louis admits, feeling sheepish. “There’s just a lot on my mind right now, I think.” And fuck, why did Louis say that? This so was not first date etiquette. He’s supposed to keep things light and breezy, at least that’s what the article that he’d studied late the night before had said and oh, Louis’ now realised how pathetic that sounds, even just to himself. He’s definitely not supposed to act as if ‘oh, I’ve just met you, let me unload all my feelings on to you as if you’re my emotional crutch and we’ve known each other for years’ is acceptable behaviour. Jesus Christ, he definitely hasn’t done this in a while.

“Is it work stress? Or something else?” Will, bless his heart, responds in earnest, looking genuinely concerned. Louis sighs internally, wondering why on earth he thought it would be a good idea to talk about work of all things on a first date. Well, it was Louis’ own fault. He’d always been bad at oversharing, back when he was younger, and had learnt the hard way that that only gets you hurt. He
had gotten used to keeping his cards close to his chest in recent years, though. Sometimes his resolve slips, however, like right now, and he realises he has to find a way to claw himself out of the deep pit also known as his emotional dumping ground.

“Um, it doesn’t really matter,” Louis begins, hoping to swiftly swerve the question, knowing that he’s really not in the best mood to just unload all his shit right now. It’s like pandora’s box in there already, even without the added new stress of the band. He’s still figuring out how the fuck he’s going to sort that whole situation out. And by situation, he actually means Harry.

God, he really can’t go long at all without his mind wandering back to that infuriating, captivating boy. He’s literally sat on a date with someone else, yet he’s overwhelmed by images of wine stained painted nails and rich kohl-lined eyes, black hair and glowing skin.

“Course it does! It’s always important to talk–” before Will could finish whatever self-help advice he was about to quote, Louis is quite literally saved by the bell. His shrill text tone goes off and echoes off the high walls of the Italian place.

He looks down at his screen, which is flashing Tom’s name, after sending a quick apologetic smile to Will.

**Hello dear boy, sorry about this, but need you to come to meet us at the label building ASAP, a slight problem has arisen… -T**

Shit. What could that be? Something with the label usually means it’s to do with one of the clients. He doesn’t think he needs many guesses to work out which client it’s about. Louis doesn't have a good feeling about this. He subconsciously bites his lip, his grip on his phone tightening, concentrating hard on the darkened screen.

“Everything okay?” Will says, and oh Jesus, he's done it again, zoned out and neglected to give his date attention.

“Yeah, sorry, uhh, my boss– I think I have to go. I'm sorry. I've been awful. Can I make it up to you?” Louis rushes out, already out of his seat, words tumbling out to a stunned looking Will.

“Oh um, yeah, sure, fine,” Will stutters back, and he gets up out of his chair, too.

“Sick, thanks,” Louis replies, eyes plastered to his phone screen again, walking his legs towards the door, trying to work out how long it will take to get to label building that he’s almost sure Tom is referring to.

“Oh, um, bye then!” He hears from behind him and oh, crap, maybe Will wanted a kiss goodbye or something? Shit. It seems like Louis’ already fucked this up.

He can't think about that right now though, has more important issues at hand. Tom was typically a laid back guy, never usually made a fuss, even if it was something quite important. The fact that he's just bluntly said Louis has to be there as soon as possible due to an issue arising means that it’s most likely not gonna be a walk in the park.

Louis turns around to face him as he gets to the exit of the restaurant, forces a smile to his face, “Bye! I’ll call you!”

That seems to satisfy his date, and Louis breathes a sigh of relief. That's one problem sorted. As Louis makes his way along the quiet, lowly lit streets to the tube station, he can't help but accept the idea that the other issue he’s being faced with this evening probably won't be so easily solved.
He was right in his assumption to go to *The Cahoot*’s label, of course he was. Wherever they went (wherever Harry went), chaos seemed to follow, and so it seemed like the most likely choice. He’d rushed through the streets of London to get here in record time, having to come from West to Central early on a Friday night meant that it was quite a challenge for Louis to bypass the combination of partygoers plus late commuters in order to get to his destination within the hour. However, Louis finally made it to the Decca Records building, breezing in through the entrance without more than a second glance at Kate the receptionist, and leaps into the lift as if he’d just completed a race and this is his finish line. To be fair, it did sort of feel like that.

The ‘slight problem’ Tom had been referring to in his text turns out to be a tad more intense than Louis had originally thought. He hears them, or should he say him, before he sees them, voices seeping down the corridor at increasing levels of volume. It’s not like Louis was expecting it to be nothing, quite the opposite really, but he definitely wasn’t prepared for what he’s witnessing right at this very moment, stood in the doorway, an image of chaos and almost-tangible tension in the air of the meeting room.

“No! I told you before, we don’t need it! We don’t need his bloody help, it’s fine the way–” Harry’s booming voice cuts off when his furious eyes snap to the door and Louis, for some reason, is suddenly overcome with the feeling of being caught red-handed.

“Louis!” Tom, thank god, proclaims with a tight smile. His voice came from where he’s seated at the end of table in the centre of the room and Louis’ immediately overcome by a sense of deja vu, is reminded of their first meeting all together. Only, the difference now is the even more extreme levels of hostility he can feel surrounding him, all-encompassing and almost suffocating. Also, Harry, unlike his serene, suave self last time, where he was sat in that chair ever the image of self-satisfaction, is now pacing up and down the room, looking positively murderous, flanked by a concerned Liam and an exasperated Zayn.

Louis looks over to his boss, and notices a severe-looking woman standing next to his chair. Glossy brunette hair and sharp eyebrows, eyes slits and lips downturned. She does not look impressed. She stands there, arms tightly crossed, observing the boys, the sight of Zayn and Liam holding Harry by the arms, uttering hushed words to try and talk him down. Louis already feels intimidated and she hasn’t even said a word.

“So glad you could join us on such short notice,” Tom’s thin voice speaks, and he sounds almost relieved at the sight of Louis, of all people. That’s never a good thing. “We’re having an impromptu writing session it seems!” Louis can tell he’s trying hard to be his usual relaxed self, however, even from across the room, Louis can see him beginning to sweat. He sounds stressed, and something tells Louis that this ‘writing session’, or whatever it began as, has been rapidly going downhill fast.

Before Louis has the chance to respond, a pair of deep, almost black, unsettling eyes land on him, belonging to the woman at the head of the table. She doesn’t look happy, to say the least, and Louis gets the unmistakable feeling that he is about to be told off, as if he’s a child again, despite the fact that he’s just barely arrived. He feels uneasy.

“Hello, Louis is it?” she offers with a bored expression, and Louis feels incredibly small.

“Yea– um, yes. Yes, that’s my name,” he stutters in response, unable to shake the shiver running down his spine from being locked in her gaze. He feels like one of Medusa’s stone statues, completely frozen and helpless.

This must be the label head of Decca, it has to be. He’s only heard stories about her, rumours and
little bits here and there, about how she’s the most terrifying woman in the industry, blunt and ruthless and completely unempathetic. Absolutely brilliant at her job, but feared massively due to her merciless nature. Louis had always scoffed at those stories thinking, naively, that she can’t be that bad. As he stands there, breathing stilted so as not to possibly disturb the air in any way for fear of disturbing her, he realises that maybe these rumours have an element of truth to them after all.

“Good, you’re the songwriter? We’ve listened to the song you were all working on last week, we love it. We think the lyrics could use some cleaning up, though, and I’ve been told you’re the one in charge of that?” her commanding voice meant that, even if Louis didn’t have the lyric suggestions waiting in his phone notes for the past few days, he would’ve bloody well found a way to get them.

Harry scoffs at her comment, and Louis supposes that he’s still a bit bitter about Louis having any semblance of creative control. Evidently, Harry’s changed his tune from their last studio session; he was so open and accepting to some alteration. Louis wonders what made him change his mind.

He spares a glance to the boy, having a real look at him. He looks tired, is what Louis notices immediately. Dark bags under his eyes, and his usually soft hair is sticking out in million different directions; he’s a proper mess. God knows what that boy’s been up to, what activities he’s probably been dragged away from to come here.

Louis shakes himself from his study of Harry, for the upteenth time it seems (Louis’ lost count now, it happens so often). He turns to face Tom and Scary Lady, which he feels is an appropriate nickname in place of her actual one (that he can’t remember right now, and he’s genuinely worried for his life if he dares ask it).

“Sorry, yes, I have them with me right now,” He starts, digging his phone out from his pocket, “there’s just a few minor lyric changes, and I wrote a bridge too.”

“Well show it to me then, we don’t have all night,” Scary Lady clips, and oh, God, Louis’ never been good with authority figures. Always gets unfairly nervous and wishes he could give off more of an uncaring vibe, inevitably failing to do so each time.

He passes his phone to her, notes open, trying to ignore the fact that his hand has developed a slight tremor to it in the past few seconds.

She reads through it, pursing her painted lips, and Louis can feel the gaze of the other boys across the room regarding her as well, hoping to gauge a reaction as much as Louis is.

It seems that everyone in the room is holding their breath, waiting in apprehension for her judgement, Louis especially, considering this is quite literally his job, and if she hates it, he’s fucked.

“Hm. Better,” she finally utters, and Louis almost has to strain his ears to hear her and oh, did she say better? Louis vaguely hears a loud snort in the background, from Harry, probably, but he’s too intent on listening to what else she’s got to say to really be sure. “You’ve impressed me, Mr. Tomlinson.” Oh, so she did know his name. “I like these altered lyrics, and the bridge you’ve added; you’ve tidied up the song well. It’s much better.” She looks up and hands Louis his phone back, and Louis thinks he may faint. She likes his lyrics. Good. Great. He thinks he needs to lie down.

“What?” a voice demands, piercing and irate, and there’s no doubt left this time that it comes from Harry.

“You’ll rerecord this song with Louis’ version of the lyrics. Is there a problem?” Scary Lady switches her stare to the boys, Louis doing the same.
“Rerecord…? No! Why? I won’t do it,” Harry growls incredulously, stubborn and incensed, forcing himself out of his bandmates’ grip.

“You’ll do as we say, Mr. Styles,” Scary Lady responds, tired expression on her face, not at all affected by the petulant pop star having a one-sided screaming match in front of her.

“For the last fucking time, we’re not doing that!” Harry roars, slamming his hands on the table, a deathly expression on his face. Louis sighs. He’s so dramatic. It’s only a few slight changes. Louis knows Harry has that thing about the industry, understands not being able to trust many people, but still. He knows Louis, it’s not like some new, random person is forcing them to sing their lyrics. He’d hoped after their studio session and time spent together before, that Harry would maybe have a bit more faith in him.

“Harry, listen, maybe if we just try—” he attempts, and wishes he hadn’t.

“No, you listen,” Harry seethes, pointing his finger in his direction, and suddenly Louis feels very small for the second time that evening. “It was fine the way it was! I told you before that we didn’t need your help and now you’re just ruining it.” Harry stays standing, words like knives, relentlessly slicing into Louis. Louis’s stunned to say the least, he really thought they were getting somewhere yesterday, before Harry had his little breakdown. Harry’s angry fists are clenched at his sides, and his face and neck are flushed. He’s behaving like a spoilt child and yet Louis is still intimidated.

Liam stands up then, with his arms out wide as if approaching a wild animal, and Louis eyes follow his movements, his face hot as he feels Harry’s own on him.

“Haz, that’s a bit far, don’t you think? We haven’t even tried Louis’ version of the lyrics. And you liked them at the studio just yesterday! He’s just trying to help, mate. This is his job. Just give it a chance before exploding, yeah?” Liam offers, with a quiet, tired tone that suggests to Louis that he’s been through this type of routine before. Talking Harry down in order that he reaches the level where he won’t erupt at the next inconvenience.

Harry only seems to get angrier though, red in the face and seething, grinding his teeth and pulling at his hair. Louis doesn’t think he’s ever seen someone look so utterly enraged.

“Maybe if you just tried recording my version, it’s not even that much different, remember? I promise—” Louis starts, hoping to calm Harry down a bit.

“No! Why won’t any of you fucking get it! It’s the bloody principle of it! These are our songs, songs that we wrote, so we should be able to decide what fucking lyrics are sung on them. This is fucking ridiculous!” he explodes, chest heaving and veins even popping on his neck.

“This is the industry, darling, take it or leave it,” Scary Lady responds condescendingly, and Louis’ eyebrows furrowed before he even thought about it, a spit of anger igniting in his chest. That was a tad uncalled for, he thinks. Harry’s young already, there’s no need to make him feel even more inexperienced and naive.

“You people always do this shit! I’ve seen it happen before, what it did to my—” he stops, catching himself. “This is our song, I want it to stay that way,” Harry howls, swiping some sheet music off the table, kicking his abandoned chair out the way. God, despite everything, he really is quite dramatic. Louis focuses on Harry’s face, can see his resolve slipping. Lip quivering and eyes blinking rapidly, fists clenching and unclenching at his sides, mask disappearing more and more by the minute.

“Well, I’m sorry, Harry, but that just isn’t possible. You gave up full creative control when you signed the contract,” even her eyes are softening now at the sight of Harry, still looking furious but
with an added element of hopelessness and dejection. This obviously affects Harry a lot, this lack of freedom over his own song. Louis can understand that it must feel pretty crap, and he starts to feel sorry for Harry. He also realises he’s part of this, part of Harry’s anguish, and he can feel the guilt creeping in. Suddenly the bad behaviour makes a bit of sense. Louis’ reminded then again of how young Harry is, how harsh the industry can be, and he can see the effects of it on him playing out on front of his very eyes.

“See,” Harry turns back then, towards his bandmates, a look of pure despair evident on his face, mask all but gone now, “this is why I didn’t want to do this,” he sighs in a quiet, thin voice. All he gets in response from them are pitying faces, looks that are full of sorrow, but equally helpless, too.

Harry looks down, Louis following his movements like a hawk, hyper-aware of his notoriously shaky moods, ready to act if Harry suddenly erupts again. He doesn’t though, not at all. Instead, Harry takes a deep breath, lifts his head up and starts trudging round the table towards the door, which Louis hasn’t moved from. It’s due to his planted position that Louis sees the stray tear leak out of Harry’s eye as he passes him over the threshold, his breath catching at the sight, Harry then wiping the back of his hand up frustratedly to wipe it away where it’s trailed to his cheekbone.

Louis glances around the room, and everyone else is sporting fraught faces, or something similar, and before Louis knows what he’s doing, for some reason, he’s twisting out the door himself, trying to catch sight of the back of the black-haired boy’s head down the hallway. He doesn’t stop to wonder why his first instinct was to go after Harry.

Louis marches down the corridor, making a quick turn round the corner to where he knows the lift is, thinking that’s where Harry must’ve gone.

The sight of slumped shoulders and shuffling feet stop him in his strides.

“Harry!” Louis calls out, and the boy in front of him halts his movements, body jarring at the sound. Louis feels a pang of emotion then, at Harry’s reaction, silently scolding himself for startling him.

“Sorry, I’m sorry…” he trails off, rounds past Harry’s figure, and turns to face him. Harry’s eyes are at the floor, he looks like a chastised child being held up on his way walking back to his classroom from the headmistress’ office, and, to be honest, that’s not far from what’s just happened. Harry bitterly chuckles at Louis’ apology, but stays stood there in front of him. Louis decides to let it go, knowing better than to react to Harry right now unless he wants another argument.

“What could you possibly want?” he then mutters, eyes rising to meet Louis’, and his pupils are all blown out; he’s evidently high, or coming down, at least, which doesn’t really come as a surprise to Louis. There are some stray tears caught in Harry’s eyelashes, which seem a bit more important, for some reason. Louis’ chest constricts at the sight.

“Is everything– I’m sorry about what happened in there,” he begins, wringing his hands, eyes focused on Harry, just Harry, hoping his controlled gaze emphasises his sincerity. “It obviously affects you a lot, and I… I’m just sorry. I know how hard this industry can be at times, how unfair some decisions can be. I think that this whole situation could’ve been handled a bit better.” Louis swallows his pride, along with every prior opinion he had of Harry, deciding that now is a good a time as ever to just be a decent bloke and offer support where it’s evidently needed. “I know we haven’t really seen eye to eye before, especially over this song, but… I am sorry. Truly. I didn’t realise it was this important to you.”

Harry looks up at him, a slightly shocked look on his face at Louis’ apology. Yeah, Louis’ not quite sure where that came from either. He doesn’t say anything for a bit, though, just sighs, the fight leaving him with his exhale.
After a beat of them holding eye contact, Harry speaks up, in a tired, weary voice, “’s not your fault. Not really.” Harry utters quietly, nose sniffling and lips trembling, and he’s never looked so young to Louis right now, in this dimly lit hallway, a sad smile on his pale face. All traces of bright, lively, self-assured Harry Styles gone, in his place a vulnerable, insecure fledging, curled in on himself. Louis feels himself loathing the sight of it, for whatever reason, it’s just unpleasant. “It’s theirs. They don’t understand… I never wanted…” he sighs, deep in thought, unfinished sentences hanging in the air.

Louis’ at a loss. He’s got the boy in front of him, shoulders slumped, evidently upset, and he somehow feels guilty, like it’s his fault. He stands there, watching Harry, and glances back to where they came from. So far, no one’s followed them out, and they’re all alone. Louis gets an idea.

“No,” he says, he doesn’t know what he’s doing, or why he’s doing it, for Harry, of all people, but he tilts his head towards the lift behind him all the same. He walks backwards, gaze locked on Harry’s now puzzled face. “Come on! Let’s go, before they realise we’re not coming back,” he finishes conspiratorially, pressing the call button on the wall. Louis fiddles with his phone then, putting it on silent mode so he can have plausible deniability if Tom tries to call him to tell him to bring Harry back, can say he didn’t hear it ring.

Harry cocks his head, but straightens up, and actually follows Louis. Louis’ surprised it’s that easy, almost certain there would be some kind of protest, or questioning. Harry seems too exhausted for that though, if the sluggish steps he takes into the awaiting lift are anything to go by. The doors close, and they stand there in silence. This is fine, Louis thinks to himself, hyper-aware of Harry’s presence next to him. The younger boy’s still got tension in his shoulders, brow still furrowed and thoughts almost tangible.

Louis thinks that by taking him out of this stress-ridden building, he can help ease Harry’s mood. He doesn’t know why he’s so intent on helping this boy, considering their track record of not really getting along, but he is, and that’s all he can think about right now. Also, hopefully, Louis thinks at the back of his mind, they can be civil to each other for long enough for Louis to be successful in his endeavour. Louis can only pray.

“I still can’t believe you don’t drink tea,” is the first thing Harry mutters while they’re sat opposite each other in the café they’re in, just a few streets away from the label’s building.

He’d taken Harry to this little hole-in-the-wall coffee shop he knew of in Piccadilly, open until late, hoping that a warm drink and a change of scenery would help him relax. It seems to have only brought his snarky side back though, or so that’s what Louis thought, until he looks up from his steaming mug to Harry and sees a small smile on his face, and Louis realises he was only teasing.

“Coffee’s got more caffeine in it per cubic centimetre,” Louis counters, whipping out some GCSE chemistry knowledge in an attempt to keep up the light mood. “It’s just more efficient, really, if you think about it.” Harry actually laughs, and Louis’ immediate reaction is to grin, genuinely happy he’s cheered the boy up. It’s odd, considering, but Louis doesn’t think much of it.

“I suppose you’re right,” Harry concurs, with a chuckle, and Louis’ shocked that there wasn’t even an attempt at an argument, even just for Harry’s own amusement. Despite a tiny whisper of a dimple appearing on Harry’s cheek, Louis knows, somehow, that there’s still something troubling him.

“So,” Louis begins, suddenly very interested in the swirling browns and whites blending together in his coffee cup, “What was that in there? If you don’t mind, um, talking about it.” Louis could be a bit more tactical, could try not to stutter every time he speaks to Harry, but alas, it’s proving to be more
He hears Harry take a breath and looks up to see him staring out the window, gaze locked on something in the distance. Harry’s blank face is lit up by the London moonlight, features aglow with it, and Louis’ caught off-guard by the sight of him. Louis’ known that Harry’s attractive, ever since he saw him step foot in Air Studios that first morning, but tonight, it’s almost more. He’s… He’s stunning, actually. It’s just a fact, really, that’s what it comes down to. It’s about half ten at night, the twinkling stars are beginning to peek through the clouds, and Harry is utterly, utterly beautiful.

Louis follows his eyes to whatever he’s looking at. Decca Records’ is visible from here, the tall structure towering above its neighbouring buildings. Fuck, Louis should’ve remembered that before bringing Harry here; his whole plan was to get Harry away from it, not have it standing there menacingly, eerie and intimidating height almost mocking them.

“Shit, sorry I, I didn’t realise we could see it from here, I didn’t do this on purpose, I promise! I’m really sorry!” Louis rushes out, hoping to god that Harry doesn’t think this is Louis’ fucked up way of getting back at him or something.

“Stop apologising, Louis,” Harry breathes, a soft, gentle voice exuding from him, and Louis thinks this is the first time he’s called him by his actual name. Amusement twitches at Harry’s lips, he evidently finds Louis’ blathering entertaining. Louis can’t really find it in himself to be even a little bit disgruntled.

“Sorry,” Louis replies, only half-joking, and that earns an even bigger grin from Harry, his cheeks kissed with pink. He’s like a little cherub like this, Louis thinks to himself, bizarrely, innocent and happy and young. Louis’s just making an observation, though, and he’s allowed to do that, it doesn’t change his preconceived opinions about Harry. (Okay, maybe it does a bit. Maybe this is his favourite version of Harry that he’s seen so far.)

“It’s sort of complicated,” Harry begins, smile slowly drooping, a stony expression taking over his face. He fiddles with the thin, delicate chains hanging from his neck; a nervous habit, Louis assumes. “The reason why it’s so important to me, I mean.”

“We’ve got time.” Louis reassures, dipping his head to meet Harry’s gaze. He’s aware of the fact that it’s slowly creeping to eleven o’clock, later than he’d usually even be awake, let alone out, but right now that doesn’t seem to matter. “But you don’t have to tell me, I mean, not if you don’t want to…” Louis trails off, he doesn’t want to pressure Harry into saying anything, not when he’s obviously in a more vulnerable state than usual.

Harry averts his eyes self-consciously under Louis’ fixed stare. Louis is giving Harry his full attention, something that in any other circumstance, he’s sure Harry would certainly be delighted about, especially because it’s Louis, and he loves to wind him up. Right now, though, he looks like he feels more scrutinised than anything.

Harry slowly looks up, then, eyes travelling up to meet Louis’, and he seems to be having some sort of inner-conflict. He opens his mouth a couple of times and closes it just as many, furrowing his brows in deep thought. Twisting the rings on his fingers nervously, it’s evident he’s deciding on what exactly to say. Finally, he speaks, quietly, almost a whisper.

“I lost someone, close to me. A few years ago. She—” Harry stops then, takes a breath. Anguish is clear on his face, and Louis’ never seen that particular emotion on Harry before, and it leaves a bad taste in his mouth. Louis leans slightly forward in his chair, wanting to catch every word. “She was… I guess you could say she was in the industry, too. And, she taught me a lot, about it, before she… before she passed.”
Louis doesn’t know where this is going, is a bit confused. It’s always awful to lose someone close to you, Louis knows. He feels bad for Harry, sympathy leaking out of him against his will, almost. He knows Harry isn’t the nicest guy, knows they’ve not got on, before this, but somehow this atmosphere between them, it feels slightly different now. It’s like for a minute, and maybe longer, Harry has no mask on or wall up, not that Louis can see, and Louis is confused why Harry’s chosen now to be open with him, now to reveal a little bit of himself. Must be the right time and place, or something, Louis has no idea.

“Well, you see… she sort of, warned me? I guess? About the industry, and what it can do to people,” Harry replies, furrow in his brow even deeper, and he looks… not upset, really. Kind of bitter, actually. Vulnerable, too, though, and he sounds very sincere in his speech, like this isn’t a joke to him like everything else seems to be, it’s real, and he’s letting Louis know this truth, for whatever reason. Louis’ never seen him like this, is captivated by this new side to Harry. Louis’ also intrigued, now, he wants to know what this all means. He’s transported back to the first day he met The Cahoots, when he saw the boys in the lobby, and was struck with a feeling of hope, hope that they wouldn’t get jaded too soon, hope that the harsh world of the industry didn’t strip them of their child-like naivety as soon as they were thrust in. It seems, to Louis then, that Harry’s… whatever she was, had the same idea.

“Right, I think I might be starting to understand now. So, this person–” Louis starts, and then Harry speaks up, louder than before.

“Oh. Song for Edie, Louis remembers, then. Must mean something special to Harry if he’s written a song about them.

“Edie… she told you how awful some people can be? In this industry? Like, labels and stuff?” Was this why Harry was so upset? Because by the sounds of this, it seems like he’d been told what to expect when coming into this career, this lifestyle, already.

“It was that, yeah, but also…” Harry bites his lip, debating. “It was also that she got really fucked over herself, by some bastards who had some control over her, and I–” Harry’s voice catches, and Louis looks on in alarm, searching Harry’s face for any signs of crumbling or cracking, not quite in full belief that Harry’s would let himself be so raw in front of Louis.

Harry’s composure hardens, then, mask resurfacing, as if in response to Louis’ thoughts, and yeah, that’s more like it.

“So she was in a contract, then? One that she wasn’t happy with? One that she couldn’t get out of?” Louis questions; it all sounds a bit familiar now. Perhaps Harry got reminded of what happened to his friend, or family member, whoever she was, with the amount of control that The Cahoots seem to have, and it struck a nerve inside him.

“She… um… well,” Harry says stiltedly, averting his gaze, and it strikes Louis then that maybe he’s overstepped in his questioning, that maybe Harry isn’t comfortable revealing that much.

“Sorry, sorry. You don’t have to say, I was just being nosy, I suppose,” Louis apologises, feeling his
cheeks heat up a bit. He’s just curious, is all, at who this elusive Edie person might be. Louis can’t think of any names in the industry that match, no songwriters, or anything like that.

Harry gives Louis a smile, then, a grateful one, eyes showing only relief. Louis’ a bit in shock at that, still not used to seeing genuine smiles from Harry at all, not directed at himself, anyway.

It strikes Louis then that it seems Harry doesn’t mind revealing parts of his life, parts of himself, but not too much that you manage to form a full picture. It’s frustrating, because Louis wants to know more, wants to know who this person is, and why their words had such an effect on Harry, but it’s fine, it’s not Louis’ place to ask, he knows.

Harry continues, “I remember the last thing she said to me, the last time I saw her, it was about a week before she left us, I think. She said, ‘Don’t let them change you, Harry. Stay true to yourself. Don’t let them control you. Be strong’. Be stronger than she was, she said. I didn’t really fully understand what she meant, until it all happened. And then I got it.”

“It really fucked me up, as well, you know,” Harry says then, more to himself than to Louis, “’s when I started, like… taking lots of drugs, and…” He trails off, and it makes a bit of sense to Louis, now, he can understand what loss can do to a person. Harry’s previous behaviour makes a bit more sense, now, too. Louis knows some habits can be hard to break, and he reckons Harry’s foray into drugs those years ago kickstarted a few toxic ones.

“I was about eighteen, and I was already in the band at this point, so I had access to so much shit already, shit that I never even knew existed. I would get fucked out of my mind, so fucked that I wouldn’t even remember my own bloody name. She was always telling me not to do any of that shit, though. Which is ironic, ‘cos she did loads of shit herself. Probably too much, actually,” Harry bitterly chuckles at this, and stops for a beat, before continuing on with the previous thread. “I’d wake up in random flats in random parts of London, with no recollection of how I got there, or the night before, or the night before that. I’d get into fights, too, got a few broken bones to prove it. Everyone said I was getting really… self-destructive, I guess.”

“The point is,” He says, shaking his head, “She got fucked over, and I don’t want the same thing to happen to me. I don’t want to be changed, Louis. I can’t change. I won’t. I have to stay true to myself, and true to my music. I have to. I liked being an independent act, with nothing to tie us down. I don't blame them, but the boys convinced me to sign this contract and– and it’s all just a bit overwhelming.” There’s so much emotion here, anger and passion, and also some sadness, an almost desperate tone to his voice. Louis doesn’t know what to do, doesn’t know whether to offer comfort, of some kind, he’s not really sure what Harry would be comfortable with, not really sure what he himself would be comfortable with, because despite everything, it’s still Harry, the person who Louis isn’t exactly the most fond of in the world right now. He chooses just to stay stay silent and listen, the safer option, probably.

Although this Harry is different to the one before, this Harry has more depth, isn’t just dismissive and rude and angry, he’s soft and vulnerable and Louis actually, weirdly, feels bad for him. Louis gets
him more, too, understands his character a bit more than he did before.

“But I just don’t want to be a sell-out, I don’t want to end up with absolutely no creative control whatsoever, it’s simply not something that I can let happen. S’why I freaked out earlier, I was reminded of her and, and what happened to her and I just. I don’t want to end up like that.” Like what exactly, Louis wants to ask, so keen to know more, but he holds his tongue, knows it’s not his place. “And I owe it to Edie to fight for my freedom with every fibre of my being,” Harry releases this all, it comes tumbling out of him, like a dam breaking, almost. His voice is calm and calculated, and there’s a hint of relief in his tone.

God. Louis is… speechless, almost. This is so much, so much and not enough all at once. It’s clear Harry was close to this Edie person, admired her and took her words to heart. It’s also clear that he is very intent on staying true to himself and his music, and that explains why he was so unhappy with the idea of a collaborator on the album.

“Okay,” Louis simply says, because that’s all he can say. There’s no argument to that, no possible way he could ever fight Harry on something that he’s so evidently passionate about. He doesn’t want to, anyway.

Louis looks Harry in the eye now, nodding, “We’ll sort it out, yeah? We’ll sort it out. We’ll figure a way to make sure everyone’s happy, okay? I’m sure we will.” He doesn’t know how they’ll go about it, yet, but he’s determined to try.

“Oh,” Harry responds, warily, not fully believing his words, and Louis can understand the cynicism. It’s hard to trust people anyway, and when you’re living a life like Harry’s, it’s even worse. Louis knows from his experience of working with singers before that they always find it difficult to find people with true, pure intentions, so he’s got no doubt this is how Harry’s feeling right now.

“Listen, Harry, I’m not the label. I’m not like those guys in those suits who sit you down and tell you what to say and do, okay? You can trust me. I just want to help you with your album, mate, that’s really all. I don’t have any ulterior motives, I promise you. I just want to help,” Louis says then, hoping Harry can hear the sincerity in his voice, hoping he can see it written all over his face. Despite everything, he has a feeling that right now, all Harry needs is a few words of reassurance.

Harry’s face softens then, and, wow, if that isn’t quite a sight. Maybe Louis has gotten through to him after all. “Okay. Yeah, you’re right.” And did Harry just agree with him? And is Louis pleased because of it? This evening has been strange. Louis seems to developing a soft spot for Harry, and he has no idea how this has happened. “Thank you, Louis. For listening. And for helping. You didn’t have to bring me here, but you did and… that was good. Thank you,” Harry says earnestly.

“You’re welcome, Harry,” he offers him a small smile, and fuck, this is weird, to be so civil, so nice with Harry, but Louis… Louis likes it. “And how about we try and start again? I know we got off on the wrong foot, but I really do want to be able to help you when I’m working on this album with you. And I can’t really do that if you hate me.” Louis knows he’d been reassured that Harry doesn’t hate him before, already, so he’s not sure why he needs more confirmation; the last sentence just slips out. He’s also trying for a jovial tone, trying to lift the mood, maybe, but he guesses he doesn’t quite hit the mark at the sight of Harry’s crestfallen expression.

“I don’t hate you, Louis. Not at all.” And Harry says this so incredibly sincerely, a trace of panic in his eyes, brows furrowed and the picture of puzzlement.

“Oh, well uh, good. Right. Sorry, that was a stupid thing to say,” Louis responds, self-deprecating smile on his face. He’s slightly embarrassed, can feel his cheeks blushing more and more by the
minute, and maybe, *maybe*, Louis’ secretly relieved. Hearing this truth come from Harry, as opposed
to anyone else, felt much more satisfying.

“No, it wasn’t really, now that I think about it. I apologise for my previous behaviour towards you. I
know I haven’t exactly been… hospitable,” Harry smiles sheepishly. “I was taking out my frustration
on you, and it wasn’t fair. I’m sorry. Truly. I’m really looking forward to working well together from
now on.”

“Me too,” Louis simply replies, slightly in shock from Harry’s apology. This sweet, vulnerable,
pleasant boy is such a far cry from the proud, cocky and arrogant Harry Styles that had walked into
the studio that first day.

They make their way out of the café then, finally, descending into the darkness of the London
gloom, with only the moon and a couple of dim streetlamps to guide them. They bid each other
goodbye, words of farewell fading into the night, before going their separate ways.

Louis shakes his head to himself, feels like he’s living a dream, almost, can’t believe this is the way
the night has ended. Harry Styles, of all people, had genuinely smiled at him multiple times that
evening, was *civil* towards him, and had even told him some personal things about his life. (Even
though they were only very minor, and left Louis with more questions than answers). Louis still
doesn’t fully get it, fully get *Harry*, but something tells him that this evening has been a stepping
stone, and that he’s, maybe, miraculously, on his way to getting there.

As Louis makes his way home, to his surprise, he changes his mind. He decides that this genuine and
real side of Harry, that he got a few glimpses of, so eloquent in his way of speaking, and so
passionate in his words, *this* version of Harry, is by far his favourite version of Harry he’s
experienced yet.
Louis’ running late today; the tubes are delayed, which means that he has to rush out of his flat without his morning coffee, which is never good for anyone, really. He’s now currently speed-walking down the street towards the studio building, because Louis Tomlinson does not run, thank you.

The jumper he chose to wear today is itchy and he’s slightly too hot, so he’s not in a particularly good mood this morning. He can see the old renovated church building in the distance up the road where the studio is located, knows that there are probably three boys, who are hopefully not too irritated at his lateness, waiting for him inside.

One boy in particular is weighing on Louis’ mind.

The Cahoots were due for another writing and recording session, their fourth one this week. Louis has been working tirelessly with Zayn and Liam this past week to finish some of the last few songs for the album, pouring over various melody and lyric combinations day and night until they all blurred together.

They’d had about three productive sessions so far, successfully cutting down the list of songs that needed tweaking from the one that Louis had been given by Tom on that first day. Louis tries not to think about why these sessions in particular were much more fruitful than the first one and, consequently, tries not to also dread today’s meeting. Harry, for whatever reason, has been absent for the past few days, busy doing whatever it is posh pop stars do. He’s not even really a pop star yet, Louis reminds himself, as if it matters.

Anyways. Harry.

He hasn’t seen Harry for a little while, not since the other night, when they’d had that surreal hour or so of just… talking. Louis’ still shocked that Harry, closed off, guarded Harry, was willing to tell him anything. Although he is a mystery to be solved, Harry is; Louis knows this. Louis had sat there and listened to him.

But that was just out of convenience more than anything, wasn’t it? Louis was there, and Harry had to vent. He probably would have told just about anyone else, too. It’s not like Louis is special, or anything. Not at all. Like, yeah, alright, he probably trusts Louis enough to have told him about his insecurities, Louis himself finds that difficult to do with Niall, sometimes. It doesn’t mean they’re best mates all of a sudden, doesn’t mean he trusts him to help make his songs better. (Does it?).

And yes, they’d said they were looking forward to working together but... Louis doesn’t actually believe Harry would follow through, thought maybe it was one of those heat of the moment things, thought for sure he would go back to his stubborn ways the next day. They’re amicable, sure; a step up from whatever it was they started as, but. Well, Louis’s just a bit surprised at Harry’s willingness to collaborate with him. Maybe he actually did something right, for once, the other night. Got through to Harry, somehow. Maybe.
Louis finally, thankfully, reaches the glass doors leading into the Air Studios lobby, and pauses to catch his breath, adjusting his bag on his shoulder from where it’s slipped down his shoulder in his rush. Yeah, exercise really isn’t his thing.

He walks in, and notices there’s no one waiting on the sofa, and no one near his desk, either.

Shit, he really must be late, then.

He quietly tuts at himself as he attempts another speed-walk down the hallway. He remembers that they’re in a different studio to last time today, Tom needing to use Louis’ preferred one for another client, or something, Louis hadn’t really been listening. Louis bypasses his studio then, and stops outside the door opposite, giving himself about three seconds to prepare himself for what’ll be waiting for him inside.

He opens the dark, wooden, ancient door harshly, cursing under his breath at his own abruptness. “Fuck, sorry!” Louis announces to the room and, really, his mum always did say he knew how to make an entrance.

He looks up then, and is met by three familiar faces staring back at him, each with a different level of amusement written on them. First is Zayn, who is sitting with his arm stretched out across the back of a leather seat (the only type of furniture Tom will allow in the studios, it seems) over Liam’s shoulder, his lips curling up ever so slightly, most likely at Louis’ brashness.

Next is Liam, obviously, because when are those two not glued together? He’s got a cheeky grin on his face, eyebrows raised in delight in response to Louis’ clumsy arrival.

Last, but most certainly not least, is Harry who just, well. He’s offering Louis a big smile, dimples and everything, for Christ’s sake, and he looks so very... soft. Eyes bright and twinkling with amusement and something else, Louis isn’t sure, but the view is so unfairly lovely he can’t seem to make his mouth form any words.

“Quite an entrance you’ve just made there,” Harry drawls then, in that low, teasing tone that Louis is ever so familiar with, and, hold on, is Harry actually... joking? Good-naturedly? Louis blinks at this unexpected response.

“Uh, um– yeah, I– sorry ‘bout that, and the, uh, lateness…” Louis stutters, and oh for God’s sake, why has he suddenly lost his ability to speak normally? Perhaps it’s the shock of Harry in a working environment being actually pleasant, or maybe it’s the shock of those green eyes. Either way, it seems to be Harry’s fault, and it’s making Louis feel peculiar.

Harry giggles at that, fucking giggles, which just makes Louis feel even stranger, and, wow, he needs to distract himself from whatever this is. Didn’t he find Harry insufferable up until now? Well, maybe up until the other night… Regardless, he’s here to work, not ponder the inner workings of his brain, or whatever it is that’s responsible for this reaction.

Louis looks over at Zayn and Liam, whose smiles have transitioned into knowing smirks, and, nope, they’re not doing this right now. Louis shakes his head, trying to get himself into gear.

“Right, lads!” he begins, taking a seat opposite them all, and fumbling in his bag for his notebook at the same time, “So, I thought today we would do some more writing, but also start on the recording process? I know you’ve got only a few songs left to finish for the album, so it shouldn’t take too many sessions to do them all.” That was fine, wasn’t it? He sounded very professional and completely collected. Good. This is good.
“Sounds good,” Harry responds then, leaning forward in his seat, an eager look on his face, still smiling, and Louis almost thinks he’s dreaming. Harry looks so genuinely interested and ready to go, it’s almost alarming. He also looks… well-rested, is the word Louis is going with. It’s a relieving sight to see, after the other night. A far cry from the boy Louis had parted ways with that evening, who had looked disheveled and exhausted and all teary-eyed.

The way Harry’s acting, too… It’s so different from that first session, so much less closed off and dismissive. Completely opposite, in fact. Louis’ not complaining, though, is pleasantly surprised more than anything. He just hopes this good mood lasts, and that this session doesn’t end the same way the first one did.

“Well… Good.” Louis begins, reeling from Harry’s consistently positive comments. “Perfect. Shall we start with your part, Harry, seeing as you’re so keen?” Louis finds some wit within himself, managing to tease Harry back a bit, thankfully. He gets a rush of something when he says it, though, which is odd, because that never happens, usually, and he’s not quite sure why.

“Brilliant! Which song?” Harry says enthusiastically, jumping up from out of his seat, to the surprise of even Zayn and Liam. Louis is almost speechless at this switch in behaviour, and a smile takes over Louis’ face completely against his will. He’s obviously in a much better mood today, almost a different person, all bubbly and cheery, when before he’d been cold and hardened. Maybe the other night, and their talk, has something to do with this, Louis wonders.

“Um,” Louis chuckles, shaking his head slightly in amusement, and averts his eyes to the page that he’s opened in front of him. “Maybe we could try Your Sweet Touch?” he tries to say it in an equally enthusiastic voice, because fuck it, seeing Harry smile is a lot better than seeing him angry, and Louis would like to keep his good mood up. For the benefit of their productivity, of course.

“Sick! Let’s do it!” Harry’s overdoing it now, skipping into the recording booth from his standing position, positively beaming. Louis can’t help but actually cackle at this odd, but entertaining behaviour, endlessly intrigued by this strange, strange boy.

He’s trying, Louis realises. He’s making an effort, or so it seems. It may all just be some act that disappears by their next session, knowing Harry and his mood swings, but. Harry did sound incredibly sincere when he said he was looking forward to working with Louis, so maybe, maybe this is actually for real. Louis hopes this is for real, anyway

He looks up at the booth, where Harry is currently slotting the headphones on, a concentrated furrow in his brow. Louis has to stop himself from fondly watching him carry out the act, looks down at his notebook again instead. This is weird, he’s not supposed to be so charmed by Harry, his client, but it’s almost as if he can’t even help his reactions to whatever Harry does.

Louis’ getting that unfamiliar feeling again, and tries not to think too hard about what it could be. It’s hardly his own fault, then, Louis realises. If anything, it’s Harry’s fault for prancing around the room like a bloody deranged bunny rabbit. Oh Jesus Christ, Louis should just stop thinking about Harry altogether, if this is where his mind is going.

He looks over at Zayn and Liam, about to ask them what they wanted to do about their parts for the song, and is met by two very smug faces. God, they’re insufferable.

“What are you two so amused at?” Louis asks then, confused at their behaviour. Although, not that confused, because it is Zayn and Liam, who are pretty much self-proclaimed soulmates, and so Louis isn’t that surprised that they’re probably both thinking the same exact thing, whatever it may be.
“Oh, nothing, really,” Zayn begins, and glances over at Liam, who’s smile only grows bigger. What is going on? Is there some private joke that Louis isn’t aware of? Again - knowing Zayn and Liam - probably. “It’s just that, well. We’re a bit surprised,” and somehow Zayn manages to look even more smug.

“Surprised? At what?” but Louis can feel his face heating up, and maybe, sort of, has an idea about where this is going.

“You and Harry! Actually being nice to one another! It’s just a bit of a U-turn from last time we were all together, is all,” Liam replies to Louis then, and Louis hopes that Harry can’t hear this, hopes the speaker is switched off in the booth.

It’s not that he’s embarrassed about his and Harry’s behaviour, it’s innocent, for Christ’s sake. It’s more that he knows Zayn and Liam probably think it’s something different, something more, which it’s obviously not, it can’t be. Louis doesn't even like Harry, not really. Well, maybe he's warming up to him a tiny bit.

“We just… had a good chat, the other night, sorted some things out, you know? That’s it, really,” Louis replies, and why has his voice gone all funny and high like that? He hopes the heat he feels on his cheeks isn’t showing.

“Oh yeah, your little escapade! How could I forget?” Zayn starts, clapping his hands in joy like a child, the most sarcastic Louis has ever heard him, and Christ, is Louis blushing again? All they did was go for coffee, there’s nothing wrong with that. Well, it was coffee and tea, because Harry doesn’t like coffee that much, only sometimes on Sundays apparently, according to him, but that is entirely beside the point. “What exactly did you talk about, then?” Zayn finishes questioning, a quirk to his brow, and that ever-present knowing glint still in his eye.

“You know…” Louis starts, and he doesn’t know what to say, really.

Logically, he knows that Zayn and Liam probably know about Harry’s insecurities about the industry, and Edie too, whomever she is. They definitely know a hell of a lot more about Harry than Louis does, that’s a given, they’ve been best mates for years, but all the same. Louis still has this nigging feeling, right in the pit of his stomach, that whatever Harry told him in that café should stay there. Harry obviously had decided to speak to Louis in confidence, for whatever reason, and Louis knows he should honour that on principle, even if he would just be repeating information about Harry to Liam and Zayn that they already know.

“Just stuff. It doesn’t matter, we just came to an agreement,” he ends up saying, and yeah, that’s all he needs to say, really.

“You didn’t happen to, oh, I don’t know…” Liam taps his chin, in mock deliberation, and Louis preemptively cringes - he’s seen that look before. “You didn’t happen to get lost in his eyes again? Like that night at the gig? And that’s why you’re suddenly so friendly?” Ah, there it is. Louis knew this was coming, and yet he still feels his face heat up, still feels nerves prickling at his skin because he’s praying Harry can’t hear this conversation, actually praying to every God he doesn’t believe in right now, in the middle of his studio, in the middle of this conversation. Liam has a smirk on his face, of course, and Louis has to control his own before he breaks a record for how many times he’s blushed in the last fifteen minutes.

Louis doesn’t know what to say to that, and he opens and shuts his mouth quite a few times before deciding on veering away from the subject completely, and as quickly as possible. It’s not that there’s any truth to what Liam’s saying. It’s just that maybe, possibly, what he said reminds Louis that he did, in fact, notice how attractive Harry truly was that night, while he sat there by the window, face
lit up by the moonlight. However, no one apart from Louis needs to know this tiny, insignificant fact.

“Right, uh, where were we?” Louis sits down, speaks into the microphone that’s connected to the booth, and turns to a lonesome Harry, who is standing in there patiently, no word of an argument or objection to being kept waiting, nothing at all coming from him. Weird, Louis thinks to himself. So weird.

Louis decides not to pay anymore attention to the two toddlers sitting in the corner, hoping that by some miracle they'll stop their loud, piercing giggling long enough for Louis to be able to concentrate on actually getting some songs down. God, no one told him helping to record a debut album for an almost-famous boyband would be quite so similar to babysitting his little siblings.

“I think we were about to record something, a song maybe? I think? I don’t know, I’ve just been in here so long now, I can’t remember,” Harry dramatically starts, affecting a breathy voice, and Louis can’t help but snigger at his ridiculousness; he shouldn’t have spoken so soon. “What day is it? What year are we in?” Harry continues, dazedly, but it’s in a good-natured tone, and he’s obviously just joking about the wait.

“Alright, alright, calm down, ya drama queen, we’re getting there, okay?” Louis replies, rolling his eyes and hoping Harry can see. Yeah, okay, so he’s still a bit of a shit, but Louis’ not so bothered by it now. Funny how that’s worked out. Louis tries not to think about why it’s suddenly so easy to interact with Harry like this now, such a far cry from the other session.

“I don’t know… I don’t know if I can make it…” Harry replies, and he can’t even keep up the helpless act now, dissolving into laughter by the end of the second sentence. Louis just shakes his head, as he fiddles with the control board in front of him.

“Okay, shut up now, please, I’m playing the track back for you,” Louis says with a smile, so it doesn’t come off too harsh. He wants to be able to banter with Harry like this, it’s fun, and he likes it, surprisingly, and it’s also… good for the overall trusting each other thing, right? Yeah, something like that. Louis’ still aware that Harry can be volatile, so anything he says could probably be taken the wrong way.

He needn’t have worried, though, because when he looks back up, Harry is just grinning at him, waiting for the music to start in his ears, and Louis realises he’s been too busy staring at him to actually hit the play button. He quickly remedies the situation, sits down in his chair and waits for Harry’s voice to fill the room.

He, stupidly, decides to glance over at Zayn and Liam again, for whatever reason, perhaps Louis has a masochistic streak he wasn’t aware of. They’re just sitting there, shit-eating grins and knowing looks on their faces, and of course, of course they are.

“Oh, piss off,” Louis mutters to them, but that just makes them howl even harder than before. He shakes his head, for what feels like the hundredth time that morning, and just leans back in his chair and lets the music envelop his senses.

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Tell me what to say to make it go away and I’ll do that

Tell me what to do to make it up to you and I’ll do that too

Time means so much if all I have is your sweet touch
It’s been a few hours now, and they’re listening to the song playback, finally complete with all of the necessary vocals recorded over the top. It’s a slow, sexy tune, and Louis likes it; it’s probably his favourite one of theirs that they’ve played or recorded so far. They’re all sitting around a table in the middle of the room, similar to the one in the studio they had used before. The only difference is this one is slightly smaller than the other one, but it’s fine, Louis’s good at making-do, apparently, that’s what Tom tells him anyway. Louis thinks it’s just Tom kissing-arse as usual, but he’ll take it.

He looks over at the boys, and they’re all lost in the song too, it seems. Nodding their heads along to the rhythmic beat, completely in sync, and Louis’ a bit amazed at how they manage to do that without realising. Must be one of the reasons they’re so good as a band, if they’re always on the same wavelength like this, so naturally.

And so it goes, and so it goes, which way I’ve never ever known
Do I hold you back in all the ways I lack what you need dear
And headed toward the end you were looking for a friend and that ain't me

They’re all singing on the song, obviously, but Louis can’t help but pick out one set of vocals in particular. Harry’s voice is just… It’s got a certain edge to it, Louis can’t really explain it. It’s so easy to pick out; so unique to Louis, he’s sure he’s never heard anything like it before. It can be soft and low, emotion seeping from every syllable he sings, or it can be loud and harsh, almost too much at times, but still somehow addictive.

It’s part of the rockstar vibe Harry possesses, Louis supposes; almost everything seems to come to him so effortlessly. The way he sings, the way he dresses, the way he presents himself, to name a few. His kohl-lined eyes are captivating, not seeming incongruous at all on Harry, who obviously feels at home in leather and any type of tight clothing.

Louis had originally thought it was all a bit pretentious, the eyeliner and nail varnish, and endless parade of leather jackets, all part of the Harry Styles act, but actually, maybe he was wrong before. Maybe this is just Harry, maybe he just naturally is this born-with-it rockstar. He sure sounds like it, anyway.

The song comes to an end, a long instrumental full of slowly strummed electric guitars, and an ever present, quiet yet sure drum beat in the back that Louis can’t help but bop his head to. He feels like he’s waking up from dream when the music quietens, blinking to make sure his eyes are alert; it had almost lulled him to sleep. In a good way, he thinks.

He looks over at the boys then, and they all seem be doing the same. They’re probably all a bit exhausted now too, after having to record (and re-record) some of their parts over and over again until it sounded good enough to Louis. He can be harsh, he’ll admit, but it’s for the benefit of the song, and that’s obviously the most important thing to him as a sound engineer.

“Okay, lads… That was good, yeah? Sounded good?” Louis asks them, after hitting the stop button on the control panel. He looks back over at them, and they all seem content, satisfied looks on their faces. Good, Louis thinks, just what he likes to see from clients.

“Yeah, mate, sounded brilliant. Didn’t think it could sound better than the one we’d originally recorded, but. Guess we were wrong. Thanks,” Liam offers, and Zayn nods along. Louis feels a
smile of his own form on his face.

“It’s the machine you should be thanking, man, I just know how to work it.” Louis simpers as he dips his head, fiddling with a stray bit of tape that’s unstuck from the board in front of him. He doesn’t deal well with praise, never quite knows how to react.

“No. You’re talented. You should own it,” Harry interrupts, simply, matter-of-factly, and Louis looks over and wishes he hadn’t. Harry’s got this warm, open look on his face, so relaxed, and it makes Louis almost uncomfortable, like he’s just waiting for the other shoe to drop. This behaviour is just so much more than before, and Louis doesn’t quite know how to react to it.

“Oh, thanks…” Louis replies quietly, sheepishly, a bit at a loss at what else to say in response. Harry’s smiling now though and, fuck, why is that sight becoming increasingly more pleasant to Louis? Louis averts his eyes, before he does something embarrassing, like get lost in Harry again, and instead takes a breath to say, “And, I um, don’t think we need to change anything on this one, lyrics-wise, I think the label was fine with this one staying the way it is, but. I’ll definitely, you know, be sure to run it by you all when and if we need to make some changes, yeah?” While Louis directs this statement at them all, it’s mainly at Harry, because he knows, he knows this was the cause for the tension before, and he wants to make it clear that he’s trying too. So he chances a look in his direction again, to see that Harry’s already watching him, already looks calm and relaxed. There’s a grateful smile on his face and he nods silently. It makes Louis feel more relieved than he thought it would.

The sound of a door handle being turned behind him is drowned out by the louder sound of the heavy door to the studio swinging open and Louis shudders in his seat at the sound, the sweet tranquility in the room completely gone. There could only be one person responsible for this.

“Oh, alright lads?” he hears a booming, unmistakably Irish voice from behind him, and Louis thinks he can already feel a migraine coming on.

“Niall,” Louis chuckles, turning around the face his best friend, an amused look no doubt already all over his face. He can’t help it, really, it’s Niall.

Niall stands there, grinning, eyes gleaming with delight at his entrance. One hand in on his hip, and the other is, thankfully, holding a takeaway container with what looks to be four iced lattes in it, which, if Louis isn’t mistaken by the logo, are from his favourite coffee shop near the studio which Niall hears him go on about all the time. Niall may be a nuisance, but he really is an angel at the best of times.

“Louis! Lovely to see ya,” he starts, ever so brightly and over-the-top, and Louis can’t help but laugh at his ridiculous friend. “Becky, that beautiful intern, let me in. I brought you coffee because of your complaining on the phone this morning, you over-dramatic sod, and also cos I had the day off and I thought I’d come to annoy ya,” Niall continues, whilst handing over Louis’ coffee and putting the rest on the table, so Louis really can’t complain about the second part of his sentence.

It was hard enough wrangling Liam and Zayn into the booth earlier with the moods they’re in, and with Niall here he’s sure it’ll just make everything harder. Then again, he did bring Louis coffee, so he can’t be too bothered about his best mate coming to visit him, even if it is just because he’s bored and he loves to pester Louis, especially at work.

“Hi, I don’t think we’ve met before,” Harry gets up from his chair, holds his hand out politely to Niall. So very deferential, Louis notices. Louis also notices the glint in Niall’s eye when he spots Harry, along with the quick look he casts Louis’ way, and fuck, he can just tell this won’t be good.
“Harry! Pleased to meet you, finally,” Niall begins, grasping Harry’s hand with more enthusiasm than everyone else’s in the room’s combined, at that moment. There was a dip in the energy levels in the studio before Niall walked in, but right now his presence seems to have lifted them all up. Louis supposes Niall is good for *some* things, then. “Louis’ told me *so* much about you!” he finishes, and Louis splutters on his drink, has to really concentrate on not choking on the coffee.

Nope, he takes it back, Niall is good for nothing but embarrassing Louis it seems.

Harry looks over, eyes bright and eyebrows raised with joy at Niall’s words. His face is slightly smug, as Louis expected, but it seems more pleased than anything. Louis can’t help but squirm under his gaze, and why does that keep happening?

“He just told me about the band, and how excited he is to be working with you all,” Niall interjects then, and if he wasn’t already mildly irritated at Niall, Louis would be grateful. “Isn’t that right, Tommo? Don’t get your knickers in a twist about it, mate, s’just banter, innit?”

“Yeah, yeah that was pretty much it,” Louis hopes the smile on his face isn’t too tight, doesn’t quite understand why a tight smile is necessary, really, but then again, this morning seems to be all about not understanding his reactions to things. He shakes his head, and has another sip of coffee, and tries to concentrate on the caffeine leaking into his system rather than the delighted face of Harry’s at the prospect of Louis talking about him.

Louis doesn’t even fucking chance a glance over at Liam and Zayn, can hear school-girl tittering from over where he’s sitting, the bastards.

“Niall, good to see you again, mate. We should all go out again soon! That was fun, when we last saw you two,” Liam offers to Niall, glancing over at Louis, too.

“Definitely, mate, actually, there’s this place near where I work—” Niall starts, but is interrupted by Harry’s incredulous tone.

“Again? Wait, where was I, the last time?” Harry asks, or demands, might be the better word. *Getting high with that girl is where you were,* is what Louis wants to say, a tiny bit bitterly, but he doesn’t, just sips his coffee and holds his tongue for once, which is very uncharacteristic of him.

“With Ericka, mate, remember?” Zayn boredly replies, sounding how Louis feels about the subject. A look of understanding washes over Harry’s face then, followed by something that almost looks a bit sheepish. Hm. Interesting.

“Oh, yeah, I, um, I remember,” Harry mumbles, crossing his arms, and he leans back in his chair now, a little standoffish, eyebrows furrowed with something, Louis isn’t sure. He continues to sip his coffee and not say a word.

“D’you not want one, mate?” Niall asks then, changing the subject, and Louis looks over at the lone
coffee still on the table, untouched, Liam and Zayn having taken the other ones from the container.

“Oh, no, thank you, though,” Harry replies, so simply and politely, and then Louis remembers.

“Harry likes tea.” Louis looks at Niall, and, honestly, he really just set himself up for that one. Why the fuck was he speaking for Harry? The boy had a mouth, and bloody– vocal chords, or whatever the fuck is needed for a voice. It was just absolutely not necessary for him to tell the room about Harry’s dislike for coffee, so of course that’s exactly what he did.

“Oh, does he, Louis?” Niall’s smirking, “S’nice you know so much about him.”

God, Louis has no one to blame for this teasing except himself. It’s just a little fact that Louis remembered from the other night, stuck in his mind for some reason, it means nothing.

“Yeah, I do,” he hears Harry chuckle, mood changing so easily again, and Louis concentrates on his drink, swirling the ice around in the cup, decidedly not looking up to see what Harry’s reaction to this could be.

“Well, maybe Louis should be a good host and go and show you where to make some, then?” Niall offers, ever so innocently, but Louis can see through it. “I would meself, but, alas, I’m worried I’ll bump into Amber, that studio technician.” He turns to Louis now, eyes wide and hands up in a defensive gesture, “She scares me, Tommo, I’m lucky I didn’t see her on me way in”.

Ah yes. Louis may have introduced Niall to a work friend, and Niall may have royally fucked it up (or the other way around, it’s still up for debate). Either way, Louis does understand; Amber can be vicious when she needs to be, and Louis can only imagine her wrath after Niall not calling her back, or whatever is it that he did.

“Um, yeah, alright,” Louis concedes, and just laughs then, at Niall, at himself, at the situation. This is all so silly; Niall’s just teasing him (and Zayn and Liam, too, actually). He’s making a big deal out of nothing, getting flustered over and over again. Harry probably hasn’t even noticed, probably just thinks him and Niall are bloody nutters. Okay, so perhaps that first bit is Louis’ wishful thinking coming into play, but he can dream.

Louis stands up and looks pasts the abundance of smirking faces, to Harry, who’s still got that bloody soft smile on, and Louis’ got to admit, it’s sort of pretty. But this is Harry, and… and, well, Louis’ slightly running out of reasons to not just appreciate the view in front of him and leave it at that.

He tilts his head towards the door. “Shall we give these kids some time to play for a bit, then?” Louis jokes, rolling his eyes, which just amuses Niall, Liam and Zayn even more, it seems. Harry too, apparently. Jesus, it really is like babysitting.

“Oh, shut up, you heard him,” Louis rolls his eyes at the grinning boy walking beside him, hopes he isn’t blushing, again, “I just told him about you guys, as a band. Sorry to burst your bubble, love.” There, that was a fine response.
“Ah, but he did mention you were excited to work with us! That’s nice, innit? How sweet,” and Harry’s taking the piss now, that low, teasing tone back again, and Louis can also sense some patronisation, if he’s not mistaken. Well, *Harry Styles* is not going to patronise him, no way.

“I’m excited to be done with you lot, more like,” Louis mutters, trying his hardest to keep the stern look on his face, but Harry just laughs; he’s not having it, not believing Louis’ telling the truth. And, well, he isn’t, not really.

Finally, they reach the mini kitchen area, which means Louis doesn’t have to come up with some other, not-quite-witty, defensive response to Harry’s cackles just yet. He opens the cupboard to retrieve a mug, and shuts it to see Harry’s amused face on the other side, eyes shining with left over delight.

“Oh, shut up,” Louis tells him, even though Harry’s said nothing, and he’s giggling again, for Christ’s sake, and if it gives Louis that weird feeling again, no one else has to know.

Louis moves past him, over to the kettle, and goes to fill it up at the sink. It’s the running of the tap which means that Louis can barely hear Harry’s next question.

“Um… You didn’t, like…” Louis hears him say, while his back is still to Harry, but the sentence trails off, and Louis’ eyebrows furrow in confusion.

He turns around, and sees a much more nervous-looking Harry than before. He’s picking at his nails again, and they’re a pale, shiny, happy yellow today, and it reminds Louis of Harry’s joyful mood from earlier. He certainly prefers the colour to the dark reds and blacks he usually wears. Louis wonders whether Harry matches his nail colour to his moods, if that’s even a thing. He wouldn’t be surprised.

It’s then that Louis realises he’s been staring at Harry’s hands for far too much longer than at all necessary, and shakes himself out of his daze to look at the boy who the hands belong to. “Sorry, what were you saying?” Louis asks, Harry was going to say something a minute ago.

“Um, I was just, wondering…” Harry looks down again, and Louis is reminded of that night in the café, when Harry had all of a sudden looked so vulnerable and small. The mood in the kitchenette has suddenly switched completely, and seeing as it’s Harry he’s here with, Louis isn’t too surprised.

“Harry? Everything okay?” Louis abandons the kettle, and takes a step closer to Harry, hopefully so Harry can see the concern on Louis’ face and tell him what’s the matter.

“Yeah, I just,” he starts, and looks up to Louis, hardened look in his eyes worlds away from the delighted glint he had not moments ago, and it’s not like that mask from before is back, no, it’s almost the opposite. It’s like Louis’ allowed to see every emotion on Harry’s face now, and they’re not exactly happy ones. “You didn’t, like, tell Niall…. About, you know, the stuff that I told you? Like about… Edie, and stuff…” he trails off, and he looks so genuinely nervous at the prospect, and his eyebrows are so creased with worry, that Louis almost too caught off-guard by his expression to actually respond. Almost.

“Of course not, Harry. I mean I thought, what you told me, it was obviously, you know,” Louis averts his eyes from Harry then, finding his gaze a bit too intense, “Like, personal? Or, not exactly pub conversation with my best mate, anyway,” Louis replies, slightly joking, busying himself with making Harry’s tea.

He’s never been good with serious discussions, always getting nervous at talking anything other than surface level stuff, about himself, or others. He always ends up doing something stupid, like
laughing, even though the topics are never usually funny in the slightest. It’s one of Louis’ many character flaws, but he has to deal with it. By turning away from Harry, yeah, he might seem a bit dismissive, but it’s better than accidentally laughing and coming across as rude or certifiably insane. Louis sighs to himself; maybe he should just not think so much.

He hears Harry sigh too, but it sounds more like relief at Louis’ words, and Louis thinks he can probably look up at Harry now. Harry’s face is much more smooth, frown lines gone, and his shoulders have dropped, the tension in them dissipating.

“Oh, okay. Good. Um, thanks,” Harry breathes, and God, there’s so many sides to him, isn’t there. This is the same, unguarded Harry from the other night, who sounds so genuine and... and quite sweet, Louis supposes, quite vulnerable. His eyelashes are causing little shadows to dance over his cheeks; his eyes are blinking rapidly, probably another nervous habit. It’s so curious, so intriguing to Louis. He wants to see more sides to Harry, wants to see what more he might find. Louis blinks himself, then, trying to lose the train of thought.

The tea’s ready now, and Louis hands it over to Harry, an offering of some kind, symbolic, perhaps. “Don’t worry about it.”

Harry takes the mug from him, eyes never leaving Louis, and puts his mouth to the edge. Louis eyes, however, follow the movement, focus lingering on Harry’s lips. Harry looks up at Louis through his lashes, and then blows on the steam a bit, and Louis can feel the warm air hit him, and his eyelids flutter at the feeling. He opens them again, and watches Harry take a tiny sip, realises perhaps a bit too late that they’re standing rather close.

He lets out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding and takes a step back, clearing his throat in the process. Louis can just see Harry’s eyes over the cup, but the shine of amusement in them in unmistakable, the raised brows, too. Louis got flustered by Harry again, and the bugger knows exactly what he’s doing, knows that he’s the cause for it.

“Y’alright, petal?” Harry innocently asks after he sets down his tea, although Louis doesn’t miss the slight curl to those lips, the slight husk to his voice at that bloody nickname again.

“Fine.” Louis’ voice on the other hand, comes out as a high squeak, and bloody hell, he needs to sort himself out. “Back to the studio?” he clears his throat, voice coming out a bit more normal now.

“Lead the way,” Harry responds through a small smile, and Louis just tries his hardest not to mirror it, as he leads Harry back down the hallway, where the other boys are no doubt wondering what’s taken them so long.

“Okay, guys, I think that wraps up this session.” Louis turns his chair around from the control board, and observes the room before him.

Zayn and Liam are on top of each other, because of course they are, taking up the entire sofa that’s near the door, and Louis’ pretty sure at least one of them is asleep.

Liam’s got his head resting on Zayn’s shoulder, and Zayn’s got his legs splayed out over Liam’s, and they look like two kids who got over excited and then tired themselves out. Which, well, isn’t really far from the truth, when Louis thinks about it. He shakes his head and laughs softly at the view, and then decides to try the other half of the room, to maybe find some more responsive friends.

He casts his glance over to near the booth, where Harry’s leaning against the doorframe. To Louis’
surprise, Harry’s already looking at him, a curious look on his face, lips pursed in concentration. Like he’s debating something, going over it in his mind.

Even from here, Louis’ left a bit breathless from all of different shades of green in Harry’s eyes, and it’s almost like they’re producing as much light as the soft studio lamps, they’re so bright. They’re such a unique colour; Louis could study them for hours. He’d like to, even.

Niall clears his throat and Harry and Louis both look away at the same time, and what was that? Louis had just… caught Harry staring at him, for who knows how long, and then he had stared right back. Harry locked him in a gaze and Louis wasn’t particularly fond of it ending as soon as it did, which is weird, is… It’s odd. And then that bloody feeling comes back again, and Louis just stops thinking altogether, praying Niall will say something, considering he’s the one who’s interrupted the moment, made both Harry and Louis aware of it.

“So, time to go, Lou?” Niall asks, looking from Louis to Harry and back again, features animated. He’s got this look on his face, this knowing look, and Louis pretends not to notice, doesn’t know what Niall could possibly be thinking about.

“Oh, yeah, time to go. Better wake those ones up, too,” Louis agrees, busying himself at the table where all his stuff is spread out, then gestures to Zayn and Liam behind him, who Niall presumably goes to jump on, or something equally childish and ridiculous.

Louis starts packing all his stuff away, tidying up the table a bit for the next session, when he feels a presence next to him. Louis stiffens; there’s really only one person it can be.

“Thanks for today, Louis,” he hears Harry utter, and Louis turns around. Harry’s stood there, arms behind his back, lip bitten in between his teeth and ankles crossed where he stands. It’s so sincere and he almost looks shy saying it, like he’s not used to it, or like he’s nervous about Louis’s reaction. It’s a little bit endearing, Louis has to admit, despite himself.

Louis lets himself relax, lets what he hopes is a reassuring smile materialise on his face. “You’re welcome, Harry.” Louis lowers his voice, then, “I, um, I hope you’re feeling better about everything, you know, like, to do with the creative control you have, and stuff.” God, he’s never been good at this, at checking on people like this, people that weren’t his close family or friends, and the fact that it’s Harry seems to make his attempts even more pathetic.

Harry just smiles, though, again, and Louis didn’t think he’d ever see Harry smile this much, ever. “Yeah, yeah I think–” he’s interrupted by Niall, who’s evidently been eavesdropping on their conversation, and really, this studio is just much too small, for precisely reasons such as this.

“Is this about the contract thing?” Niall asks, as Louis rolls his eyes and looks over to see three heads perked up, two a bit more sleepy than one.

Talk of the creative control issue had peaked Niall’s lawyer brain’s interest when Louis had spoken to him about it a few days ago, and so hearing them talk about it here must be absolutely thrilling for him. God, must be so boring being a lawyer, Louis doesn’t know how Niall does it.

“Niall, I know what you’re about to ask and no, you can’t,” Louis chastises, pointing a finger in his direction, eyebrows raised as if daring Niall to argue, because he knows where this is going. Harry’s just got a confounded look on his face, searching Niall’s face for answers, it seems.

“But if I could just look at the contract, maybe I could help?” Niall offers, leaping to his feet with eagerness, and Louis just outwardly rolls his eyes again, not even trying to be subtle this time.
“Niall, I’m not letting you steal my clients, first of all,” Niall chuckles at that, evidently amused by Louis’ disgruntled mood. “And secondly, it’s unnecessary.”

“Are you sure it’s unnecessary? Sure you don’t want a fresh set of lawyer eyes to take a look at the contract, see if there are any loopholes?” Niall turns to face the boys on the sofa then, who literally look as though they could not care less about this conversation.

“What are we talking about, again?” Liam yawns, and yep, Louis’ right, they’re hopeless.

“They most likely already have a bloody lawyer,” Louis mumbles then, under his breath, patience for one of his best mate’s numerous grand ideas running thin. God, Niall really can be ridiculous sometimes. It’s then that Louis realises that Harry has been rather quiet throughout this and, really, it kind of all comes down to him. Louis had thought after their chat that Harry was happy to continue the way they are, that he would trust that Louis wants to work with him to make the album the best it can be. So that doesn’t explain why Louis is nervous to hear Harry’s thoughts about this, about Niall’s offer.

“Harry? What do you think?” Niall asks, and Louis looks over, too, breathing momentarily suspended as he listens to what Harry will say.

“Um, as I was saying before,” He glances over at Louis then, and a smile starts to grow, and Louis could have sworn Harry had just winked at him as he said it, and tiny, flick of movement, gone so quick that Louis almost isn’t sure. Louis feels himself smile back, nonetheless. “I think that I, um, want to work with everyone, instead of against. I think it can really work here, I, um, have faith in it, I don’t feel as bad as I did before.” Louis’ so incredibly pleased at these words, he hadn’t even realised how much he was dreading the answer until he got it, and it was actually good. He’s happy their chat paid off, happy that it really does feel like it’s going to work well between them all here. And, okay, he might be a little happy that Harry is happy, too.

Harry’s gaze wanders to the other boys as he says this, but it lands back on Louis as he finishes his sentence, and it stays there. This seems to be a common occurrence between them now.

“Ah, so, Niall the Lawyer isn’t needed?” Niall says then, affecting a disappointed tone, and Louis not even wound up anymore, feels relief, actually, Harry’s words probably having something to do with it.

“No, Niall,” “No, sorry, Niall,” Louis and Harry speak at the same time, Harry obviously trying his hardest not to giggle too much at Niall’s defeated expression. Louis knows it’s all just an act from Niall, though, so he doesn’t try hard at all to hide his disdain.

“Fine! Fine, I can see where I’m not wanted,” Niall says then, in such a petulant, spoilt voice that is so completely outrageous that they all just laugh at him.

“Come on, Nialler, let’s go,” Louis says, shaking his head in amusement at his friend.

He rallies Niall up, manages to get him to stop acting like a child long enough to get him to get his stuff together, and then it’s time to say goodbye to the other boys. Zayn and Liam leave before them, on a date, or something, Louis wasn’t really listening. Then they say goodbye to Harry, who’s smile honestly hadn’t seemed to disappear at all the entire day.

“Bye Harry, it was nice to meet you!” Niall says, giving Harry a hug, because he’s Niall. Niall leaves after that to go to the loo, so it just leaves Harry and Louis. Alone. Louis has a feeling the other boys found a way to do this on purpose, but maybe he’s just being paranoid. Maybe.
“Uh, so, I just wanted to say thank you, again, for everything. It’s obvious that you’re trying, with the control stuff, so,” Harry says so earnestly and sincerely, and Louis still maybe would have been surprised at this sort of thing a few hours ago, but during this session he’s seen a much calmer, gentler side to Harry, so this sweet thank you doesn’t really come as a shock. Although, it still manages to leave him speechless for a couple of seconds, but maybe that’s just the sight of Harry, standing so closely in front of him, looking all tired and soft, and… nice. It must be the lighting in here, or something.

“Of course, Harry. We’re a team, yeah?” Louis replies, finally, gets a nod from Harry in response. “I um, I’ve gotta go, are you staying here for a bit? I think the next session in this one isn’t for another hour.” Louis makes his way to the door, stepping out of the close proximity of them.

“Oh, yeah, okay. I might stay and do some writing, then, actually.” Harry goes to sit back down at the table, shuffling about some papers Louis hadn’t moved. “Don’t really feel like third-wheeling, anyway,” he chuckles at his own comment.

“Right,” Louis opens the door, unsure of how to end this chat. “Well, I guess I’ll see you soon then?” Louis seems to be incapable of saying things to Harry which aren’t questions.

“Yeah, see you, soon, Louis,” Harry glances up at him from the table, then looks back down to whatever lyrics he’s decided to start working on. He’s just picked up a song and started working from it immediately, scribbling away just like that, like it was nothing. Perhaps Louis is a tiny bit in awe.

Louis simply mutters a quiet, almost silent, “Bye,” in response, as he shuts the door softly, not wanting to interrupt the creative process.

As Louis walks back down the hallway, to outside where he’s assuming he’s meeting Niall. Louis thinks to himself, as he goes, about today, and how differently it turned out to how he had imagined. He hadn’t imagined it to be bad, not at all, just… not as easy, as natural as this session had been. They were all so accepting, so eager, and Louis thinks it must be part of them being first time artists, a fact he always seems to forget when he thinks about them.

Well, when he thinks about Harry, mainly, because of Harry’s disillusion with the industry. Harry, indeed. Louis had been surprised at his behaviour at the start of the session today, but as the hours passed, it stopped feeling strange, and started feeling like he was just with a mate, just hanging out, banging out some tunes.

It’s obvious he’s trying, and Louis really is so pleased that Harry seems to have accepted their clause with the studio, about Louis being a songwriter credited on the album, that they’ve gotten over that issue fairly easily. Harry seemed happy today, actually, quite happy. Any mood that’s positive from him, Louis will take, considering he’s seen Harry at his worst, a few times, actually. He was good, today, though, really good. Pleasant, even. Louis can only hope this will be kept up as they keep working together.

As Louis finally makes his way outside, the sun still shining behind the slowly retreating clouds, Niall standing at the edge of the pavement, waiting, Louis notices something. Today, Louis has come to realise that Harry Styles is really, actually, admittedly, not that bad. It’s a surprise, considering his original feelings towards him, but. Harry’s friendly, and Louis can’t quite believe it but he may be, ever so slightly, warming up to him.

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It’s warmer today. Brighter. The golden light streaming through the tall windows behind Louis shrouds him as he sits at his desk in the studio building. Well, sits might be a stretch, considering he’s currently testing how many times he can spin in his seat before he gets dizzy. Honestly though, they shouldn’t make these types of chairs if they don’t intend for them to be used recreationally, especially not for places as boring as an office. It’s not like anyone around him really minds though, to be fair; all of his colleagues must be used to his antics by now. He’s not being unproductive, just passing the time until his first session begins this morning, which is in a few minutes actually, if his watch is correct. And if anyone told him that he’s just trying to distract himself in some way from the reality of who his first client is, he’d tell them that there’s no truth to that at all. None whatsoever.

Harry is coming in today, alone, for a solo songwriting and recording session with Louis. Zayn and Liam had been in for one the other day, together, needing a different time to Harry because of some prior commitment, a family wedding they’d been invited to, or something. It just served to remind Louis of how couply they were, how much he didn’t, wouldn’t ever, really, understand.

Anyway, Harry’s coming in alone, and Tom reminded him about it earlier - had accosted him in the lobby, actually, before Louis’ morning coffee too. Quite rude. Louis would have been surprised at this keen behaviour a couple weeks ago, maybe, but after their last studio session, when he’d realised Harry actually isn’t that bad at all, and really just wants to make good music, and okay, is possibly a pleasant person to be around, he’s not really, not anymore. Harry had also sort of been quite open with Louis, actually, surprisingly, telling him about Edie, and his own issues with the industry. And… Well he’d told Louis tidbits about his past, chose him to share it with for God knows what reason. It only made Louis want to know more, though, made him even more intrigued by Harry.

“Enjoying yourself?” a low, teasing voice appears next to his ear, seemingly out of thin air, and Louis almost falls off of his now-stilled chair out of fright, and promptly grips the edge of his desk to ensure his safety.

“Jesus, Styles,” Louis gasps, clutching his heart, and doesn’t miss Harry sniggering at the sight.

“Warn a spinning man before sneaking up on him!”

“But where’s the fun in that?” And Harry’s beaming now; he’s in the best mood Louis has ever seen him in, even better than last time, and Louis doesn’t want to question it in case it makes it disappear.

Harry’s dimples positively popping as he looks down at him. They’re lovely. Louis blinks then, wondering how many times he’ll manage to get lost in this boy. Too many to count, it’s beginning to look like. Louis just can’t but notice tiny, insignificant details about the boy, whenever he’s near him. He also has to keep reminding himself that Harry is a client, and he shouldn’t really be thinking anything about him, other than lyric choices and… stuff. Speaking of Harry, he seems pleased with his little stunt, and is no doubt delighted that he’s managed to fluster Louis yet again. Louis rolls in eyes in response, not amused in the slightest.

Louis stands up from his hunched over position, and gets a better look at Harry in the process. Harry
looks every bit the baby rockstar today, gorgeous, to be honest, dressed in a leather jacket (which is a shocker, really, Louis’ positively blindsided) with what looks to be flowers hand-painted all over it, pale pink roses to match Harry’s cheeks, and dark red tulips that mirror his lip colour almost perfectly. More importantly, however, Harry’s wearing a content smile on his face, all relaxed and soft. He’s glad, then, despite Harry being a nuisance, that he seems to be in better spirits than before.

“Let’s see, perhaps me not having a bloody heart attack sounds mildly enjoyable? At least not this early in the morning, you menace. But, you know, maybe that’s just me,” Louis responds grumpily, a sarcastic edge to his voice, and he’s trying his very hardest not to let the creeping smile slip through his visage.

“So what you’re saying is, I can give you a heart attack, just later on in the day?” Harry cheekily replies, disregarding Louis’ attempts at admonishment. “Hmm… I think I know of a few activities I could put into practice that would raise your heart rate enough,” and Harry actually winks. Louis just snorts in response and doesn’t blush at his stupid joke; Harry’s terrible.

“Come on, petal,” Harry continues, and oh, back to the nicknames, are we? Louis doesn’t seem to mind it that much this time, though, “I think we’ve got a few songs to write.”

Harry spins on his heel, and makes his way towards the direction of Louis’ studio, behaving as if he belongs here, and Louis releases a breath he didn’t realise he’d been holding. He can’t help the endeared smile that sneaks onto his face this time as he watches Harry, who is actually skipping down the hallway, golden boots sparkling in the sunlight and grinning face glancing back to make sure the other boy is following.

Louis has a good feeling about today.

They’re back in Louis’ studio now, and sitting there at the table again, in companionable silence, while Louis plays a song back to Harry, with Liam and Zayn’s newly added vocals. It’s the song they’d been discussing in the first session, the one Louis had made the changes to that Harry had originally liked, and then hated, pretty much having a breakdown because of them. Now, though, Harry seems to appreciate them once more, as he leans back in his chair, letting the song flood his senses. He looks so serene at this moment, so peaceful, and so blissfully untroubled that Louis almost doesn’t recognise him. His eyes are shut and his lashes are casting shadows over his cheekbones. They’re long, his eyelashes, and dark and thick, possibly appearing even more so because of the smudgy eyeliner he wears, that Louis, admittedly, thinks looks quite good on him. He looks so totally encompassed by the music, so concentrated on listening to every single note, that Louis’ scared of causing even the slightest disturbance in case it lifts Harry from his trance.

The song comes to an end, bass guitar reverberating through the speakers as the last notes are drawn out. Louis’ just realised he’d been absent-mindedly chewing his pen, and secretly hopes that there’s no ink stain on his lips as a result. He’s just a bit nervous, he will admit, for Harry’s reaction to the song. He’d said he liked the lyrics Louis had initially supplied, but that was before the added bridge, and before Harry’s bandmates had actually gone and sung and recorded the revised version.

Everything comes down to this, here, right now; Harry’s verdict of the song is what truly matters to Louis. For the benefit of the band, of course, but, also… he really does care about what Harry thinks, quite a lot, really, due to the fact that this is Louis’ version of the song that they’ve just listened to, and he does hope Harry likes it.

Louis rolls his chair over to his laptop that’s resting on the control panel, and clicks a button to ensure the song doesn’t continue to play. Also, it gives his hands something to do, somewhere for his eyes to look which isn’t in the direction of Harry’s newly opened ones.
“So,” Louis starts, still unnecessarily fiddling with his computer controls, “What did you think?” he can’t look at Harry, can’t see his face, just in case his expression is full of distaste or disapproval at the song.

“I liked it.” Harry’s voice is so cheerful, and he sounds so genuine, and Louis almost thinks he’s misheard.

“You did?” Incredulity is evident in Louis’ tone, as he spins his chair back around, biting the bullet, except there needn’t have been any anxiety about Harry’s reaction at all. He’s smiling, grinning from ear to ear, actually, those damn dimples on full display again. Louis can’t help the pleased look that he’s sure appears on his face in response, and also can’t help the warm feeling that travels from his chest and spreads through every inch of him.

“I did. It was great. Like I said before, Louis, you’re very talented,” Harry confirms, nodding, barely concealing a chuckle, and Louis can’t imagine himself being able to garner that reaction from anyone, really, let alone Harry. Regardless, Harry’s eyes are so bright and uninhibited, and it Louis can’t help but be a little dazed by them. He doesn’t stop to recognise how significant this might be. It hits Louis, then, again, like the last session, that this is Harry trying. He’s making such an effort, Louis realises, and a massive one at that. He’s trying his hardest, he must be, if he’s able to behave this openly and willingly with Louis. Somehow the warm feeling that’s materialising within Louis gets even warmer, and Louis feels even more pleased than before. It’s so great, being able to work so well with Harry like this, it feels like it comes so naturally to them, and Louis could get used to it.

“Ahh… thanks,” Louis replies bashfully, suddenly very interested in the pattern of the rug beneath him, scuffing his trainers against it, too worried that if he looks Harry in the eye, he might do something embarrassing, like squeal, and he can’t have that. It’s just, okay, he’s very pleased that Harry liked the song. It means they can move forward in the recording process, means they’re being productive. More importantly, however, Louis can’t help the feeling of validation he gets now he knows Harry likes the song; he feels so accomplished, so proud of himself. Being able to impress Harry wasn’t something Louis thought he would think of as very important, ever, but actually… Actually Louis finds it is, it’s almost an addictive feeling, getting praise from him, and he wants to keep doing it.

“So, d’you reckon you could record your parts to the song now? I’ve got the backing track if you want that, or you can sing over this version, or you could just… try both? Whichever one you’d prefer, obviously, it’s completely up to you,” Louis breathlessly offers, getting his words out in a rush, trying not to sound too keen.

Harry smiles even bigger at that, his eyes crinkling, probably at Louis’ blathering. Louis just wants Harry to feel comfortable, is all. Louis studies Harry, because that seems to be a thing he does now, and Harry is… He’s so pretty when he smiles, Louis realises. Louis had seen Harry smile before, but something about the sight before him awakens something inside him, and he gets that feeling again, that warm, enveloping feeling. Just at Harry’s smile. Louis usually would try and suppress any type of warm feeling, whatever it may be, but.. It’s nice, and Louis doesn’t mind it, for some reason, not at all.

“Of course. Sounds good, Lou.” And oh. That’s– that’s not… That’s a different one, Harry hasn’t called him that before. The new nickname sounds familiar already, rolling effortlessly off of Harry’s tongue. Louis decides he likes it quite a bit, can’t help the tiny, pleased curl of his lips at the sound.

Harry gets up from his chair, and sheds the stunning jacket he’s been wearing. Louis’ reminded then,
again, of where they are and what they’re doing. He’s in a studio, with Harry. Harry, who wears gorgeous Gucci outerwear like the born rockstar he is, and who had flat-out refused to do this a few days ago, but is now smoothly stepping into the booth, no hint of resistance to speak of. Louis’ amazed at how far they’ve come in such a short time.

Louis watches Harry place the headphones carefully over his head, pushing his own dark, floppy hair back in the process. He’s making sure the wires aren’t tangled, and Louis wants to tell him that he doesn’t need to do that, that some intern usually comes in and sorts stuff like that out at the end of each day. It’s sweet, though, seeing him concentrate so hard, making sure it’s all perfect. Maybe it’s calming for Harry, to go through these meticulous movements each time before recording. Louis doesn’t ask though, will probably find out sooner or later, anyway.

Louis continues to observe Harry, he can’t help it really. His eyes are tracing the lines of Harry’s tattoos, that he can see peeking through the shirt he’s wearing. He truly is an unfairly pretty man, and Louis can’t help but notice it. Louis’ only half-aware of what he’s doing, not fully grasping how creepy his staring must be.

“You know, I think you actually have to start recording if you’re wanting to get this song done. Also, switching the music on in my ears would help too. Maybe that’s just how I do it, though.”

Harry, the fucker, is sniggering at Louis, looking pointedly at him through the glass, and of course he’d caught Louis ogling him, and not for the first time, either.

“Oh, um. Yeah, right,” Louis can’t help but giggle at himself, too. God, he really is quite hopeless with Harry. He should probably sort that out. Probably.

Harry’s laughs turn into full on cackles at Louis’ reaction, and Louis can’t help but grin. The feeling he gets from hearing Harry laugh is a far-cry from the feeling he got when he was all teary-eyed, and Louis’ just relieved that their time spent together doesn’t seem to just consist of Harry being either angry or upset. They can actually… have fun with each other. Louis’ pleased. And he doesn’t blush, not in the slightest.

“It’s the big red button labelled ‘record’, by the way. Can’t miss it,” Harry finally manages to sputter out, taking a break from his howls. He’s such a cheeky shit.

“Yes, alright, thank you, Harold. That’s enough out of you,” Louis teasingly scolds him, an attempt to be sassy spoiled by the laughter in his speech. “I have been doing this for a while, you know.”

“Whatever you say…” Harry replies, lining up to the microphone, and Louis can hear him in his headphones now, still chuckling away. Louis can’t help but join him.

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Slow strumming of guitar resonate through the speakers to end the song, along with the voices, Harry’s voice, the desperate, shrill sound the last thing Louis’ hears before there’s complete silence.

“How was that?” Louis hears, and oh, right. Words.

“That was… it was. Incredible, I– to be honest. Really, uh, really good. We can definitely, um, use this. Definitely useable,” and Louis has no idea why he’s suddenly behaving this way, acting almost speechless at the sound of Harry’s raw, impassioned voice. Like he’s just experienced a unique phenomenon and he doesn’t know how to react. Which is silly, because he’s already heard Harry sing before, at the gig, and the other session, and he’s heard a few demos, too. Maybe this time in the studio, alone together, no one else to distract him, made it more real, or defined, or something. It was
just… It was like he’d never heard someone sing before, like he was experiencing it for the first time. That’s what it feels like, if Louis’ being completely honest. Which is just, ridiculous really, and so far from the truth it’s embarrassing. He does this for a living, for Christ’s sake, has people coming in and out of the studio every day, and standing where Harry’s standing right now, singing their heart out, too. So, yeah, Louis doesn’t really want to investigate why Harry’s voice alone has got him feeling like this. He’s, maybe, a bit scared at what he might find.

“Sick. I can come out then?” Harry, bright eyed and keening at Louis’ praise, detaches himself from the headphones and wanders out of the booth.

Before he can come back over, though, Harry stops suddenly in his tracks, and something seems to catch his eye. Louis watches as Harry makes his way to the corner of the room, and his brain clicks with realisation at what he’s about to do.

Harry plants himself on the seat at the piano, the same instrument which Louis never lets anyone play under any circumstances. Which is why Louis doesn’t understand why he stops himself, then, why he just lets Harry carry on familiarising himself with the smooth keys, lets him get comfortable on the chair. Something in Louis tells him to not interfere, tells him that seeing Harry perform, he’s assuming, so intimately like this, is a privilege, and Louis shouldn’t take it for granted.

Harry doesn’t say anything, doesn’t even look at Louis, before beginning to play. He doesn’t need to, though, Louis’ already hanging on every note. Tiny, twinkling keys ring out, and Harry starts to sing. Louis can barely breathe, doesn’t want to make a single sound that could cloud Harry’s soft, soft voice.

Cemented in the corners
Refusing every white flag that’s meant from me

And you say stop then go
That’s just us
That’s our show
You were yes and I was no

And let’s stay up all night
With fading hearts, fading light
Falling old, and out of time
Pack up the photo frames

It’s… it’s not a happy song, but Louis didn’t really expect as much. He can hear the melancholy in Harry’s voice, can hear the desperation to win a losing battle, the acceptance that it can’t be won. Harry’s voice cracks on some of the lyrics, and Louis has to stop himself from instinctively getting out of his chair, to just get closer.

Gripping onto walls that shake from all the fake applauds you make for me
My own memory
And fortune through our start to greatness
And hold us to disaster
All we can do
Is just enjoy

Start across tonight
Let’s put out London’s lights
And in this lonely
He can hear the bitterness and the disappointment in Harry’s tone, in the way the sound of his voice is deafening at some parts, practically engulfing the piano, and then it’ll be all timid and just fucking sad, barely above a whisper in others, and he just wants to know… a lot of things, really. Mainly why Harry’s in this much pain, who is responsible, or maybe if it’s to do with stuff Harry’s already told him before. That’s not really his business, though, not at all. He has no right to know, and Harry owes him nothing, not really, not when it’s a song as evidently deep as meaningful as this. More importantly, Louis wants to know what he can do to just… just to help Harry.

Harry plays the final note, and at this point it takes Louis a while to realise that they’re in complete silence, stuck in his own thoughts yet again. Louis looks over to Harry, and Harry’s looking at him, and they share a gaze for one, two, three beats, eyes never leaving each other, and Louis’ about to say something, anything, when a piercing sound rings out through the studio, and Louis flinches, and Harry’s eyes blink. Fuck. Louis had forgotten to switch his phone off.

“Um…” Louis begins, shaking himself into action, and glancing at his phone screen.

Will. Will is calling him. Probably about later. Louis can’t seem to think about that right now, though.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean– I thought it was on silent,” he continues, silently berating himself. The intense, bare moment had been shattered, and it was Louis’ fault.

“It’s okay,” Harry seems a bit dazed, sort of how Louis feels, and his phone is still ringing. “You can take it, if you want. If it’s urgent.”

“It’s not urgent. Not at all.” Nothing is more important to Louis right now than talking to Harry. This boy, who is evidently troubled, and lonely, if his lyrics were anything to go by. Maybe he just needs someone to talk to. Louis wouldn’t mind being that person to Harry.

Harry’s closed the piano lid now, essentially closing the conversation, too, Louis guesses. He lets himself wonder how far it would have gone had they not been interrupted.

“So… That song…” Louis attempts, can’t help but at least try to coax something out of Harry.

“I don’t really, um, want to talk about it. Don’t really know why I played that one, actually. Haven’t played it to anyone before.” Harry’s eyes are cast downward, but Louis can see the alarm in them, the realisation that he’s sort of just lain his soul bare to Louis, yet again.

“Oh…” Louis concedes; he doesn’t want to push it. Doesn’t want to scare Harry away. He wants him to continue to trust Louis, like he did that night when he told him a bit about his past. Like he did the other day in the studio, when he said he wanted to keep working together, even with the creative control issue. Louis wants to help him, but he’ll have to wait for another time to talk about this. He wants to help him, more than anything, and if that means holding his tongue, even though he’s never been particularly good at it, that’s what he’ll have to do.

Harry moves back to his chair opposite Louis, and they sit in silence for a bit. Louis taps out a nonsensical tune on his armrest, maybe a song he’d been working on the night before.

In Louis’ line of vision, past the rhythmic movements of his own fingertips, is the edge of the writing table. A familiar brown leather bound book is resting there, just on the corner, right where he’d left it, the other day. He’s surprised he hadn’t noticed it before, hadn’t given it to one of the other boys when they’d come in, to give back to Harry. Well, regardless of that, he supposes now is as good a
time as ever to return it to its owner.

“Hey, by the way,” Louis breaks the silence, and gets up out of his chair, realising that maybe now’s probably not the time to spin over like a child, “You left this last time you were here.” He moves to pick up the journal, shutting it closed without glancing at the pages. “Sorry, I uh, I didn’t remember it was here until now. Would’ve given it back to you earlier, if I had.” Louis moves to hand it over, holding it out so it takes up the space between them, and finally looks at Harry again. He’s wearing a dazed look on his face, eyebrows scrunched together, and mouth slightly agape, those plump lips looking as pink as ever. Pretty as ever.

“Oh… thanks,” Harry replies softly, taking the book from Louis at a sedated pace, almost unsure, like he’s too busy thinking about something else to register his movements properly. “You didn’t, um…” the unsaid question hangs in the air, and Harry’s wide, worried eyes look up at Louis in apprehension.

“Of course not, love. It’s private. Don’t worry,” Louis doesn’t think about the term of endearment, it just slips out. Harry doesn’t seem to mind, though. He’s replied to him in a reassuring tone, confirming to Harry that he hasn’t read it.

He did consider it, that first day, but now he’s glad he chose not to, because he can see in his eyes how much the contents mean to Harry, how much keeping a few secrets to himself means to him. He’d also much rather Harry told him about whatever it is that’s in there in his own time; Louis doesn’t mind waiting when it comes to such delicate things. That is, if Harry wants to tell him. Louis would love to hear about it either way, would love to sit and talk to Harry again, like they did that night in the cafe. Louis already has a sort of idea about what could be in there, anyway, due to their chat. He can’t assume, though, he barely knows Harry, for Christs’ sake. Sometimes he forgets that it’s barely been a few weeks since they met, and that he still hardly knows a thing about him.

Although, sometimes it doesn’t feel that way, not always, and not recently. It feels like this studio session has been transformative, almost, like he’ll walk out of here a different person than when he walked in. It’s a bit like that, though, with someone like Harry, someone so full of life and character, that now that Louis feels like knows him more, he feels like parts of Harry have rubbed off on him, inevitably. Like by just being around Harry, being constantly affected by him, has almost added something to Louis.

Sometimes, *these* times, he feels like he’s actually starting to get to know Harry, almost as if Harry is like a blooming flower, and with every new petal that opens up, it’s like Harry himself opens up a little more too. Little by little, something else, some new bit of information, a new fact about Harry, slowly gets revealed to Louis as the days go on. Louis is willing to be patient and wait for this flower to fully bloom, if it means that someday, hopefully soon, he’ll be able to fully know and understand this intriguing boy.

Harry gives him a sheepish smile in return, and focuses on meticulously binding the book with the thin leather strap, tying it tight. “There’s nothing—” Harry begins, still looking at the securely shut journal, and quietly enough that Louis has to strain his ears to catch it. Harry breathes out, hands splayed out on top of the brown leather, and Louis’ notices his collection of rings that he usually sports has been traded in for one singular one. A simple silver band, on his right middle finger. From this angle, Louis can’t read what the inscription on it says.

“There’s nothing like, *bad*, in it,” Harry continues, almost shyly, and *he*, *Harry*, is starting this conversation, he’s *willingly* giving Louis information. Louis hardly breathes as he sits back down on his chair, just across from Harry. “Just, you know, like, um… stuff. About, like, my time as a teenager. All those years ago, because I’m *so* old now,” Harry attempts a joke, but Louis can hear
the strain to his voice, can tell this topic probably won’t be a light one. Harry looks at Louis now, right in the eyes, apprehension clear in them, and Louis realises for the second time that hour that this is Harry trying. This is Harry making an effort, opening up again, miraculously, even when Louis knows Harry finds personal subjects fairly difficult to talk about. Louis has to silently contain his pride for the boy sitting in front of him. “It’s just, like, song inspiration, and stuff. Sometimes I find it easier to write down my past experiences in there so I can kind of, remember everything, all together, I guess. If that makes sense? So I can refer back to them when I’m writing the lyrics, you know? Sorry, this probably makes no sense at all. Don’t really know why I’m telling you this, to be honest,” and Louis can see Harry physically receding into himself, as he shakes his head and drops his eyes back down to his fidgeting hands in his lap, confidence already depleting, and it’s not a pleasurable sight. Talking about something this personal, something like songwriting, to someone who he doesn’t know that well, is probably quite nerve-wracking – Louis’ surprised Harry’s already said so much.

“No, no, I understand,” Louis quickly responds. “That does make sense. Completely. You like to be able to see everything laid out on a page. All the different, connected branches to the tree. I get it. S’how I write sometimes, too,” he reassures softly, trying to coax Harry back out of his shell. He wants Harry to open up, wants him to see Louis as the kind of person he can talk to, about anything. It doesn’t seem like Harry talks enough.

Harry’s face lights up with recognition at Louis’ words. “Yeah, yeah. Like a tree with all its different branches. Exactly like that,” the tension eases from his face, he looks relieved, and Louis feels it too, feels it seep into him, relaxing him. He’s relieved that he hasn’t scared Harry off yet, talking to him like trying to approach a wild animal. But like one of those sweet, little ones, that can be defensive when they feel they’re being threatened but are ultimately good natured. Did Louis just compare Harry to something along the lines of a baby deer? Thank God he didn’t say that out loud. Christ.

Louis smiles encouragingly, and waits for Harry to continue, eyes no doubt gleaming with eagerness.

“I think music is something, like… When nothing else is there, you have it, you know? I find comfort in it. I find comfort in the way it helps me understand myself, I think. So, yeah. I write stuff about my life, and, experiences and stuff. And put them all on a page, and then I’ll, like, use that as a base for a song. And then I just go from there.” Harry simpers, letting a breath out.

“Are the songs you guys record, are they always, like, exclusively from your own personal experiences? I mean, surely you must run out of stuff to write about.” Louis means it as a joke, but he’s also curious. He wonders how much Harry has gone through in order to enable him to write reams of songs and still have more unfinished and untouched content in that journal of his.

“Well, I mean, yeah. Usually. I’ve always been the main songwriter for the band, ever since we started. That’s not to like, say the others aren’t talented at it, too. But that’s just… how it’s always been, I guess. And I’ve had– I think I’ve lived a very eventful young life so far…” Harry replies, deep in thought again. Louis wants so desperately to reach over and smooth out the deep crease in his brow. “I, well. I think this lifestyle comes from being in the band from so young, always surrounded by all types of crazy shit. And from, like, parts of my family,” and Louis knows Harry isn’t referring to his parents when he says this. “I’ve been quite… privileged? I guess? So, like, I always have stories about, I don’t know, wild nights I’ve been on, or weird experiences that I’ve had. And I like to talk about those through song. I think, if they’re good enough. Interesting enough.

“But also, you know, I think my most genuine music comes from emotional events that I’ve been through. It’s cathartic, for me. Song for Edie, for example. That was, ah,” Harry’s voice cracks slightly, and he clears his throat, visibly afflicted. Louis still doesn’t know who this Edie person is to Harry, is almost desperate to know, wants to find out more about her so he can find out more about
Harry, but he doesn’t ask. Knows that if Harry wants to tell him, he will. “That was a tough one to write, definitely. And like I told you before. I sort of… went a bit crazy, and stuff, after everything happened. I started taking too many drugs, and drinking too much, started having these times where I would wake up and not know where I was.” He pauses. “Just, you know, normal, teenage things,” and he bitterly chuckles at his joke, but Louis doesn’t find it funny. Harry hadn’t mentioned that bit before. It sounds fucking terrifying, if he’s being honest. He’s not surprised Harry’s so hesitant to talk about it.

“Wait,” Louis decides the derail the initial subject, ears latching onto something much more urgent, “But… Do you ever… Does that kind of thing, like blackouts, and stuff… does it still happen?” Louis tentatively asks, hoping he’s not overstepping. He feels like they’re on a roll here, though, that Harry’s on a roll, and maybe if he doesn’t say too much he can keep him talking, and hopefully keep getting more and more clues to solve the puzzle that is Harry Styles.

“Well, I mean… It’s not as… I still– I’m not–” Harry’s caught of guard by the question, and stutters, he can’t quite seem to get his response to Louis out, which leads Louis to believe that he might be right. Fuck. Louis was hoping for a firm ‘No’, was hoping, had been hoping, since the first time Harry had mentioned this, that it wasn’t still this bad. He’d had his suspicions, though, like from the night of the gig, and the first studio session, after seeing how Harry would practically self-medicate.

“So, yes?” and Louis tries not to let the pity seep into his voice, and he isn’t trying to be rude, quite the opposite really, but he just wants a solid answer. He wants to help Harry, because he can see this boy, this slightly broken boy, with so much potential, who seems to be stuck within himself, and Louis, maybe, wants to help try to get him out.

Harry sighs, and any trace of humour slowly disappears from his expression. He shifts his eyes to the rug underneath them, wipes a hand down his face, keeps it there, hiding behind it, and doesn’t respond. Louis can see the writing on Harry’s ring from earlier now. ‘PEACE’ in capital letters, it reads. Louis’ never known an item of jewellery more suited to its owner. Of course Harry, in this seemingly never-ending chaos of a life, would just want some peace. Would want to be reminded of that fact every time he so much as glances at his hand.

“Harry?” because Louis has to hear it, has to know, because Louis really does care about the answer.

A very soft, very quiet, “Well, yes,” comes in response, and Louis is– he’s fine. He just… It’s difficult to hear this, about Harry. Difficult to hold the knowledge that not only does he live this incredibly unhealthy lifestyle, where he has these nights where he wakes up with no recollection of the night before, chunks of his memory missing and no idea what the fuck kind of substances are coursing through his bloodstream, but also that it’s been happening for at least four years. Louis’ surprised no one’s done anything yet, and why the fuck has no one done anything? Harry’s just basically told him that he has a drug and alcohol problem, a current problem, as if it wasn’t even that big of a deal. Harry had said before that he used to be self-destructive, but it sounds to Louis as if he still bloody is.

“Then why–” Louis starts to voice his concern, frustration clear in his voice, before Harry cuts him off.

“Everything’s just… better when I’m high. I feel better, when I’m not feeling as much. And I also write better, for example. The best, really. And when I’m high, and drunk, or whatever the fuck I am, I don’t know… It, it makes life more interesting. Makes me actually interesting, more creative, I think. And in turn, I guess, makes my music interesting. That’s sort of why,” Harry simply says, and Louis… Well.

Louis– Louis wants to scream. He can’t believe, won’t believe that this wonderful, whirlwind of a
boy sitting in front of him, who has so much to him, so many fucking brilliant traits to his character, who can be rude, he’ll admit, but is also charming, and sweet, he can be so sweet, could ever possibly even entertain the idea that he isn’t interesting. He’s incredibly creative, and he tries, tries his hardest, to be better, Louis’ seen it himself!

And he’s a bloody rockstar, for Christ’s sake! An almost-rockstar, fine, but still, it doesn’t matter because, honestly, he’s a fucking vision, isn’t he? The way he completely owns the stage, and the way he can just walk into any room and command everyone’s attention just like that; he’s like a fucking supernova that no one can help but gaze at. Which is why Louis can’t for the life of him begin to imagine why Harry, of all fucking people, would ever think his personality lacked such a mundane, fundamental element to it as interesting. Harry is infinitely interesting, and Louis wants to scream.

“Harry, that’s really… I don’t– I can’t believe that that’s how you perceive yourself, that you think that you’re… boring without being high? I…” Louis has to take a breath, already getting so heated in the moment, not even knowing where to begin when it comes to trying to convince Harry of such a basic truth of him being interesting. God, Louis feels so strongly about this, and doesn’t know how or why someone can affect him this much.

“You don’t have to, Louis, it’s fine. I know myself, what I’m like, and I know that my songs are so much better when written while I’m high on something. I’m sort of hopeless without them, actually. It’s like just… get better. It’s just a necessity I have when writing. Not while recording, though, don’t worry,” Harry has the audacity to make a joke after dropping a bomb like this? “It’s just, I dunno, makes me less stressed or something? So I write better? Who knows. It just makes sense to me. It’s not really a big deal.” Harry bloody chuckles at Louis’ protests, and what? It’s not really a big deal? What is Harry talking about?

“What are you talking about? Harry, that can’t be even near the truth,” Louis starts, determined to get some kind of protest out, something to convince Harry even a little bit that he’s fucking misguided.

“Don’t worry about it, Louis, you’re making it bigger than it is,” and the mask, that godforsaken mask, that Louis had thought was gone, appears again, tight, close-lipped smile back in place, and it’s clear that that’s that. Louis forces his words back into his mouth.

Harry doesn’t want to hear it, and Louis can’t say he’s surprised. It is quite personal, and, again, Harry owes nothing to Louis.

Harry’s still stubborn as anything, though, and even after letting up on his insistence to not sing Louis’ version of his song, Louis supposes his headstrong nature translates across the board with Harry, applying to lots of intimate elements to him, not exclusively to just when it comes to writing and recording music.

Louis is frustrated, however, at how lowly Harry thinks of himself. He’d come into the studio that first day, cocky as anything, smug grin constantly plastered to his face, air of arrogance following him wherever he went. How on earth could this boy, this self-critical, self-deprecating boy, be the same person? But then Louis remembers that night in the cafe (how could he forget) and he remembers Harry being so vulnerable, and raw, and so very childlike, and Louis begins to understand. Harry is a multi-faceted person, and Louis’ slowly starting to uncover new parts of him, bit by bit, and it’s exhausting, God it’s exhausting, but Louis wouldn’t rather be spending his energy doing anything else.

Louis spares a thought for how it’s possible he cares so much about this boy, already, when it’s barely been a few weeks. Louis’ not used to this; this feeling of intensity towards someone and their
self-regard, this pure need for them to just be happy. Louis doesn’t care about the whys and the hows, though, not really, even though it’s towards Harry.

“Tea?” is the only other thing Louis can think of to say, high pitched and tight, still reeling from this realisation and their discussion, hoping that he can distract himself if he has to get up and do something.

Harry starts at Louis’ words, word, actually, and, vacant mood all but gone, a slow smile spreads across his lips. Louis’ confused.

“Heyyyy…” Harry begins, an even wider, teasing smile now, eyebrows raised in delight, and Louis thinks he knows where this is going, “I knew you were a tea man! Right, give me my prize, I called this from day one!” Harry positively beams, and Louis’ frustration seems to ebb away, too distracted by Harry’s two front teeth poking out, and honestly, it’s impossible to stay in a sour mood when such a sweet sight is right in front of him.

“Allright, alright, you caught me, maybe I do like to enjoy a nice cuppa once in awhile,” Louis playfully rolls his eyes at the actual child in front of him. Honestly, who gets excited about tea? It’s endearing to say the least, although Louis won’t say it. “Your prize is a cup of Yorkshire, and no complaints about it, because it’s the best and I won’t hear any arguments against that fact,” and if the reason Louis has recently started drinking more tea again is because of Harry’s assessment of his character on that first day, then no one has to know.

Harry accepts Louis offer, and they start to make their way down the hallway, after promising that they’ll do some more fine-tuning to the song they’d been working on, and a bit more writing for other songs, before all the studio time ends up running away from them.

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After they’d had their little break earlier, Harry and Louis had managed to finish the initial song and complete lyrics for two more songs that Zayn, Liam and Louis had worked on in the solo sessions they’d had with Louis. They even recorded Harry’s vocals for the remaining songs, it turned out to take less time than expected. It hits Louis then that they’re almost done; The Cahoots having already recorded part of their album prior to coming to Air Studios, so they don’t have much left to do now. He’ll miss them, he realises. He’ll miss working with them, because despite everything, he’s enjoyed it. He looks over at Harry, after his realisation, and he gets a sudden feeling that he can’t explain, in the pit of his stomach, and it’s not pleasant. Fuck. He’s gonna miss Harry, despite everything, too. They’ve still got a couple more sessions to go, though, and the wrap party. Positive mentality, Louis reminds himself.

“Okay, so we’re done for today then?” Harry asks, gathering up his phone and jacket, before turning towards the shelves and retrieving his journal that he’d placed there earlier.

“Yeah, that’s it until next week I think.” Louis’ a bit distracted, had realised a few minutes before that he’d never responded to Will’s call, never even texted him to make sure they still had a plan. Oops.

He looks up, and Harry’s made his way to the door, where he’s stood there, lingering, effortlessly pretty, and not making any obvious moves to leave. He’s waiting for you, idiot, Louis tells himself, and realises he’s holding them up.

“Oh, sorry, didn’t realise you were waiting.” Louis almost squeaks, and and can he ever just, what’s the word, not be flustered by Harry? Louis’ still waiting for a conclusive answer to that one.
Harry just smiles at him, softly, the smile Louis’ almost come to recognise; he’s seen it so much, and Louis’ grateful. He picks up his shoulder bag, quickly stuffing all his belongings into it, and starts to lead Harry out of the studio, switching the lights off and locking the door before turning to walk down the hallway.

Today felt like a world away from the first session, even better than the last one they all had. He really felt like he knew Harry this time, parts of him at least, that helped Louis understand the depth of him as a person, and how that translates into his music. It’s interesting, Louis thinks, at how quickly this has happened; how soon Harry had gone from a complete stranger, to actually maybe a friend of Louis’. Unusual, how quickly they managed to get on, and Louis thinks it must’ve been that night in the cafe that triggered it all. He’s glad, then, that despite that being a sad story that Harry told him it allowed them to grow closer, and work together better. That’s all the friendship between them will be though, obviously. It’ll just last for the duration of this job, and not longer, Louis knows. Won’t be anything more, between them. Which, Louis hadn’t really thought about, at all really, but… Harry’s lovely, and gorgeous, honestly, and maybe if there was even slightly a chance of something, Louis would entertain the thought. But there isn’t, so he won’t. Louis tries not to think about it.

“That was good today, by the way. Really productive session,” Louis says, and he means it. The double doors at the entrance come into view. It’s slightly darker outside now, and Louis’ worried it might rain.

“Yeah, it was.” Harry opens the front door for Louis, leading them outside, and Louis sheepishly thanks Harry for the gesture. Louis’ a bit chilly, as well, walking outside, having forgotten a jacket this morning, not checking the weather forecast because, well, he’s not seventy five years of age.

Harry takes out his phone, presumably to text his driver to come pick him up, or however it is that celebrities travel these days. Will Harry have a driver? Would the label still grant him such a perk after that episode at Decca Records the other night? Louis supposes he’s about to find out.

Perhaps Louis is shivering more than he thought, or maybe Harry’s just perceptive, because, as they stand there on the pavement, in the corner of his eyes he sees Harry starting to shuck his jacket off, before he hands it over to Louis.

“Here, Lou. You’re freezing,” Harry smiles warmly, holding the work of art that is his leather jacket over to Louis. “It is summer, though,” Harry says, in a teasing tone, eyes glinting at Louis, again, and Louis feels an inevitable curl of his lips happen; an automatic reaction to Harry smiling at him, it seems. “Don’t quite know why you’re so cold.”

“Oh, thanks. I just, um, get cold easily. But you don’t have to, though, I’m fine.” Louis isn’t fine, but he’s not about to accept Harry’s jacket, for Christ’s sake. When Harry had joked earlier that he could probably think of some activities that would increase Louis’ heartrate, Louis’s sure that he probably didn’t have this in mind. 

Harry gently places it over Louis’ shoulders anyway, the stubborn git, and Louis is silently pleased, get’s a content feeling within him that’s unfamiliar, and warm. The material is soft, and heavy, and cosy, and Louis immediately feels better.

“Thanks, by the way, for today, you’re, um, a good person to talk to, really. I– I like you,” Harry shifts his weight on his feet, turning to Louis so he’s facing him directly. Louis has to move closer, to hear Harry properly, his voice soft, his heart almost skipping a beat at what Harry’s just said. “Honestly, Lou, you– I like spending time with you, and I think we worked really well today, together. I’m really glad I put my faith into you, and trusted you, before.” Harry says this so genuinely, and so sweetly, and Louis just wants to cuddle him in that moment, that’s his instinctive
reaction to his words. He doesn’t though, just stares at Harry in awe. He’s just so lovely, and earnest, in the way he speaks. He’s smiling at Louis as if Louis is the one who’s said this to him, so happy and rosy-cheeked, and his eyes are full of something Louis doesn’t recognise, something he’s only seen in Harry’s eyes a few times. Harry had said he had liked spending time with Louis, had liked him, and Louis can’t quite believe this is the same Harry that he had met, just a few weeks ago.

“I’m glad, too, Harry. I, thank you, that’s… that’s really nice of you to say,” Louis doesn’t even know where to start in response, is surprised his mouth can even form words with the massive grin that’s stretching across his face. “You’re not so bad, yourself, either.”

Harry’s smile just grows, and he reaches out to Louis then, and suddenly Harry’s arms are enveloping him, and when did that happen? Louis feels Harry’s hands rest gently on his back, warm and big and comforting, and finds himself relaxing into the hug, too. It’s really nice. He winds his smaller arms around Harry’s waist, and they just fit, and Louis doesn’t know how or why, but it just feels so natural, like they’ve done this a million times before. Louis can’t help but have his senses be overcome by Harry all at once, and he feels so soft and smells so sweet, Louis feels a bit dizzy by it all.

“Seriously, thank you,” Louis hears Harry whispers in his ear, warm breath eliciting goosebumps on Louis’ neck, and he hopes Harry doesn’t notice.

They separate then, with nervous laughter from Louis, and a growing grin from Harry. They step back from one another, reluctantly, on Louis’ part, and maybe a bit on Harry’s too. Harry’s reason was probably different to Louis’, though, hesitation caused by the fact that it was a good hug, Louis’ almost sure. Louis’ hesitation was more about how welcome he felt in Harry’s arms, just then, and how much he enjoyed the feeling. Could have stayed there for a while, honestly.

He looks up at Harry again, and sees that warm, inviting expression, eyes soft and droopy, a slight tinge to his cheeks. Louis thinks it’s the loveliest sight he’ll see today. They just watch each other for a bit; they seem to be quite good at that now. That is, until, a voice calls out to them, from down the road, and Louis remembers where they are and what time it is.

“Hey babe!” the voice cheerily says. “That’s a nice jacket. Haven’t seen you wear it before,” Will is here, has just appeared at Louis’ side; he’s come to pick Louis up from work, they’d made plans yesterday after another date. And ugh, babe? Louis needs to talk to him about that. Before he can say anything, he feels Harry shuffle next to him, lax figure straightening suddenly, and getting very, very close to breaching Louis’ personal space. Louis can’t say he minds too much.

“That’s because it’s mine,” Harry… if Louis isn’t mistaken, honest to god growls. He looks up at Harry’s eyes, and they’re hardened and cold, the softness from a second ago gone, and they’re fixed on what Louis realises is a nervous-looking Will, and the relaxed mood has vanished, in its place pure tension. Louis is very, very confused.

“Will, this is Harry, he’s in the band, The Cahoots, from that show we met at,” Louis says, trying to diffuse… whatever it is that’s in the air between them. He looks over at Will, who’d tentatively holding out his hand for Harry to shake.

“Yeah… Nice to meet you. I’ve heard your music, it’s good! I’ve actually worked at three of your—” Will offers, who’s currently being caught in a death grip handshake by Harry, and is very much trying not to make it too clear how much it’s affecting the blood flow to his hand.

“Wonderful,” Harry cuts him off, eyes on Louis, and Louis feels his cheeks heat up, again. “Lou, I was going to ask you if you wanted to come over tomorrow. I’ve already asked the other lads, Niall
too, and they’re all free. What do you think?” And what? When was this a plan? Also, the other lads? Niall? How did he even…? Louis can’t really find it within himself to do more than give Harry a stunned nod, and muster a tiny, “Sure”.

Harry’s eyes go towards the direction of the road after Louis’ response, a small, satisfied smirk on his face, which Louis can’t begin to decipher the reasons behind right now. Then, in the most perfect timing Louis has ever seen, a sleek, dark Mercedes pulls up on the side of the kerb in front of them, on a double-yellow no less. Louis didn’t have to worry about any rules of the road being broken, though, because Harry immediately and swiftly slides into the backseat, even though Louis isn’t entirely sure that the car had stopped moving.

“Goodbye. See you tomorrow. I’ll text you my address. Lovely to meet you, Will,” Harry airily announces out of the window, and Louis realises he doesn’t even have Harry’s number, so he doesn’t quite know how that’s going to happen. Louis doesn’t even get a chance to respond this time, either, just watches as the car speeds away down the North London street, becoming a black blur in the distance before disappearing.

“Um. Wow,” Will mumbles, and yeah, Louis agrees. Wow. The only question on his mind as they make their way to Will’s car, rain beginning to spit down on them, now, is what on earth was that?

It’s only when he’s sitting in the passenger seat, torrential rain beating down around him, and heater on full blast, that Louis realises he’s still wearing Harry’s jacket.

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Louis stuffs his hands further into the pockets of his faded denim jacket as he walks out of the Tube exit, making his way onto the street outside. It's colder today, but still sunny; Louis’ favourite type of weather. The walk from the station to Harry’s flat isn’t a long one, barely 5 minutes, if that. Louis had received a text with an address from an unknown number, to come and meet there at around midday, and for a second he felt like he was in one of those awful Hollywood crime films, thinking he was about to be asked to go make a ransom drop or something.

To his relief, it just turned out to be from Harry, who had gotten his number off of Niall, apparently. Louis tries not to feel unnerved at the fact that Harry was already befriending his best friend, the same best friend who could so easily embarrass him at the drop of a hat, and can read him better than anyone. But it’s good, of course it’s good, that they’re getting to know each other. Perfect even, Niall could use more friends, having being stuck at the law firm for most of his time. So, yeah, it’s fine that they’re friends now. Completely fine.

Louis rounds the corner, and realises that Harry’s flat must be in the old Shepherd’s Bush fire station. It’s beautiful to look at; all brownstone and old-fashioned. He wouldn’t have imagined Harry here, thought maybe he would be living in one of the edgier parts of London. Although, Louis’ come to realise that Harry is nothing if not surprising.

It’s a great location, as well, so near the tube, but also so near the river too. Louis loves the river, hasn’t been very often since he moved further up to North London. He sometimes thinks about taking the tube down here, to walk along the trail that he used to walk when he needed to have some time to himself. It was when he was at uni, that he’d come down, and it would be such a trek, too, miles away from the actual university building, but Louis didn’t care. He liked the distance it gave him, the perspective. Being here is making him feel a tad nostalgic, actually, but he likes it.

Louis, now older, obviously, and living much further away from the river, loves his tiny one-bedroom, with it’s broken tap in the bathroom and a perpetual draft, he does. He will admit, though, without even seeing the inside yet, that he is a tad jealous of Harry’s flat. Louis knows the reputation of this building, knows most of the flats in it are bloody nice, and two-bedroom. The record deal Harry and the other boys were given must’ve paid them all a pretty penny for Harry to be able to afford a studio flat all on his own at only twenty two years old.

He makes his way to the large front door with a brass handle on the front, narrowly avoiding a woman with a buggy walking in the opposite direction. It’s busy in this area, no matter the time, but that’s what Louis’ always loved about it. He presses the buzzer that’s just labelled ‘H.S.’, the last on a list that include names such as ‘Peter and Tom’ and ‘The Masons’, and suppresses an endeared eye-roll. He’s such a baby rockstar, with just his initials as his name label, being sure to cast an air of mystery, of course.

“H’lo?” someone answers, through the crackly speaker, and Louis can’t tell who it is.
“Hi!” Louis says, softly, hoping he’s got the right flat, “It’s Louis! Um, Tomlinson?”

“I know who you are, Lou,” someone chuckles, and even though he’s quite busy with being a tad embarrassed, Louis’ pretty sure he can make out that someone is Harry. “Come on up, I’m at the top, flat 7.

“Right, ah–” Louis’ pathetic response is interrupted by the door buzzing, signaling him to push on it and come into the building, away from the loud noises of the busy London street behind him.

The door shuts, a loud, echoing bang, and then silence. Louis opts for the lift, doesn’t really feel like turning up at Harry’s front door all sweaty from the stairs. Not because he cares about looking good, or anything, but– oh, alright, maybe he does care. Sue him for wanting to look nice for once. He’d quiffed his hair up today, his usual hair care routine consisting of a fluffy, unbrushed look, controlled by a beanie of some description and not much else. His hair out of his face made his eyes pop, Louis had been told by some incredibly desperate and incredibly drunk guy in a club once, so of course Louis trusted that the guy was honest in his observation

His palms are a bit sweaty, and he has to switch over the hands he’s holding Harry’s jacket in. He’d remembered it just as he was walking out the door this morning, is returning it to him from yesterday, when Harry had put it on Louis against his will. Okay, so maybe Louis didn’t put up that much of a fight when Harry had given it to him. Who could blame him, though, when it was so warm and fit around his shoulders so perfectly? Anyway, holding onto the thick leather is probably the only reason why his hands are clammy, right? Yeah, Louis’ll go with that.

The lift opens and there’s a single door in front of him, so Louis assumes Harry must have the entire floor. How very, very rockstar of him. He rings the bell, and not a second later the door opens to a relaxed-looking, rosy cheeked, and very smiley Harry Styles. Louis finds himself mirroring his beam immediately; an impulsive reaction to the sight before him.

“Hey, Louis,” Harry breathes, eyes twinkling, as they always seem to do. He’s leaning against the doorframe, dressed in a blue silk shirt that compliments his skin tone perfectly. Louis remembers how he’d chucked on a holey, old band t-shirt this morning, along with a scruffy pair of jeans, and wishes he’d put a bit more effort into his outfit now. Harry looks beautiful, again, Louis briefly notes to himself. It’s hard not to notice.

“Hi, Harry,” Louis responds, albeit a little delayed. He’s a little breathless, is all. He wishes he could have the stairs to blame for that. Just the sight of Harry is enough, though, apparently. “Here’s your jacket, by the way, from yesterday. Sorry, I forgot to give it back before we both left.” Before you sped away in your car, Louis doesn’t add, as he hands it over.

“Oh yeah,” Harry replies, not even looking at the jacket, just at Louis, “Thanks.”

They stand there, for a minute, smiling softly at each other. Harry’s head is haloed by some sunlight behind him, turning his dark hair golden at the tips. His eyes are twinkling, a cheeky expression on his face, and his dimples could probably be visible for miles. So beautiful.

“Oh. Sorry. Um, come in! Everyone else is here,” Harry says suddenly, his cheeks getting a tad rosier, and he shakes his head with a smaller, but sure smile on his face now. Louis likes it all the same.

“Oh. Sorry. Um, come in! Everyone else is here,” Harry says suddenly, his cheeks getting a tad rosier, and he shaking his head with a smaller, but sure smile on his face now. Louis likes it all the same.

“Oh, yeah. Thanks,” Louis mumbles, eyes still following Harry’s own, and he almost feels like he’s in a daze, like he’s floating, as he walks over the threshold and follows Harry into the flat.

Harry begins leading Louis down the entryway, and speaks over his shoulder to Louis, “We were
just watching the Man United match, it’s on in the living room—"

“The what?!” Louis gasps in disbelief; he’s sure there wasn’t supposed to be a Man U match on
today, in fact he’d double checked! They aren’t usually playing unless it’s a Tuesday or Saturday,
especially when the premiership league isn’t on… How did he miss this?

He’s trailing after an unresponsive Harry into what he assumes is the living room, when he hears the
unmistakable cackle of a Mr. Niall Horan. Oh. Of fucking course.

“Mate! You shoulda seen your face! Fucking brilliant!” Niall howls, and Louis puts on the most
scathing look he can muster. Liam and Zayn are joining in too, sitting on the sofa, on top of each
other with laughter; seems like everyone was in on this little ‘joke’. Louis huffs.

“Knew you could trick him, Haz!” Niall adds, and Harry’s laughing now, too, giving Louis a pitying
look, after high-fiving Niall. Also, Haz? Niall and Harry are already on a nickname basis? Louis
needs to sit down.

“’M sorry, Lou,” Harry starts, and earns himself a pillow to the face from Louis for his obvious lack
of remorse. The pillow could have cost more than Louis monthly paycheck, given the lavish look of
the flat in general, but Louis can’t quite find it in himself to care. “But Niall said it would be hilarious
to make you think you missed a Man U match, and it was! Your face–” he takes a break to laugh
some more.

“Are you quite finished?” Louis asks, scowl on his face softening, an amused expression threatening
to break through - okay, so maybe it probably was a bit funny. Louis would’ve laughed if it was one
of the other boys this had happened to.

“Yeah, yeah. God, that was so funny. The panic levels just skyrocketed, think you could feel it in the
room,” Harry replies, looming over Louis where he’s sat down on the sofa, still grinning as big as
anything.

“Mate! You know catch up TV exists, anyway, right?” Liam chimes in next to him, and Zayn
laughs, of course. Zayn would probably laugh at whatever Liam says, regardless of what it is.

“The stress that my body was just put through, Jesus Christ. Wouldn’t wish it on me own worst
enemy,” Louis says, with an air of melodrama, because of course. He leans back in his seat and shuts
his eyes, and puts the back of his hand to his forehead, for added flair and theatrics.

“I do love that disgruntled kitten face you have, Lou. It’s very sweet,” Harry just giggles some more,
and Louis can feel his cheeks heat up at that; he has no response to Harry’s comment. Instead, Louis
stays silent while he can feel Harry’s presence moving to sit on the arm of the sofa. He waits until
Harry has just sat down, and then jabs his elbow out, hoping he got him right in the ribs.

There’s the unmissable sound of something large and heavy tumbling to the ground, quite
ungracefully, actually, and Louis snorts.

“Hey!” Harry says, though Louis can tell he’s still laughing.

“You deserved that, Styles, don’t pretend like you didn’t,” Louis responds, feeling satisfied with his
revenge. He opens one eye and sees Harry, sitting in a pile of limbs next to his feet on the floor,
grinning up at him, smug look on his face. Louis can’t really say he minds this time, though.

“Right,” Louis says, breaking their gaze, before he ends up in another extended period of eye contact
with Harry, again. “What are we actually doing today lads, apart from increasing my anxiety
levels?” he asks to the room, and they all just laugh at him again, and Louis, despite himself, joins in.
It turns out there were no footie matches on, or none worth watching, anyway. Instead, Harry suggested sitting out on the terrace with a few beers, to just relax and hang out, get to know each other more, were the words Louis thinks he used. This attitude would have been great about a couple weeks ago, when Louis was hoping that them all getting along would mean that writing would be easier. Better late than, never, though, he supposes, and takes another swig of his second (third?) drink, as he basks in the London sun.

“It’s nice to have you all here, lads. I thought a day like this would be fun,” Harry says to them all, cheery tone to his voice, rocking his chair back and forth in front of Louis, between the light and the shade, so that his eyes would go pale and sparkling one second, and then dark and rich the next. Louis watches from behind his sunglasses, just a little bit mesmerised by the sight.

“Thanks for ‘avin us, Haz, you’ve got such a nice place,” Niall responds, in an equally jovial tone, evidently loving life as per usual.

“Yeah, thanks, Harry,” Louis says then, along with Zayn and Liam who supply something similar.

“You’re welcome. Anytime, honestly,” Harry simply responds, with a small smile, eyes looking straight at Louis. Only Louis. He feels a shiver run up his spine at the heaviness of it

Before he can respond, and in true London summer fashion, the first few hints of rain trickle down, and that’s their sunny afternoon gone. It was nice while it lasted, and Louis has to be thankful for having at least a couple of hours of uninterrupted sunshine.

They decide to go in, Zayn and Liam quickly stubbing out their cigarettes, while Niall collects the empty beer bottles they’d amassed that were on the table, and goes inside.

Louis looks over at Harry, who’s currently removing the pillows from a few of the chairs, so that they don’t get any more wet, Louis’ assuming. Wordlessly, Louis picks up the rest of them, to help Harry get it done quicker, and get them inside quicker, too. When Harry notices this, a look of pleasant surprise is on his face, warmth almost radiating from him.

“Oh, thanks, Lou. You didn’t have to,” Harry says, gratefulness evident in his tone, gesturing to the pillows held in Louis’ arms.

“S’alright,” Louis makes his way back to the door to the inside of the flat as he responds. It’s fine; he wanted to help. Always wants to help Harry. Not that he would say that out loud, he’d never hear the end of it from Niall.

Louis looks over his shoulder as he’s stepping in, about to ask Harry where to put his collection of pillows, when a carpet corner, which Louis definitely didn’t notice before, gets in the way of Louis’ somewhat lazy step. He begins to go flying towards the arm of the sofa, a sharp intake of breath the only sound he produces, bracing for impact on the hard edge.

He never feels it, though. Instead, he feels a warm, strong, large hand wrap around his arm, tight and unyielding, tugging him back upright.

“You alright there, Lou? Almost gave me a fright,” Harry chuckles, softly, and Louis shifts his eyes from the hand on his arm to the body attached to it, the body that’s standing very close to Louis’; Harry’s giving him this look that Louis can’t recognise, but his eyes are big and smiling, and there’s almost a hint of wonder in his gaze, like he can’t quite believe he’s had to save Louis from falling
over like an idiot, probably. Louis has realised Harry must’ve seen what was about to happen and jumped through the doorway to rescue him. Louis would feel pathetic if his heart wasn’t racing so fast, and if Harry’s hand wasn’t still gripped so tightly around his bicep.

“Thanks,” Louis breathes, forcing himself to chuckle after a beat, eyes attempting to focus on Harry’s amused but concerned face, but he’s almost too close. “Sorry, didn’t see the carpet.” he adds, as if it helps.

“Just don’t make a habit of falling over, trouble. Don’t know what we’d do without you, otherwise,” Harry responds softly, and Louis can feel his sweet, hot breath on his cheekbone, can see the flecks of gold in his eyes that Louis was always sure were there. The amused look has taken over now, and Harry’s hand is still on Louis’ arm, still tight in its grip, and still massive.

“Jesus, Tommo, how much did you have to drink? Almost thought we were gonna ‘avta take you to A&E, then!” Niall says from across the room, and Louis remembers that they’re not alone, that other people are there with them. He jumps apart from Harry, suddenly aware at how close they were standing. Harry’s hand drops slowly from his arm, and Louis misses the warmth of it immediately

“It was the carpet, Nialler, completely not my fault!” Louis protests, hugging the pillows to his chest now, a form of protection against the onslaught of abuse he’s probably about to face.

“What just happened?” Zayn’s tickled voice, then, along with the person it belongs to, comes from behind them, with Liam in tow.

“Louis’ almost bloody face planted, but then Harry saved him before he could do permanent damage to his already ugly mug.” Niall responds, grinning ear to ear at this obviously falsified retelling of the previous events.

“Oi!” Harry and Louis both say at the same time, and Louis chucks a pillow at Niall, hitting him square in his ugly mug, thank you. Harry quickly follows his move, making it a double attack. Louis looks up at Harry, and finds him already eagerly looking down at him, giggling away as usual.

“Great teamwork, Styles,” Louis says then, just to say something, ignoring the other boys’ cackles, and Niall’s mini tantrum.

“There’s a chorus of agreements to this suggestion, and Liam, ever the teddy bear, looks proud at his idea, crinkly eyed and pleased.

“Yeah, Louis and I are just gonna put the pillows away first,” Harry says as a reply, leading Louis down a hallway, towards a bedroom, Louis supposes

They walk in, and Louis immediately sees a small piano in one corner, and numerous guitars leaning against the wall next to it; bass, electric and acoustics, in all different finishes and colours, too. Next to them, on the floor, is the next thing Louis notices; a small bundle of glass bottles, once full of alcohol, and now empty lie on their sides in a pile together. Louis glances away, feels like he wasn’t meant to see that, but it leaves a bad taste in his mouth all the same.

He looks around, then, instead. The room’s bright, and a little untidy, a bit like Louis’ first impression of Harry. The first thing Louis notices on the wall next to the door, is lots and lots of pictures, all pinned and taped and stuck to it. Polaroids and disposables, mainly, and some regular
prints. Some big, some small, some black and white, some not. It’s like a massive scrapbook stuck to
the wall, taking up almost the entire thing.

“This is very impressive,” Louis comments, studying the pictures. Lots of Harry as a small boy,
sweet, all chubby cheeked and wide-eyed in wonder, and there are equally lots of him from what
looks to be his age now, less chubby cheeked, but still wide-eyed in some of them. Probably for
entirely different reasons, though, Louis realises.

Harry’s smiling in almost all of them, Louis notices. He looks like the happiest boy in the world,
from all these pictures. He looks like it, sure, but Louis knows that that's not strictly the truth when it
comes to Harry.

“Oh, thanks,” he hears in response from behind him; he can't stop himself from looking at every
single picture he can. It's like seeing through a window into Harry's life, and Louis feels privileged to
have the chance.

Louis sees a picture of Harry, a recent one, with a little girl, red-haired and freckly, can't be more
than about three years old.

“That’s my niece, Posie. Isn't she adorable?” Harry says then, still from behind Louis, cheerful tone
to his voice having noticed what Louis is looking at.

“Yeah, so cute,” Louis agrees, voice dropping to just above a whisper. Harry has a niece? Louis
didn't know that. Why would he, though, to be honest. Harry’s got the loveliest expression on his
face looking at the photo, and Louis finds it ever so sweet. Harry’s heart is so much warmer, so
much fuller than Louis had originally even thought possible, from the first impression he got. Oh
how wrong he was.

No more is the intimidating, leather-clad daymare that Louis had seen the first day they met, in his
place a lovely, soft, loving boy, who’s so multi-levelled and captivating and entirely too good for
Louis. Of course, this is when he’s sober, Louis reminds himself. He’s still aware that Harry is
almost a different person to this when he’s high, remembering Harry’s behaviour that time after the
gig, and also that one time in the studio. Louis knows that’s a part of Harry that Harry himself doesn’t
really see as a problem, which is an issue to Louis. Which is why Louis also knows that that's the
part of Harry that Louis wants to help Harry work on, if he lets him. Has wanted that since Harry
told him he's still living an unhealthy lifestyle. Maybe Louis can try talking to him about it again
soon, knows that now that they’re friends, he thinks, maybe he’ll get through to him, unlike the time
at the studio when Harry bluntly ended the conversation.

It seems like Louis just keeps uncovering new parts to Harry, keeps finding out new bits and pieces
that he keeps filed away in his mind, working on finally completing the puzzle that Harry is. Louis' getting there, though. Slowly but surely, he's getting there.

They stand there a little while longer, Louis just studying every picture he can see, and Harry letting
him.

Louis realises they've been here for a while, and are definitely holding the other boys up. He places
his pillows down, finally, where Harry had put his, and moves to the door.

“We should go watch the film, they're all probably waiting for us,” Louis says to Harry, who's still
studying the picture, a reminiscent smile on his face.

“Yeah,” Harry replies, sounding a bit far away, finally turning away from the wall, and he
soundlessly follows Louis out of the door and back down the hallway.
It’s Zayn, Liam and Niall who got to the big sofa first, so Louis and Harry have to take the smaller one next to it. Naturally.

Louis doesn’t miss Niall’s extremely unsubtle look that he casts his way, eyebrows waggling and cheeky smile on his face, gesturing with his eyes between him and Harry. He prays Harry doesn’t notice, and momentarily resents Niall’s presence, and also resents his best friend’s ability to read him like a book, in any circumstance. Niall can obviously tell, to some extent, the way Louis is affected by Harry, but it would be brilliant if he didn’t make that fact so bloody obvious to everyone around them - including Harry himself. Louis doesn’t like to dwell on the subject, doesn’t like to think about what he might find within himself if he does.

“So… Love Actually?” Harry asks the room, pulling Louis out of his clouded thoughts.

“Harry, it’s August. Not exactly the right time of year,” Zayn muses, arms crossed in apparent outrage at the suggestion.

“Hey, it’s always the right time for Love Actually! Greatest Rom-Com ever made, that is,” Louis finds himself saying, in immediate defence of Harry, and honestly, maybe he doesn’t even need Niall to make it obvious he fancies Harry, maybe he makes it clear just on his own.

Zayn just sniggers in response, shaking his head good-naturedly. Liam joins him, and they look like they’re sharing some sort of private joke. Louis isn’t going to even attempt to try and decipher what they’re on about.

“Yeah, see, Lou’s got the right idea!” Harry turns and dimples at him, eyes all lit up, pleased at his support. Louis thinks he feels his heart flutter at the sight, a familiar feeling by now, and not altogether unpleasant, either. Not in the slightest, actually.

“’Lou’?” Liam asks, demanding their attention away from each other, incredulous tone to his voice. “Since when are you two so chummy?” But it’s not really that he wants to know the answer, he just wants to point it out to them, if the smug look on his face is anything to go by.

Harry and Louis look back at each other again, exchanging small smiles, both unsure of how to respond. Louis’ unsure of his ability to say anything, actually. They have grown a little closer after their solo studio session, Louis supposes. It’s nice, he likes how quickly they’ve been able to get on like this. Likes it a lot, actually.

“Come on,” Harry says after a beat, soft eyes still latched onto Louis, gleaming with something, Louis still can’t recognise it. Louis is still captivated under his gaze, regardless; always is, really. “Let’s put the film on.”

Harry shifts closer and closer to Louis on the sofa as another film plays on (they’ve been at this for a while now, light from outside steadily creeping away, film afternoon having turned into a film evening), and Louis is slowly losing his ability to regulate his breathing properly. He can feel the warmth from Harry’s body, can feel Harry’s thigh touching his, and even though it’s a small couch, there’s still plenty of space, so Harry doesn’t strictly need to be this close. Louis doesn’t dare say anything, though. Doesn’t want to.

Harry does get up, though, and Louis misses his presence immediately. Jesus. He spends an hour with Harry in close proximity to him and now he can hardly bear being apart for a mere minute? How pathetic.
Louis’ not suffering for long, though; Harry’s just come back, along with even more drinks for them all to have. He also brought a blanket, the same one that he’s now draping over them both, all soft and fuzzy and pink. Louis realises, as Harry’s arranging the blanket, that it almost matches Harry’s nail colour; a glossy, pale rose that he hadn’t noticed before. And of course. Of course this hardened boy who wears tough leather and harsh black eyeliner, and does too many drugs to count, also owns a fluffy pink blanket. How very Harry.

“Love the colour, H,” Louis whispers once Harry is settled, because fuck it, if Harry’s allowed a nickname, Louis is too.

“It’s my favourite,” Harry smiles shyly, as if there’s anything to be shy about. Louis focuses his eyes on Harry, and in the low light, the colour of his glowing cheeks almost seem to match the blanket. Louis is helplessly endeared by this boy. Of course his favourite colour is pink, too.

“Hey, lovebirds, stop your whispering,” Louis feels his cheeks heat up at the comment, and he also feels called out. Is he being that obvious? He’s going to kill Niall, honestly. “There’s a time and place for that. You’re the ones who wanted to watch this film in the first place.” Louis’ head finally whips over to the source of the sound, to see Niall grinning, who’s not actually irritated in the slightest.

“Shut up, Niall,” he hears Harry mutter from next to him, after a beat, voice slightly breathless, and he sounds a bit distracted, attention probably back on the film already. Maybe it’s not such a big deal then; it’s probably just a joke to Harry, Niall’s comment. Louis wishes it could be just a joke to him, would make things, controlling his feelings, mainly, a whole lot easier to deal with. Louis lets out a deep breath. He’s going to be having words with Niall later. “It’s those two you should be worried about, anyway,” Harry adds, gesturing to Zayn and Liam sitting next to Niall.

Niall looks over - they all do - to where Zayn and Liam are sitting together. They’re all curled up to each other, oblivious to the conversation around them even more oblivious to the attention on them. They’re in their own little bubble, reciting the lines from the film to each other. It’s sweet.

Louis remembers the conversation he’d had with them in the pub, weeks ago now. Remembers what they’d said about feeling secure in each other, how they just knew.

“They’re adorable, aren’t they?” a whispered voice travels to Louis’ ear, barely loud enough. He knows who’s said it though.

Without looking away from the couple, he responds, “Yeah. They’re lucky.”

“They’ve always been my gauge, you know? Ever since they first got together. They fell in love straight away, I think, even when we were kids you could tell,” Harry continues, voice low so as not to earn another comment from Niall. Also, perhaps to keep their conversation private, too. Louis stomach flutters at the simple prospect of him and Harry having secrets together, exclusive discussions that only they hear. Fuck. Louis’ already in so deep if this is what he gets excited about.

“Your gauge?” Louis whispers back, confused at what he means.

“Like, my measurement. For relationships, I mean, people I meet. I’ve always been a bit nervous that I’d never actually find anyone, because my standards are so high, but it’s important to me,” he continues, a bit sheepishly. “I say to myself, if they don’t seem like they’re gonna make you feel like Zayn and Liam make each other feel, that almost tangible feeling of just… pure love, then what’s the bloody point?” Harry responds, light humour in his tone, but Louis can tell, is able to tell now, when Harry’s being genuine or not. And he is, with this. He obviously admires his friends’ relationship a lot.
“Oh. I see,” Louis says softly, and then decides he’s just going to risk saying the next thing he says before wimping out, “So… Has anyone lived up to that yet? For you?” Louis doesn’t know why this question makes him so nervous, why he has to work on regulating his breathing yet again in preparation for the answer. (He knows. Of course he knows).

“Hm.” Louis can feel Harry’s gaze latched to him now, and he moves his eyes from Zayn and Liam back to Harry. It’s always back to Harry, it seems. “Not until—” Harry stops then, a puzzling look on his face that Louis can’t quite decipher. Then, unmistakably, in their close proximity, Harry’s emerald gaze flickers from Louis’ eyes, to his lips, and then back again. Louis is almost fully sure that he stops breathing for a second there. “I’m not sure, now, actually.”

Louis has to avert his gaze, has to vacate the intense moment immediately. Harry’s heavy stare is almost too much, never mind the weight behind the words. Louis can’t, doesn’t want to think about what Harry could possibly mean, doesn’t want to take it the wrong way, because Louis always takes it the wrong way. Louis’s past, whether with his family or relationships, has been disappointing, to say the least, and he’s been let down too many times to count. It’s ironic, too, because now Louis barely ever lets himself feel anything, will never admit to himself properly how feels, out of fear of disappointment, but he can’t really help it when it comes to Harry. He doesn’t want to be disappointed, though, it’s happened too often before. Harry’s his friend, and that’s enough. It has to be enough.

Instead, he looks back over at Zayn and Liam, still cuddling, still adorable as anything. Louis feels wistful as he watches them, all happy and in love. He feels that same feeling again, as he had in the pub, the feeling of longing for something like that, something like what they have. Wouldn’t it be nice, Louis thinks.

He knows that’s just not on the cards for him, though, has to keep reminding himself. It’s hard, though, when he’s sitting next to such a lovely boy, a boy who radiates so much warmth, and whose eyes shine so bright that he rivals the sun.

He’ll admit it now, the way he feels about Harry. Since that night in the café, and every time he’s seen him since, he’s slowly started to develop… something, towards him, Louis isn’t quite sure how to define it, but it’s something he feels deep within himself, something he can no longer ignore. He knows it’s nothing like what he feels for Will, and nothing like how he should feel for someone who’s just his friend, if that. He knows, though, God, Louis knows, that nothing could ever happen, would ever happen, with Harry.

Louis has gotten to know Harry, the real Harry, or parts of him at least, in just the few times he’s spent with him, and he likes this Harry. He likes this Harry a lot. And he’d been running away from it, for a while, is still sort of running away from it, really. He hasn’t wanted to admit to himself the extent to which his feelings towards Harry go, for numerous reasons. One being that there’s no way someone like Harry; vivacious, intriguing, lovely Harry would ever reciprocate feelings towards someone like Louis. It’s just not something that would ever happen, and Louis knows this.

There’s also the minor issue of Louis’ history of being faced with his own emotions, in the sense that when it happens, he immediately runs in the opposite direction. He’s never been a crier, really, either, finding it easier to bury his feelings until he can pretend they don’t exist anymore. He’s just not good at them, really, at accepting them or acting on them, is always, always scared of fucking it up, so he just ignores how he feels completely. It works, most of the time.

Also, more importantly, Louis wants to help Harry, that’s all he wants to do. That’s all he’ll allow himself to do. He’s wanted to help Harry since that night he’d told Louis about his life, and some things he’d gone through, and then that day in the studio; what he’s still going through. It’s clear to
Louis that the boy needs some level of help, and if he can give it to him, that’s what he will do. Since Louis first properly got to know Harry, that’s been his main goal, and his silly feelings shouldn’t, and won’t, get in the way of that. Not when they don’t even matter, anyway.

“Lou?” he hears, and Harry, of course, is pulling him from his reverie. How fitting. He’d probably missed something, some joke Harry had made that he’d expected Louis to laugh at. Louis would’ve, of course.

Louis looks over at Harry sitting next to him, and just gazes, goes soft at the sight. This beautiful, slightly broken - Louis’ come to realise - but still lovely, lovely boy, and feels pure want. It must be the surplus of alcohol that Louis’ consumed, that’s letting Louis allow himself to feel this way right now, or maybe it’s how exquisite Harry looks in this light, that finally pushes Louis over the edge; gets him to finally admit to himself that he really, truly does have feelings for Harry. Rather a lot, in fact. Fuck.

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It’s much later now, and Louis’ not altogether sure that he’s entirely sober, either. He blames Niall, the bloody Irishman, for suggesting shots after their third film, and then more shots, and then more shots. They’ve decided to go out clubbing in a bit, drinking too much to let it go to waste, according to Harry, a comment which only mildly troubled Louis. Louis’ in the kitchen, with said Irishman, along with Zayn and Liam. They’re all laughing at some joke, Louis isn’t sure what. Hm... is it ‘what’? Or perhaps it’s ‘which’? Anyway, correct grammar aside, Harry isn’t here, he isn’t next to Louis like he was a minute ago, and that’s what Louis notices. He should go and find him.

Louis slopes off into the living room, fifth (sixth?) drink of the day in hand, movements lazy and eyelids even lazier. He takes a swig, cringes at the taste. It’s something that Liam and Zayn had conjured up for him, promising him that they’d taken a couples mixology course together, so of course it’ll be good. It tastes predominantly like something similar to nail varnish remover, though, if Louis’ being honest. He drinks it anyway.

The back of the sofa comes into view, and how long has Louis actually been standing here? He’s not sure. The back of Harry’s head comes into view too; wavy, jet black hair unmistakably him. Ah. Harry. Lovely Harry.

“Lovely Harry? Well, thas much better than any other name I’ve been called before!” Harry’s low, teasing, slightly slurred voice materialises, and he’s whipped his head around to look at Louis, a blinding smile plastered on his face, eyes glinting with amusement. Fuck, Louis realises, did he say that out loud?

“Yeah, ya did. I liked it, though,” Harry replies breezily, signature giggle ending the sentence, and Jesus Christ, Louis should not only stop talking, but stop thinking too it seems.

Louis rounds the sofa, cheeks heating up and no doubt turning at least a tickled pink. It was a tad embarrassing, obviously, but Louis can’t really find it within himself to care right now, too inebriated to feel awkward about calling Harry lovely to his face. Well, back of his head actually. Anyway.

“Lou! Come sit with me!” Harry suddenly chirps, over-excited, and arms up like a child, as if it wasn’t obvious that Louis was just about to do just that.

“I am, you silly billy,” Louis replies, just as bubbly as Harry, and did Louis really just say ‘silly billy’? Is he 24 or four? Louis plants himself as heavily as possible down next to Harry, just to be annoying (and maybe get another giggle out of Harry, they are wonderful). He chuckles at himself, and his extremely long track record of embarrassing himself or getting flustered in front of this boy.
He hopes his tipsy state helps to hide his emotions, hopes it makes him look more relaxed than he is.

“Luuuu,” Harry drawls, and wraps his hands around Louis’ arm, nestling his head into Louis’ shoulder. His hair is soft where it brushes Louis’ jawline, and while his heart rate is rapidly increasing, being this close and touched so intimately by Harry, Louis is helplessly endeared by him. Harry’s evidently a teensy bit drunk, and in the back of his mind, Louis briefly wishes for Harry to stay at this level, this fun, affectionate level, and hopes he doesn’t drink so much tonight that he has one of those apparently common black-outs. “I’m so glad we get on now. Didn’t really like being mean to you, after a little while,” he murmurs, and Louis has to perk his ears up to listen, which is decidedly harder to focus on doing when there’s alcohol coursing through his bloodstream. “You’re far too pretty and far too kind to be mean to,” and um, fuck? Louis was definitely not expecting him to say something like that.

Harry just… He just called Louis pretty, and Louis decides that all he can do is file this information away for another time, unable to process the absurdity of it right now. Maybe Harry’s more drunk than Louis thought. That’s really the only explanation, and Harry’s said shit sort of like this before, when he was high. Must just be the alcohol talking, then.

Louis forces a chuckle, won’t let himself get overwhelmed by something so meaningless, “Me too, H.” He’ll just ignore Harry’s other comment, that way it goes away, right?

“Heyyy,” Harry says then, hands still wrapped up in Louis arm but head now almost level with Louis’, a furrow in his brow and a pout on his lips. “What happened to ‘lovely Harry’? That’s my favourite name you’ve ever called me. Keep calling me that please,” and he looks so very disgruntled and sulky and so, so pretty, that Louis can’t help but give in.

“Okay, lovely Harry. My sincerest apologies,” Louis chimes back, grinning at the boy looking up at him, with his now-satisfied face and smoothed out features, and Harry makes a pleased sound. He really does have the most gorgeous eyes, Harry does. Louis would like to get lost in them, would love to, even. Smudged black outlines them both, his irises a shock of green because of it. Thick, curly lashes encompass them, and Louis thinks he could count them all from how close he is.

“Alright lads!” someone announces, this noise along with a loud clap distracting Harry and Louis from each other, and the moment’s gone. If it even was a moment, Louis’ not very good at noticing anymore. Seems to be in these sorts of dazes with Harry more than he’s out of them, recently. “Time to go!” It’s Niall, of course, already three sheets to the wind, and with several full beer bottles in his hands. For the road, apparently, according to him.

Harry gets off the sofa first, holding his hand out to Louis who gratefully accepts. When their hands join, they fit, perfectly, slotting into each other like puzzle pieces. Louis gets the sudden feeling of not ever wanting to let go. It’s over in a second, though, the warmth of Harry’s touch leaving him cold and wanting. He’s already so addicted to it, Harry’s touch, even after only experiencing it for such a short period of time. Louis tries not to let himself process how much of an issue this is.

Harry bounds towards the door, holding it open and ready for everyone to leave. He’s definitely like a baby deer, Louis decides, all bouncy and high-spirited. Louis lets himself smile at the sight, really smile, because fuck it, they’re all drunk, and he doesn’t care much if anyone notices how pleased a happy Harry makes him look, how warm and fuzzy inside it makes him feel.

Liam and Zayn leave first, apparently a cab has been called already; Louis wasn’t aware. Isn’t aware of much right now apart from the lovely, dimpled, smiling boy in front of him. Niall goes after, shouting down the stairs at Liam and Zayn about something or another, Louis can’t hear what. He doesn’t care, really. Finally, Harry steps out of the flat, and Louis follows, and Harry locks the door, taking a few tries to get it right. Louis titters, finding it quite entertaining.
They finally make it down the stairs, not taking the lift for whatever reason, maybe they momentarily forgot it existed. Louis doesn’t know, he’s really quite drunk. They meet the other boys where they’re standing outside, in the process of getting into the taxi.

Louis and Harry are greeted with cheers and ‘finally’s from the other lads as they both pile in, falling over each other just a little bit. They give the driver directions, and Louis feels excitement coursing through his veins. He has a good feeling about tonight.
The queue for the club is long, winding out the door and down the dimly lit side street located somewhere in Soho. Louis’ never been here before, never even heard of the place, just knows it’s one of Harry’s haunts. They’re led in by a bouncer who seems to know Harry, and recognise Zayn and Liam too. Niall as well, for some reason. Louis doesn’t really know what the Irishman always gets up to, doesn’t want to ask, really. Inside, it’s dark and musty, the smell so strong that alcohol could be dripping from the walls, it’s that intense. Music ripples through the crowd, a pounding, edgy, fast-paced beat that Louis can feel vibrating in his head, mostly, and the rest of his body. He feels dizzy at the noise, but it’s almost addictive, this whole atmosphere. Crimson coloured lamps hang precariously from the ceiling; the only things in the small space that are offering any lightsource. Swaying sweat sheened bodies are what first meet them at the door, each person at a closer glance looking like they’re on something. Ah, so it’s that kind of club. Louis should have guessed, seeing as Harry was their way in. Miraculously, although unsurprisingly, there’s a bar in the middle of the chaos, at which Louis finds himself, along with the rest of them, at almost immediately.

“Shots? Everyone? Brilliant!” Niall shouts, loud enough to be heard above the music and also everyone else around them’s conversations. Niall rushes it out in excitement all in one go to the amusement of Louis, speaking only to him and Harry; Liam and Zayn are still chatting to the bouncer behind them nearer the entrance. Niall somehow wiggles through Harry and Louis to get into a space at the packed bar to get the drinks. The movement jostles them against each other, and then Louis feels Harry’s hot, heavy body press up against his back. Fucking Christ, this isn’t fair. He takes a deep breath and tries to relax, channeling more energy to some parts of himself than others.

“'M sorry, was an accident,” a slurred, warm, amused whisper that he feels on the back of his neck elicits a chill that travels up and down his spine, and he really, really has to fucking calm down.

Without looking back, and perhaps to save what little dignity he has left, he simply utters a high and tinny, “No worries,” and leaves it at that.

He looks back to the bar, focuses on that to save him from focusing on anything else, and notices Niall’s gotten the bartender’s attention. Before Niall can so much as open his mouth to order, though, Liam appears with Zayn, finally, and taps him on the shoulder, and then gestures to a set of stairs that Louis hadn’t seen before. Niall’s face goes all confused and questioning, but he eventually (reluctantly) steps away from the bar.

“Mate, we’re going down. They’ll bring us drinks, we don’t have to order them. And that’s where all our friends are, usually,” Liam explains loudly over the music, smiling and visibly excited.

He doesn’t miss Zayn’s tiny eye-roll, and tight smile at the last comment. Louis finds it odd but at the same time, he’s still slightly drunk from earlier, so he can’t really bring himself to try to grasp what it could mean.

They squeeze through the maze of people and slowly make their way down the stairs to an even louder, darker and packed room. Liam leads the way, and Louis is constantly conscious of Harry
walking very closely behind him, hyper-aware of their proximity for what feels like the hundredth time this evening, and he tries his utmost hardest to contain himself. Must be the atmosphere and the alcohol that’s got him so worked up; he’s never usually this bad with Harry. Has managed to control his acute sensitivity to him quite well until now. It’s as if, just after he’s finally admitted to himself that he *likes* Harry, the floodgates have been opened and his body is going into overdrive in its reactions towards him, a month’s worth of pent up frustration and repressed feelings all coming out at once. Louis would feel overwhelmed, but it’s more of a relief, really. Well, as long as he manages to keep it to himself. That’s all that matters.

“Here lads!” Liam announces, and leads them into a dark, tiny booth tucked into the corner of the room, easily missable, and possibly purposefully so, Louis realises. The club itself is exclusive, that much is obvious, and the privacy of the booth just adds to that. It has shiny seats and more of those red lamps serving as lights. They can all just about fit in together, Louis squeezing as close as possible to Niall in order that he doesn’t have to feel Harry’s thighs pressed up against his, *again*, avoiding a possible aneurysm while he’s at it.

“This is nice and compact,” Harry, the tosser, says through a chuckle, and Louis prays Harry doesn’t notice the effect the closeness is having on him. He gives a high breathy, obviously put-on giggle in response, and he really should have just kept his mouth shut because if it wasn’t obvious before, it’s definitely obvious now.

He feels Harry take a breath and turn towards him, possibly to start a conversation, and oh, God, that means Louis will have to look him in the eyes, probably, and act normal. It’s fine, he can do this, he’s been doing this for the past month, apart from a few minor embarrassing hiccups. He always does seem to fluster him, Harry, even since day one. He steels himself, about to turn to face the boy next to him, when his phone goes off.

“Oh, sorry, one sec,” he says, glancing quickly up to Harry with an apologetic smile, catching sight of his gorgeous, gorgeous green eyes. God. Louis will never tire of them.

Louis digs in his pocket for the culprit of the shrill sound, a noise that can even be heard above the music in their secluded space.

He glances at the phone, and feels Harry’s hot eyes on him, and it takes him a little longer than usual to focus on the screen in front of him.

**Hi louis, was so nice to see you last night, had so much fun!!! are we still on for our date next week??**

It’s from Will. Louis has to jog his memory a bit to remember what he’s referring to, can’t even really recall what they did the night before. Oh, yeah, they went for coffee (again) and then Will dropped him off at home. It was… nice, Louis supposes. Not much else, though, really. It made Louis realise that Will probably isn’t for him, that it’s not as fun as Louis had originally thought. Not when he’s constantly distracted by his feelings for someone else. Also, the date next week? Louis’ fingers hover over the keyboard, unsure of how to respond.

He sees a shadow lean over towards him, and Louis finds it even more difficult to think of a reply now, “‘sat that Will guy? From yesterday?” Louis hears, and it appears to have come from Harry. He sounds curious, but with a small edge to his voice.

“What? Oh, um, yeah, that’s the one,” Louis answers, distractedly; he’s not really concentrating, focusing more on figuring out a way to cancel on Will, maybe rearrange the date. Louis’ inebriated self is helping him to understand that he can’t really cope with another just simply *nice* dinner again so soon. Or ever again, really. Louis needs fun and excitement, not nice and predictable.
Well what’s he want? Can’t you tell ‘im you’re out with friends? To not text you constantly? Is he the clingy type?” A flurry of questions erupt from Harry, his voice harsh, and irritability evident in his tone. Louis looks up from the still empty reply screen, a confused furrow in his brow. Harry’s once soft, smiling eyes are now hard and accusing, and Louis is extremely perplexed as to why.

A waiter brings drinks to the table then, and Harry and Louis are still locked in a heavy gaze. Harry’s eyes challenging; Louis’ questioning. The drinks are set down, and Louis finds his voice.

“What? Um, I dunno, maybe?” Louis… doesn’t really know how to respond, voice getting smaller as the sentence goes on. Why is Harry asking all these questions. Why does it matter what Will is, and why does Harry care? Is he… annoyed? That Louis is on his phone? That’s weird, Niall’s been on his phone since they got here, and Harry didn’t say a word.

Harry huffs, and turns away. Louis doesn’t miss him lifting what looks to be some sort of fruity cocktail from the table as he does in one hand, and a double shot of something else in the other. Louis goes to lean towards Harry, to ask him what’s the matter, because really, what is his deal? He catches Liam’s eye just before, though, and stops. Liam’s swapped places with Niall, who seems to have caught the whole exchange, and is giving Louis a look, but Louis pretends he doesn’t see it. Doesn’t really want to deal with that right now. Louis also hadn’t even noticed they’d switched places, was too engaged in whatever that just was with Harry to realise.

“I’d just leave it, mate,” Liam tells him in a low voice, eyes on Harry’s back, over Louis’ shoulder. “He gets into these moods sometimes, you know he does.” Louis does know, how could he forget. Those first few sessions proved to be absolute nightmares, before Harry and Louis somewhat, miraculously, made a truce and started working well together. Seems like they’re regressing now though, the progress they’d made seem to have momentarily been forgotten by Harry, for whatever reason.

“Yeah… yeah,” Louis says, shaking his head, slightly, because he doesn’t have much else to say. Louis’ got this feeling now, this frustrated, unfamiliar feeling in the pit of his stomach. He doesn’t know what it is, what it means - just that it’s uncomfortable and he wants to get rid of it as soon as possible, please.

“Shot?” Liam then asks, and honestly, bless Liam.

“You read my mind, mate,” Louis breathes out, in relief, maybe. He pockets his phone, text left unreplied to, and decides to worry about it later. The crease in his brow smooths out after the first one, and a smile tugs at the corners of his lips by the third. The other lads join in, even Harry, who Louis has decided to give a wide berth to for the time being, wanting to avoid another disagreement. More importantly, wanting to avoid getting that unpleasant feeling again.

By their fourth shot, everyone’s a little looser and giggly, even Harry, who Louis has decided to give a wide berth to for the time being, wanting to avoid another disagreement. More importantly, wanting to avoid getting that unpleasant feeling again.

They’re talking about football, or films, or something. Louis can’t really keep up. Is too busy trying to surreptitiously cast glance up at Harry’s profile, ignoring all warnings of you’re being so obvious, and to stop staring, Jesus, from within himself, no doubt his small percentage of sobriety (and sense) trying to claw its way through. Louis won’t let it, though, not when Harry’s looking so lovely next to him. He’s laughing lazily at something, features soft and lit up. Smiling lips all sweet and stained pink from the cocktail earlier, and Louis wants to taste them. His hair’s all wild and wavy, curling ever so slightly just around his ears, so very daintily, and Louis wants to touch it, wants to tangle his fingers in it. His angled jaw looks so strong and defined, and Louis wants to softly trace the line of it with his lips. Louis just wants, wants, wants, can feel it expanding within himself like a bubble ready
to burst, reaching every corner of him; it’s inescapable. Louis doesn’t want to escape it, though. Not really. That’s the problem, though, isn’t it? Not that he can’t get away from his feelings for Harry, but that he won’t.

“Harry!” Louis is shaken from his thoughts by the sound of someone’s booming voice, rising above the sound of their conversation.

Louis looks up to see a group of people, a few boys and a girl. He recognises her, he can’t remember where from, though. They’ve come over to where Harry’ sitting, and are now saying hello to everyone, introducing themselves to the table.

“Hi there, I’m Nick, nice to meet ya!” The tallest one of the group says loudly, too loudly, with a wave, and Louis dislikes him immediately. Working in the industry has meant that Louis can pick up on artificiality very easily, and this guy reeks of it.

“Hi,” Louis responds, flatly, but with a trace of a smile so as not to be too obvious about his indifference. Nick gives him a look and turns to face Harry, effectively ending the chat. Well, then.

Louis looks at the other people in the group, not recognising the other two guys, but then his gaze lands on the girl, and that’s when he realises. It’s Ericka, from the gig. Ericka, from Harry’s dressing room, who Louis thought Harry was seeing. Ericka, who’s actually Harry’s dealer. Right.

“Anyway, Harry, I was hoping we’d see you! Ericka’s got some new goodies for us,” Nick singsongs, and Louis feels his stomach drop a bit at the words, knowing where this is going, “You know, the stuff we were talking about? It’s imported, meant to be almost 100% pure. Oh, and she has that other shit you wanted, too,” he says it conspiratorially, except he doesn’t, because the whole bloody table can hear, and Louis’ pretty sure that was his intention. Louis should have guessed, should have put it together after seeing Ericka that this could only go one way.

“Oh… sick, man! Where? Now?” Harry says stiltedly, and gets to his feet clumsily, obviously drunk as shit now, jogging the table and remaining drinks as he does so. Louis instinctively holds out his hands to keep Harry up, but Nick beats him to it, placing both hands on Harry’s shoulders, steadying him. Yeah, Louis definitely doesn’t like him.

“Mate, relax, Ericka has it with her, yeah? Don’t worry, we’ll sort you out,” Nick chuckles, a bit sinister if Louis is passing judgement. Which he is, he’s drunk so he’s allowed to. Louis feels a bit uneasy at all this, though, Harry’s already drunk as it is. The fact that Harry’s most likely gonna go snort some coke from God knows where in some bathroom or corner of the club doesn’t exactly make Louis feel that great. He turns to look at Liam and Zayn for guidance, who aren’t at all trying hard to hide their irritated expressions, both looking tense, with their arms crossed and jaws tight. Ah, so Nick isn’t really a universal friend, then. Louis can’t say he’s surprised at that one.

“Yeah, yeah… Sort me out,” Harry slurs, swaying on his feet, eyes lazy and all over the place, unable to focus. His friends are just laughing, finding this amusing, and it occurs to Louis that this isn’t really an uncommon occurrence. Louis feels conflicted, he feels like this isn’t right, that Harry’s already on his way to being fucked and taking more drugs is certainly not going to help.

Louis remembers the conversation they had in that session, about how Harry regularly has these nights, these exact nights, where he drinks so much and takes so much that he has blackouts, just in the name of fucking art, and not feeling anything, or whatever, in the hope that it will strike up inspiration for songs the way being sober apparently can’t. Louis felt frustrated, then, when Harry had told him, had confessed to him that he didn’t feel interesting when he wasn’t drunk or high.

But now, seeing it happen in front of him, this ritual Harry seems to go through, he just feels white
hot anger coursing through him. These people are meant to be his friends, yet they let him do shit like this? They enable it, for their amusement and other selfish reasons, it seems. It’s disgusting to watch, and Louis feels himself sobering up at at the sight.

Before Louis can say anything, though, someone else beats him to it.

“Harry, maybe that’s not such a good idea. Remember last time?” Zayn says, soft and hard at the same time, somehow, from across the table, and it earns him a dirty look from Nick.

“No,” Harry perks up, energy suddenly renewed, “I don’t remember. But that’s the point, though, innit?” A bitter smile that doesn’t reach his eyes forms on his face, and Louis wants to interject, but he can’t. He’s just sitting there, speechless, unable to stop it from happening because he has no responsibility, no right to Harry, no matter how much he wants it.

“C’mon, H, let’s go!” Nick says, glancing at the rest of them as if they were shit under his shoe, “Promise you, you won’t believe how smooth it is…” Nick takes Harry under his arm and leads him away, a protective gesture for a casual observer, but Louis isn’t so easily fooled.

Harry casts a glance back at the table then, and for a split second his eyes catch with Louis’, again. He just looks a bit lost, really, but Louis doesn’t let himself say anything. He watches them disappear into the crowd, their little posse trailing not far behind, and Louis has to take a deep breath to steel himself, try to cool the bubbling rage inside of him.

“Well, he was a fucking arsehole,” Niall says, and Louis feels a touch of relief. Thank God for his best mate. “Haven’t you told Harry what a fucking arsehole his friend is?” Niall’s turned to Zayn and Liam, who give him a look in return as if to say, of bloody course we have.

“Oh really? I thought they were all super friendly, meself,” Louis chimes in sarcastically, because that seems to be his only line of defence right now.

“We stopped trying to convince Harry to not hang out with him after a few years, when we realised that he was most likely here to stay, and nothing we could say could convince Harry that he’s bad for him. That that whole group is bad for him,” Liam explains, leaning forward so everyone can hear him over the louder music, taking a long sip of his drink and sighing.

“He takes a lot of drugs, doesn’t he?” And Louis knows the answer to this, but there’s a difference between knowing and knowing.

Zayn continues now, looking over at Liam, for approval at what he can say, Louis assumes, before responding, “Well, yeah. I mean, we don’t go out with him every night he goes out, like, so we don’t always see it. He goes out way more than us, but. It’s not like he lies to us, either, not that we know of. Like, If we ask him what he’s done, he tells us, that’s kind of a rule, actually. We always ask him what he’s taken, and he always tells us.” The just in case goes unsaid, but Louis hears it anyway.

“Is that… That rule, is that because of Edie?” Louis questions; it would make sense. He was obviously close to her, and he said she was always telling him not to take too many drugs. Louis hopes that’s what the reason is, anyway.

“He told you about Edie?” Liam questions, mouth hanging open. He has an incredulous look on his face, evidently surprised or shocked, one of the two, Louis can’t really tell in this low light. Louis looks over at Zayn, who wears a similar expression.

“Um, yeah? I mean, not everything, I don’t think, just told me he lost someone close to him called Edie, and that’s why having control, and stuff, was important to him,” Louis explains, sinking feeling
beginning to materialise. Fuck, why do they look so stunned?

“Who’s Edie?” Niall says then, and Louis realises how out of the loop he is, and remembers how cruel it is to do that to a drunk Niall. He doesn’t answer, though, isn’t sure now if the information he has, although minor, is meant to be secret or not. He remembers how Harry had revealed parts of the story, and was evasive with others. It had confused Louis, but it was just Harry protecting himself, he had realised.

“Edie is…” Zayn begins, so it must be okay. Niall must be allowed to know. He turns to Niall but keeps his eyes on Louis until the last minute, almost a glint in his eye. “Someone who Harry was close to, but you’ll have to ask Harry for the whole story, mate, it’s quite personal. He doesn’t tell many people about her.” Louis starts, and blinks a bit at Zayn’s words. Oh.

Zayn glances over at the movement, and then continues, “She basically… just wasn’t very well, I guess, towards the end of her life. Kind of… Participated in the type of behaviour that Harry participates in now, ironically, because you would think if he’s seen in it her, he wouldn’t–” Liam’s put a hand on Zayn’s knee to calm him down a bit, and perhaps as a warning too, his temper evidently rising as the sentence had gone on.

Zayn stops for a minute. This is all news to Louis, he didn’t realise the story could get worse.

“I can’t really say much else, I’ve probably said too much already, but. That’s part of it.” Only part of it. Louis still doesn’t know this full story, just knows now that it has something to do with Harry’s behaviour, and Louis’ guessing Zayn is referring to Harry’s drinking and drug-taking habits.

Niall has a sombre look on his face, taking it in. It’s all a bit intense, this conversation, especially to be having in a club. Louis won’t drop it, though, his ears catching onto something.

“What were you saying? About Harry’s behaviour?” there’s no other reason for this question other than the fact that Louis is endlessly enraptured by Harry, is always eager for more information about him, more ways to understand him. He knows now why that is, knows that this thirst for knowledge is because of his feelings towards Harry.

“Oh, well. He’s been doing better, recently, I think. Well, he had been doing better. Not going out as much, focusing more on music. I guess it’s all the same, though, when he’s getting high either way,” Zayn replies, and that doesn’t do much to comfort Louis.

“Has he ever… been to see someone?” And Louis knows this is none of his business, knows that it has nothing to do with him, but he has to know.

“No. No, we asked him about it, a few times, but he said he didn’t want to. That it wouldn’t help, apparently. And we can’t force him to do anything, and he’s not really on great terms with his family, either, so,” Liam replies defeatedly, and that’s exactly how Louis feels. Defeated. He can’t quite believe they’re having this deep conversation in a club of all places, while Harry is probably not even a few metres away, but presumably getting high off his face. It’s all so much.

“Fuck,” Niall and Louis both sigh, because what else is there to say, really? Liam and Zayn nod. “It’s nice, though,” Zayn says, after a minute, and Louis glances up to see him already staring at him. “That you care so much. About him, I mean. We appreciate it. I’m sure he does too.” Liam looks over at Louis pointedly after this, and Louis pretends he doesn’t notice. He doesn’t even want to look in Niall’s direction, knows he’ll see some sort of knowing look that he can’t be bothered to deal with right now.
Zayn’s got a small smile on his face, now, and Louis hopes the red lights they’re under will a hide a blush if one appears. “He’s never told anyone outside the band, or the people who knew her, about Edie. No one knows about her part in why Harry behaves the way he does, why he has certain beliefs, I guess, only a few people. Not even Nick, I don’t think. That’s so unlike him, to open up like that to someone so quickly. Someone he barely knows. He must trust you a lot, you know.” Louis doesn’t know how to react to that. Harry had told him that not many people knew, before, sure, but he hadn’t realised… He hadn’t realised how massive it truly was, for Harry to tell Louis about Edie, even to just tell Louis the foundations of it, not even the full story. What could this mean?

“Well, I’m just glad that I’ve been able to offer my friendship to him, then,” Louis says then, swallowing; he doesn’t really know what else to say.

“Yeah. Friendship,” Zayn’s smile turns into a full on smirk, eyes glinting even more. God, does everyone fucking know that he fancies Harry? Jesus. He needs to tone it down.

He ignores their stares, though, and rolls his eyes half heartedly, wants to tell them, very funny guys, but it’s also a bit shit, because yes I fancy Harry, but nothing’s ever going to come of it, so it’s a bit pathetic, isn’t it? Even if Harry placed his trust in Louis, someone he’s only known for about a month, over someone he’s known for years. Even if that, it doesn’t mean anything significant, it can’t. There’s no way it can.

“Right lads,” Louis starts, cheery tone affecting his voice, “I don’t know about you, but I think it’s time to do what we came here to do? Have a good, fun, drunk time? Yeah?” he finishes, gesturing to the dance floor next to them.

He receives a chorus of agreement in return, everyone probably thankful to end the discussion. Louis steps out of the booth, drink in hand, and doesn’t let his eyes travel to find a head of wavy black hair, no matter how much he wants to.

—

Louis is very, very drunk. He stopped counting after the fourth free drink (turns out being friends with people in a band has its perks) and is now by himself, it seems, on the dancefloor, sweaty and happy and content. That’s what he tells himself, anyway, even though he can’t quite get rid of the nigglng feeling he has, the where’s Harry feeling he’s come to call it, because that’s what it is, if he’s being completely honest.

He hasn’t seen him since a few hours ago, when that twat, what was he called? Oh yeah, Nick. When Nick came and whisked him away, to god knows where to do god knows what, and Louis can be bitter if he wants, on account of the fact that he’s drunk, and he probably won’t remember this tomorrow. So he’s letting himself be annoyed that Harry is off somewhere else, when, really, he’d just like him to be right next to him.

“Louuuuuu,” a slow, syrupy voice comes from behind him, and Louis whips around, spilling his drink in the process. He doesn’t care, though, once he sees who it is.

“Harry. There you are,” Louis breathes, because as if by fucking magic, Harry has appeared opposite him, shirt buttons all but completely undone, droopy eyes, and soft, silky hair, a sweet smile on his face. Louis feels himself mirroring it immediately; can’t really help himself.

“Here I am! You found me,” he replies, sounding so sweet and genuinely pleased, moving closer, and Louis momentarily forgets how to breathe. This always seem to happen.
Harry leans down, with that look in his eyes, the one Louis finds it difficult to recognise, and for a second, Louis is absolutely still, heartbeat ringing in his ears, and his head, and his throat.

“Don’t let me dance all alone,” Harry whispers in his ear, and Louis shudders, Harry’s hot breath creates goosebumps on Louis’ cool skin, and his eyes flutter shut on their own accord; it’s so much to take in, and not enough, all at once.

Louis can hardly find it within himself to do more than nod okay, he doesn’t know what’s happening, where this Harry has come from, but he doesn’t dare question it. Harry’s hand finds his own, and it’s warm and familiar and grounding; Louis doesn’t want to let go.

He follows Harry further into the throng of people, and lets himself be pressed up against warm, sweaty bodies, and is there a word for feeling nervous and excited at the same time? Whatever is it, that’s how Louis feels, swaying there with Harry, possibly to the beat of the music, Louis isn’t sure, can only see and hear one thing; Harry’s eyes and Harry’s breathing, and that’s all he needs right now, really. Harry lets go of Louis’ hand in order to let them travel to his waist, holding tightly and securely, and Louis literally cannot breathe, his senses so overwhelmed by being surrounded by Harry. Harry touching him, breathing the same air as him, looking at him like he wants something from him, and like he knows Louis would give it to him in a fucking heartbeat.

His eyes get all hooded and fuck, he looks so fucking good right now, and they’re dancing so close, probably looking positively sinful to anyone watching. Louis’ arms find their way around Harry’s neck, somehow, and he actually can’t quite believe this is happening. Harry’s not holding back, and Louis knows what it looks like when a guy wants something from him. Knows what it looks like when a guy wants him.

Their short puffs of breath are mingling between them, Louis could get drunk on it, he thinks. Drunk on this feeling, drunk on how Harry’s large hands feel, gripping hungrily at his waist, drunk on Harry, being with him like this, just everything about him.

He hears Harry giggle, right next to his ear, and he feels warmth spread down his neck. Louis refocuses his eyes on the boy in front of him. His dimples are out, his lovely dimples, and Louis has to stop himself from reaching up to touch one then and there. Louis feels like he’s dreaming right now, Harry is dancing with him, getting intensely close to him, this is Harry, Harry who he literally cannot control his feelings for, maybe actually reciprocating some of them. Louis wants to bottle this moment, freeze it and capture it, be able to go back to it whenever he wants to, it’s all so much, and not enough, never enough; it always seems to be that way with Harry.

He stares up at this boy in wonder, finding it hard to process how someone who looks so happy and carefree right now, can harbour such darkness and pain within him, can switch between both so easily. Well, he gets help from certain substances, Louis supposes. It’s then that Louis realises how fucking high, and drunk, Harry must be right now, and suddenly, his stomach drops at the realisation, and Louis feels fucking stupid.

Of course, of course Louis let himself get lost in this, let himself think that maybe Harry wanted him. Of course he doesn’t fucking want him, probably just saw the first person that he knew, among all the people here, and wanted to have some fun while he was coming down. This is Louis’ problem, he always fucking does this, always gets too caught up in something, something that doesn’t mean anything. Won’t ever mean anything. Harry may be self-destructive with his drug taking and drinking, but Louis’ just as bad, with the way he lets his heart be taken, the way he gives it away, so quickly, and so easily.

Louis steps away then, shaking his head at himself, and feels Harry’s hands slip from his sides, already missing the feeling. He averts his eyes, trying his hardest to just get past this moment, this
blip in his strength and composure, hoping Harry doesn’t notice the anguish he’s sure is written all over his face.

“Lou?” he hears, faintly over the music and noise around them, that he’s now tuned back into. “What’s wrong?” he looks up at Harry, who looks like a kicked puppy, all sad and not sure why. His eyebrows are creased, and lips pouty, and a stray piece of his hair has flopped over his eye, and he’s making no move to fix it. Louis looks down again.

“Nothin’, nothin’, I just… I have to use the loo, um, sorry,” Louis stutters out, chancing a look back up at Harry before disappearing. He looks put out, confused, standing alone in the middle of the dance floor, and Louis feels shit. It’s better than how shit he would feel if he let it get further though, knowing how that could only end in Louis’ hurt feelings.

Louis does in fact make his way to the toilets, the ones at this place being significantly nicer than any of the ones he’d seen in other, much cheaper clubs. Not that it matters, though, all he needs is some cold water to splash on his face, and you can get that anywhere.

He’s there for about ten minutes, just staring at himself in the mirror, going over what’s just happened, and hoping Harry doesn’t remember it tomorrow, hoping he himself doesn’t remember it tomorrow. Maybe he should go and get another drink.

He moves towards the door, and has his hand reached out to the handle when someone opens it, quite vigorously, from the other side, and it swings in Louis direction.

A man walks in, smiling, he’s blonde and tanned and tall. Classically attractive, not really Louis’ type. He doesn’t notice Louis, just focused on something behind him, and then Louis sees.

The man’s hand is connected to someone else’s hand, and that someone is Harry. Right. This… This is fine, Louis’ fine. Fucking pull yourself together, Louis.

They’re both in now, and that’s when Harry notices Louis. The lazy smile that had been on his face drops, and so does the hand that was in his own.

“Lou, I—” he starts, and it takes more strength than Louis’ willing to admit to look him in the eye, “I didn’t know if you were coming back, I…” he trails off, stepping forward, but Louis’ not going to interfere. Sort of just wants to leave, actually, doesn’t particularly want to stay to hear what they get up to. It’s none of his business anyway. Not his responsibility. He has no claim over Harry; he doesn’t belong to him. This doesn’t explain why his stomach has dropped though, but the unmistakable feeling of white hot jealousy that’s coursing through him probably does.

Of course. Of course this has happened to Louis.

“Harry,” Louis simply says, and he can feel the tightness of his smile, can feel it in his muscles how forced it is. Louis doesn’t care, a smile is a smile.

Harry looks like he wants to say something else, but Louis doesn’t give him the chance. He’s got to act normal, for Christ’s sake, and normal means getting on with his night like he would usually, and not getting caught up in what Harry chooses to do with his time, or with whomever he chooses to do it with. It’s none of his business.

Louis leaves without another word, and makes his way out to the dancefloor, again, movements jagged and stumbly, but his mind is alert and lively. How many times will he have to get drunk in one night? He supposes he’ll find out. He finds Niall, thankfully, a beacon of familiarity amongst the masses.
“Tommo!” Niall says when he sees him, and Louis feels a genuine smile form on his face. “Y’alright?” And of course Niall can pick up on something immediately, because he’s Niall.

“Fine, mate, let’s just have some fun, yeah? Where’s Liam and Zayn?” Louis replies, asking out of curiosity and also in an attempt to change the subject.

“Uh last time I saw them they were in the smoking area taking pictures with some fans. Isn’t that sick? Imagine us being famous, man!” Niall has a excited smile on his face, eyes lit up.

“Can’t really see it, mate,” Louis says, mainly to humour his dear friend.

“Where’s Harry?” and Louis pretends not to hear this question, instead stealing Niall’s drink and downing it, with promises to procure him another one somehow.

They dance for a bit, and Louis drinks even more. It doesn’t affect him, though, not as much as he’d like, but he also doesn’t want a killer hangover tomorrow, so he stops after a little while.

Zayn and Liam find them a little bit later, back in the booth, much more drunk than Niall or Louis is, and attached at the hip as they walk through the crowd, looking sickeningly sweet.

“Guuuuuuuus!” Liam announces, and proceeds to pounce on Niall, who takes it in his stride, of course. “We missed you! It’s been so long,” Liam says, eyes wide and searching on Louis’ face.

“It’s been about three hours since we last saw you, mate,” Louis laughs, amused at Liam’s sincerity.

“Too long! Much too long,” he mumbles back, into Zayn’s neck where he’s positioned himself, and Louis has to force himself not to keen at how sweet they are.

“You two are adorable,” Niall says, as if reading Louis’ mind. “How long have you been together again?”

“Mmm… few years? Five? Loved him for longer, though,” Zayn says then, and Louis’ lips curl up impulsively at the admission.

“Thas always the way it is, innit?” Niall says in response, “I always feel like one person falls in love first, and then the other always follows soon after.” Louis swallows at that, and why is his throat so dry all of a sudden? Niall continues, “Like dominos, kind of. Except there’s only two of you. Unless it’s a polygamous relationship, which I totally have nothing against, by the way,” Niall finishes, a lost look on his face; confused, along with the rest of them, at how he managed to finish on that subject.

“Oh, Niall, thanks for that, mate,” Louis chuckles, affectionately slapping a hand on Niall’s back.

“How long have you and your boyfriend been together, Lou?” Liam asks then, and what? What is he on about?

“Boyfriend? I don’t have a boyfriend… Who told you that?” He doesn’t miss Niall’s head whipping towards him out of the corner of his eye, calculating stare on his face, probably just as lost as he is.

“What?” Zayn and Liam share a look, “Harry said…” Liam trails off, and oh, if that isn’t fucking irony if Louis ever saw it. “Harry told us you have a boyfriend, that there was a guy who picked you up? Yesterday?” Zayn says then, with a puzzled expression.

Oh. “Oh.” Will. “Will. Yeah. He’s… We’re… I dunno, dating, I think? Met up with him a few times, met him at your gig, actually,” Louis says pathetically, because he’s still just a bit in shock.
“He’s not my boyfriend, though, not at all. I was actually just thinking about how much I don’t really want him to be my boyfriend, earlier. That’s… that’s weird that Harry said that. I never told him…” Louis trails off, unsure of what to say. Why would Harry tell them that? Did it look like Will was his boyfriend? He did call him babe, to be fair. Louis shudders at the memory. 

Awful petname.

Louis’ in disbelief, had never even placed it in the realm of possibility that Will would look like, let alone be his boyfriend. It’s just not something he’s considered, ever, really, and Louis isn’t really sure why that wasn’t a red flag from the beginning, but. Well, he is sure, actually, because the original plan was to just have fun, but that was before… everything. Before he developed feelings for someone else, is the simplest way to put it.

Louis supposes he’s mistreated Will a bit, led him on while he was always aware that it wouldn’t really go anywhere. Even though he wasn’t consciously aware of the seed of doubt before, it’s always been there. Ever since that night when he had to leave their date to rush to the label. To rush to Harry. And of course, it always comes back to Harry, doesn’t it? Every single time.

“Oh, well… Maybe you should tell Harry that, then,” Zayn says, slowly, and Louis starts. A calm, reserved expression forms on Louis’ face, a shadow of a bitter smile showing.

“Harry doesn’t care either way, mate. Trust me.” Why would Harry care who Louis’ seeing or not? He’s not interested in Louis, that much is clear. Earlier was just a blip; Harry’s drunk, that’s why he acted the way he did, he didn’t realise what he was doing. This has been clear from the start, because no one Louis is truly interested in is ever truly interested in Louis. That’s just how it goes. It’s fine.

“Are you sure about–” Liam interjects, with a puzzled look on his face, but Zayn stops him with a hard look, and Louis’ grateful, while not being fully sure why he’s done so. Either way, he’d rather not recount the pathetic reality that is his love life right now, to all of them.

“Niall, you wanna go find someone to get us more drinks? I’ll come too,” Zayn says then, nudging a now-sleepy looking Liam off of him, and onto the seat where he happily lays down and snoozes.

“Sure mate,” Niall simply replies, and Louis’s secretly pleased, doesn’t really feel like being surrounded by people for a bit.

Louis sits there, trying to make his mind go blank, trying not to think about anything, just for a little while. He shuts his eyes, relaxes his hands, and lets the music travel through him, lets the beat thrum within him, feels it like a clock, ticking, counting down to when he has to return to reality.

“Excuse me, um, hello?” someone says, right next to his ear, and Louis reluctantly opens his eyes. It was nice while it lasted.

“Yes?” Louis replies, in the driest tone he can muster, annoyed at his one moment of peace being interrupted.

“Sorry, but, does he belong to you? I think I saw you with him earlier,” and then they gesture behind them, towards another booth, a few over, and fuck, Louis can see those godforsaken black sparkly boots poking out the end. He wants to shout, no, no he doesn’t belong to me, but he doesn’t, because right now Harry’s laying in some random booth, all alone, for fuck’s sake, and right now, by some cruel, ironic trick of the universe, he’s Louis’ responsibility.

Louis walks past the woman, a waitress, he realises, without another word, and descends upon the booth which contains what he realises is a passed out Harry.

He’s on his side, and his hands are drawn up to his chest; he looks like a sleeping child. So peaceful,
and silent, his chest heaving ever so slightly with every breath. His milky skin is visible due to his shirt being gone, who knows where, and a strand of his hair that covers his face floats up at every exhale. He’s precious, Louis has to admit, and Louis almost doesn’t want to wake him.

Despite how the night’s gone, and his feelings, everything, Louis really just wants to take care of Harry. And see, this is why letting himself feel for Harry was a bad idea, because then it gets complicated when he tries to help him. He feels annoyed at himself at earlier, and at Harry, even though he has no right to be, and that gets in the way of what he needs to do right now, and so it would just be best to just… not feel anything, if he wants to be able to help Harry properly. That’s not really looking like a possible option for Louis, though. He sighs.

Louis gets down on his knees, and shakes Harry’s shoulder gently. “Harry. Harry? Wake up. I’m gonna take you home.”

Harry blinks, finally, after some more gentle nudging, and his brows crease immediately; he’s unsure of where he is. “Whaaa?”

“Hey, it’s fine, it’s me, Louis. Gonna take you home, yeah?” Louis says then, and takes Harry’s hand, hauling him up gently from the booth.

“Lou? Home?” Harry says then, and it sounds so tiny and trusting, Louis dreads to think of how many people have probably taken advantage of Harry in this state.

“Yeah. Home,” Louis replies, arm around Harry’s waist as he leads them out of the club, the sound of Harry’s necklaces clanging together right next to Louis’ ear as they stumble out, and he hopes to God that no one outside recognises Harry and takes a picture, because that’s the last thing he needs. Louis also decides to just text the others from the car, no point in trying to find them when he’s got a drunk and high Harry over his arm.

They walk outside, and thankfully there’s not many people there. Louis spots a black cab up ahead, and decides to risk it, not having the time or patience to order his own one.

He hauls Harry in, and buckles his seatbelt before his own, then tells the driver Harry’s address. Harry’s shivering next to him, and Louis quickly removes his jacket and places it over Harry’s cold shoulders, cringing at the feel of them. Harry had teased him about being cold in summer, and Louis would do the same now, except. It doesn’t really feel like a time for jokes, right now.

Louis sits back, watches the light from the street lamps make Harry’s eyes glow in intervals, emerald, and then jade, back and forth until it’s just a pool of green. He’s not asleep, then.

“D’youuu have fun tonight, Lou? Hey! That rhymed,” Harry asks then, quietly, with a little giggle, still gazing out the window. Louis looks over, can’t help the fond look that takes over his face at the sight.

“Yeah… yeah, I think I did.” A lie, obviously, but who the fuck cares at this point. Harry’s not going to remember this conversation, anyway. Hopefully neither will Louis. “You?”

“Yeah. For a bit,” Harry replies, his voice slow and rough, and he’s fiddling with the sides of Louis’ jacket now, pulling on loose bits of frayed denim.

“Yeah, well. Definitely looked like you did. Think the whole club probably saw you stumble into the loo with that guy, Harold,” Louis tries for a cheery, joking tone, but falls short, and it comes out bitter and cold instead. Harry doesn’t seem to notice, or if he does, he doesn’t make it clear.

There’s a pause, and Louis thinks he’s fucked it up, gone a bit too far, been a bit too obvious about
his feelings. Maybe Harry doesn’t even know what he’s referring to; he wouldn’t be surprised if he was already so far gone, anyway.

“That was– Nothing…” Harry exhales then, and he leans back in his chair, wraps the jacket more tightly around him. “Nothing… happened. With him. Lou. Just… so you know,” Harry turns to look at him now, words still slightly slurred, and, well, it seems he does remember, then. Louis’ breath catches at the sight of those steady, mildly focused eyes on his. Just so Louis knows? Why? Louis can’t think of the answer to that. Probably just Harry being his puzzling self, as always. Harry somehow still has Louis under his spell, even when he’s under the spell of all those substances he’s taken.

“It doesn’t matter, Harry, ‘m not gonna judge you for it.” Louis forces an airy laugh out, hoping he sounds as nonchalant as he thinks he does, “I don’t mind either way,” and now he’s lying through his fucking teeth, but what else is new.

“Oh… Okay,” Harry says then, quietly, after a minute, and then he turns away, and it breaks Louis’ heart a bit, the simplicity of how the statement sounds, the acceptance in it; how easy it is for Harry to just not care. It’s not his fault, though. Just Louis’.

Louis stares out the window, and the sky is lit up with stars, but none of them seem as bright as Harry’s eyes did tonight. As bright as they always do, really. Within a minute, hears soft snores coming from Harry.

They arrive at Harry’s shortly after, far too quickly, in Louis’ opinion. Louis pays the driver, and gets out with Harry after waking him up, not quite trusting him to get up to his flat alone.

Harry just stands there on the pavement, lazy eyes and a lazy smile, and yawns like a kitten. He scrabbles in his tight pocket for a minute, before presenting Louis with a key. Must’ve had the same idea as Louis, then. At least they’re on the same page for some things.

Louis leads Harry to the front door, opening it up, as quietly as possible, because it is about 3am at this point, and he’s not sure Harry’s posh neighbours would appreciate being woken up. He lets Harry in first, who stumbles his way to the stairs, almost losing Louis’ jacket on the way there.

Harry begins his ascent, slowly and sloppily, and Louis follows. They climb in silence, Louis conscious of the fact that Harry could probably slip and fall at any minute, wondering again halfway up why they didn’t just take the bloody lift.

Finally, they reach the front door, and at this point Louis is having to almost carry Harry again, his weight fully on Louis. He doesn’t mind, though. The warm press of Harry’s body against him is comforting and Louis lets himself enjoy it, because he’s drunk, and nothing fucking matters when you’re drunk.

Louis opens the front door and everything looks different now, in the darkness and silence of the early morning. Moonlight shrouds the room in a glowy haze; rare, for gloomy London.

“Bed,” Harry murmurs, slowly, sweetly, and Louis does what he’s told.

He leads Harry past the messy sofas and the terrace door that they’d forgotten to close, and down the hallway to where he remembers the bedroom is.

Harry is pretty much asleep on his feet at this point, so Louis just places him as carefully as he can on his bed, making sure his boots are off. Louis can’t bring himself to take his jacket back, though, not when Harry’s looking all curled up and warm in it. Louis spots a blanket in the corner of the room,
places it over him. It’s the pink one from earlier, Louis realises, Harry must’ve taken it back to his room before they’d left. Louis smiles fondly, for a minute, at the memory of Harry telling him it’s his favourite colour. Jesus. Louis’ hopelessly gone for this boy.

Just as he’s walking out the door, he hears a soft, “Lou?” and he looks back to see Harry, eyes still closed, breathing even. Must be dreaming, then.

“Goodnight, lovely Harry.” Louis whispers then, a smile in his voice, and shuts the door quietly, hoping not to wake him again.

Louis walks back through the flat, out the front door, and locks it before putting the key through the letterbox. He takes a deep breath, and leaves the building, deciding to walk until he finds a bus that can take him home.

—

Louis wakes up the next morning, early, to his phone going off. Must be texts from the other boys, he thinks, wondering what happened last night. He’d texted them about what had happened in the taxi, he thinks, but had switched his phone off soon after. Ah, so Louis remembers it all, of course he does. Remembers the multiple realisations of his feelings, remembers his chat about Harry, and his chat to Harry. Taking Harry home. Of course the alcohol would let him remember all of that.

He glances at the phone, ready to assess the damage, and all that catches his eye is one single text at the top of the screen.

Thank you for last night. H.x

Ah. So Harry remembers, too, partially at least. Louis tries not to think about what significance that could hold. He stares at the message for a bit, and then switches his phone off. He can think about all that later.

—


A week of studio sessions seem to fly by, filled with finishing up a couple of half-done songs and recording them almost immediately after, and next thing Louis knows, the album is pretty much done. It’s only taken just over a month - about what they had predicted at the start. Only a few songs needed touching up with the lyrics, and a few more had to be recorded, to complete the short debut album of The Cahoots. It’s the smallest time frame it’s ever taken Louis to finish an album, and usually he’d be pleased that a job was done so quickly, but that’s not really the case when it comes to this one. Louis’ going to miss working with the boys, especially now after they’d started to all get along so well. He’s going to miss seeing them so regularly, miss spending time with them. Going to miss spending time with Harry the most, if Louis is being honest, because there’s no point lying to himself about the way he feels about Harry anymore.

They hadn’t really spoken about the other night, during the sessions when he’d seen Harry. There was only the text Harry had sent him, which Louis didn’t respond to. He’d found out that Harry hadn’t actually remembered Louis taking him home, only that Liam had told Harry the next morning about it. Louis supposes it’s for the best that Harry remembered nothing of Louis acting the way he did, pathetically embarrassing and obviously affected by him, not covering it up well at all. He didn’t know how to respond to the text, really, other than, no worries, H, I’d happily take you home every evening if it meant that I knew you were safe and not passed out somewhere random, cross faded to within an inch of your life, because while I don’t really understand how or why, I care about you quite a lot. So, yeah, it was for the best that Louis didn’t reply to that one.

There’s a meeting at the studio today to go over the album, make sure everything’s done, and to tie up any loose ends there might be. Louis’ almost feeling nostalgic at the thought of it, like he’s already missing something that hasn’t even ended yet. It’s silly and ridiculous, because it honestly was just a job, for Christ’s sake, he’ll have another project soon enough. Louis knows it’s not that simple, though, knows saying goodbye to regular sessions with the boys - regular sessions with Harry - is going to be more tough than he’s willing to admit, even now.

Well, Louis will just have to get over it, because as soon as the album drops, The Cahoots will skyrocket to fame (Louis, along with their label, of course, is extremely confident in their ability to
get there) and Louis will just be a chapter in their origin story. He knows it would be nice to stay in touch with them, to stay friends, but Louis knows it’s not possible, not really, not after they’d told him how their quickly their schedule will become intense and gruelling for their promo rounds, and how right after that they go off on a tour, too.

Louis’ fine just being a memory, though, happy to have played even a little part in their beginning, even if it means there’s a chance he’ll be forgotten. He’s used to it, anyway, being forgettable, and it’s fine. Louis’ fine.

The doors to the studio building come into Louis’ view and he gets a bit jittery at the sight, nervous about the meeting this morning. He just wants it to go smoothly, hopes that they’ve remembered everything, and that the label is satisfied, too. He hopes mainly that the boys are happy with the finished album, because that’s what’s most important to Louis.

He wanders into the building, and goes to dump his stuff on his desk and makes a quick coffee too, before making his way to the room they’re all meant to be meeting in. As Louis walks down the hallway, steps echoing on the high walls, he realises this is the same meeting room they’d used when The Cahoots first came to meet with them, on that first day. It feels like a lifetime ago now, although it’s only been a month. Yeah, it is strange, the way it’s all worked out.

Louis walks in, and it’s almost like deja-vu; it’s like it’s day one all over again, and he supposes it’s all a bit symbolic. No one is saying anything, and there’s Tom, at the head of the table, eyes up at Louis now that he’s made his entrance. He looks stressed, which is odd, because he never usually is, especially for end of client meetings like these. And then Zayn and Liam, off to the side, at the other end of the table, who both look a bit on edge, and really, and what’s going on? The weird vibe in the room is even similar to day one, and Louis wants to know why. It’s then that he looks across from him, his eyes finally landing on Harry, that he begins to realise.

Harry’s sitting there, feet firmly planted on the floor, no where near the nonchalant, relaxed, legs-on-the-table Harry he’s gotten used to. One arm is crossed across his middle, tightly, and almost protectively, and the other is rigorously scraping through his hair, eyes focused on the empty table, and he seems tense, Louis can practically feel it from across the room. He stands there, hand still resting on the door handle, not quite knowing what to do.

“Is everyone… alright?” he asks the room, after a beat, confusion evident in his stilted tone. Zayn and Liam’s eyes shift from Harry to Louis then, and they seem to relax a little bit. Louis casts them a questioning glance, hopes they can understand that he’s trying to ask them what on earth have I walked into without actually having to say it.

“Yeah. We’re, um, fine.” Zayn says then, but it’s obvious that’s not the case. He looks over at Harry then, who still hasn’t looked up at Louis, and who seems increasingly more agitated the longer Louis looks at him.

“Harry? You alright?” Louis coaxes, and immediately wishes he hadn’t, due to the plain nothing he gets in return. Harry doesn’t look at Louis, doesn’t even so much as lift his head up from where he’s staring. Just ignores him completely, and it makes Louis feel incredibly small. Louis winces a bit at the blatant rejection.

Now it’s feeling extremely like they’re back at day one. That’s just… so very unlike Harry. Smiley, cheerful Harry, who’d gotten on with Louis for the better part of a month, who had (eventually) welcomed his friendship with open arms. Louis’ even more confused, now. He tries to think of what he could have possibly done that deserves this reaction, but comes up short.

When it’s clear that Harry isn’t going to say anything, Louis’ brows furrow even more and he looks
over at his boss for some explanation. Louis feels like he’s just walked into the middle of something.

“Tom?”

“Yeah, take a seat, Louis. We’re just, uh, discussing the album. Talking about how everyone feels it’s turned out,” Tom says through a tight smile, his voice strained, and Louis can tell that someone’s not happy.

He looks back over at Harry as he takes a seat, who still has that same stony look on his face, and his stomach drops at the prospect of Harry being the one unsatisfied with how the songs have turned out. Louis doesn’t understand, Harry seemed fine before? All those sessions had gone so well, each one better than the last. He’d been so compliant, even on that second one, so open to suggestion. And he’d tried, he really had; he’d made such an effort with Louis.

“Oh, so… what are the thoughts, then?” Louis asks, slowly, reluctantly, and he feels his palms begin to sweat as he does so. He’s nervous for the answer, hadn’t been expecting this kind of environment in the meeting at all when he walked in. Thought it would be easy and quick, but it’s proving to be the opposite, it seems.

“Well,” Tom begins, and Louis grimaces, waiting for the inevitable bad news, “It seems that not everyone is very happy,” and okay… Okay. Louis doesn’t really know what to say to that, he wasn’t really prepared for this at all.

“I never said I wasn’t happy with the album,” Louis hears a gruff, low, irritated voice speak up, and it almost doesn’t sound like Harry, it’s so harsh. He slowly turns to look at him, and oh.

His eyeliner is a bit smudged, and his eyes are red-rimmed, looking at Tom, and Louis hadn’t noticed that before, hadn’t had a chance to. There are dark purple bags under his eyes, too, and his face is almost grey in colour, and Louis can’t understand this change, he’d only seen him a few days ago, and he looked nothing like this.

Louis’ first thought a month ago would have been that Harry had been getting high earlier on, probably, but… that’s not what Louis thinks now. No, now it looks like he’s been crying, recently, even, and like he’s trying his hardest not to break out in tears again, jaw all clenched and words stiff. Louis’ chest constricts at the sight, and he’s even more confused; he doesn’t understand what’s happened, or what’s happening, or why Harry won’t even look at him.

“I asked you how you felt about it, and you said you wanted to leave… That you didn’t want to be here? I’m sorry if I misunderstood the implications of your response—” Tom starts, but Harry interrupts him.

“There weren’t any implications, Mr. King, I said what I said. I just would rather be anywhere else but here, right now, is that so hard to understand?” Harry snaps, eyes like slits, and it’s so rude and sarcastic, so grating, and so very unlike Harry. Louis’ in shock, and he looks to Zayn and Liam to gauge their reactions, and their faces seem to be mirroring Louis’ own. The tension in the room could truly be cut with a knife right now, and Louis has no idea what to bloody say, or do, or anything.

“I asked you how you felt about it, and you said you wanted to leave… That you didn’t want to be here? I’m sorry if I misunderstood the implications of your response—” Tom starts, but Harry interrupts him.

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“Harry,” his mouth moves, and oh, okay, he’s saying something apparently, “Are you— what’s the matter?” Louis leans forward, facing Harry, who still won’t look at him. He says this softly, quietly, not so the others can’t hear, because they can, but so perhaps Harry can recognise the sincerity that Louis feels, that he hopes comes across in his speech.

Harry chuckles then, dryly, and it’s not a pleasant sound, not like his twinkle giggles or his deafening cackles that Louis’ come to adore. Harry’s eyes dart from Tom to his own fiddling hands in his
lap, still refusing to look at Louis in the eye, “You’ve got your album, and your credits on it, Louis. You can stop pretending to care, now.”

What… the fuck.

“...What?” Louis’ voice is weak and tinny, mouth gone dry, and he stares at Harry, mouth agape at what he’s just said.

Louis... Louis’ mind goes blank. At least, he thinks it does, his senses are sort of overwhelmed by utter disbelief at what Harry’s said, so it’s hard to tell. His stomach has dropped, and he’s full of this dreadful, unpleasant feeling, like he’s anxious and angry and fucking confused, all at the same time. Harry’s words hurt more than Louis’ willing to admit, even now, after everything. He can’t believe Harry thinks, that all this time, Louis’ just been interested in getting his stupid bloody name on a stupid bloody album. Louis doesn’t give a shit about that, he never did, he didn’t even want to write on it in the first place, and Harry knows this, so he’s bloody confused and frustrated. God, he’s frustrated. He can feel it simmering away inside him, ready to explode at any minute.

He just… fuck, he really can’t quite believe that Harry thinks Louis doesn’t care, as if it’s not been at the fucking forefront of Louis’ mind for the past month, whenever he’s been with him. As if he’s not thought of ways to ask Harry, gently, about whether he thinks his lifestyle is healthy; whether to ask about ways in which Louis could possibly, in any way, help him somehow.

Louis’ spoken to Harry, at length, about his life and about his personal issues, has offered him support, he’d even bloody taken him home the other night, for Christs’ sake. It’s all Louis’ thought about, Harry is all he’s thought about, for what feels like forever now. It just… makes no bloody sense to Louis; his mind is spinning, trying to understand this all, and he doesn’t quite know how he could have made it more clear that he cares about Harry a great fucking deal

Lous feels faint, his breathing has quickened and there’s a ringing in his ears. He can feel sweat pooling in the dip in his back, and fuck, why can’t he ever have a fucking normal reaction to anything? Harry’s said this, for whatever fucking reason, Louis has no idea, and Louis’ confused and angry and fucking hurt but, like, if his breathing would slow and his vision would focus and he could stop bloody embarrassing himself in front of fucking everyone, that’d be nice.

“Louis?” he hears Tom say his name, looks up from where he’d be staring at his hands, and he hadn’t even realised he’d stopped looking at Harry. Probably a good idea. He’s not too sure what he would have done had he still been transfixed by those smudgy red-rimmed eyes of his.

“Yes,” it comes out soft, like a whisper, almost, but it’s sort of all Louis can seem to get out. His throat’s like sandpaper, and he’s not really concentrating, still sort of in a daze. “Sorry, what was that?”

“I said, I think we’re probably done here. I can sort the rest out with the label. Think we all should go and have a breather, yeah?” and Tom’s got this pitying look on his face, this look which says, fuck, you look like shit, you can leave if you want, mate, and Louis’ so fucking embarrassed that Harry’s managed to affect him like this and pissed off that that’s all Harry’s ever seemed to do - garner reactions from him that are pretty much inescapable.

Before Louis can respond, out of the corner of his eye he sees a shadow of black glide past him out the door, and he looks back to Harry’s chair and it’s empty.

Oh. Okay. Fine.

Zayn and Liam are still in their chairs and they have similar sympathetic faces on, both sets of eyes
on Louis, but Louis doesn’t really want their pity right now. It’s not going to make any difference; the damage is already done. Louis feels so fucking stupid, doesn’t understand how he let himself fall so deep into Harry that he’s now allowed himself to feel this much hurt at his words, at just a sentence, even.

“Mate–” Zayn starts, but Louis doesn’t really have the energy to have a conversation, is sort of not up for trying to figure out Harry Styles right now, not when it’s all he’s been doing for the past month or so, and right now he feels like he’s gotten absolutely nowhere.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry. I, um. I’m fine.” Louis says, stiffly, can’t let them know how much this has affected him, although his attempts are probably pointless; they can probably see all they need to see written on his face. “You guys go, I’ll see you tomorrow, or something, maybe,” he finishes tiredly, waving them off.

Louis doesn’t see the look they give each other, but he knows it happens, because he knows them. They do end up leaving though, without any more words, and he gives them a small smile as they go which he hopes comes across as reassuring.

Tom sort of slinks off after that, possibly sensing that Louis needs to be alone for a minute, because, in all honestly, he feels like he didn’t even process anything properly past the words you can stop pretending to care, now.

And this, this is why Louis shouldn’t have let himself feel this much, he fucking knew he was only going to get hurt in the end. And Louis can’t help but think, really think, about where on earth that could’ve come from. Harry spoke as if he wasn’t there when Louis listened to him pour his heart out in a café at almost midnight, like he wasn’t there when Louis took him home and bloody tucked him into bed. Which, Louis’ supposed he wasn’t, seeing as he doesn’t even remember it. Louis did say he’s forgettable, and he supposes Harry has just made that fact quite clear.

He can’t help but wonder what could be the reason for this regression back to the first Harry he met; the rude, unpleasant boy who Louis didn’t like one bit. Something must’ve triggered it, because Louis knows, he knows, that that boy in the room with them a minute ago, he wasn’t Harry, not the one Louis’ come to know and… and really, truly develop feelings towards. For now, Louis can only sit there, still, in silence, and wondering what the fuck has just happened.

Louis’ on the tube currently, watching the midday sun’s rays light up the inside of the carriage as he fiddles with his oyster card holder in his hands, wondering how long this journey is going to take. He’s not nervous, or anything, he’s just… He’s on his way to meet Will because despite everything, and despite feeling a bit shit, Louis knows he needs to end… whatever they are, Louis’ not even sure. They’ve been on a few dates, and they were nice, but they weren’t that exciting, and Louis, truly, is getting a bit bored. It’s also not fair to Will because, despite everything again, of course Louis still has feelings for Harry, because his head and his heart can’t ever seem to agree on a damn thing.

They’ve just travelled into a tunnel, and as Louis gazes out the window of the train at the sparks of electricity which come and go at intervals, he thinks about what happened a few days ago. Louis hadn’t seen Liam or Zayn, and definitely not Harry, the next day, or the day after that. Not for almost a week, actually. The more he thinks about what Harry said, the more he goes over in his mind how uncharacteristic of Harry it was, and the more confused he gets. Louis knows that Harry must know he cares about him on some level, he’d even told Louis he liked him, liked spending time with him. Louis remembers, (of course he remembers) it was after their solo studio session.
His thoughts are cut off by the tube arriving at his stop, he’s somewhere in Chiswick, that’s where Will had wanted to meet. He gets out at Turnham Green station, and sees the short, brown haired boy waiting for him by the florist display next to the entrance.

Louis hugs him hello, and feels nothing to be honest, not even a little inkling of a feeling. *Fuck,* Louis should have realised this before, should have bloody ended it ages ago, because how the fuck does he say to this decent guy in front of him that, *hi, by the way, while I was dating you, I sort of developed these incredibly intense feelings for someone else instead, and I’m terribly sorry, let me get the bill?* Louis’ not exactly an expert on great date etiquette, however he knows that that’s just not it in the slightest.

They go to a small brunch place, and Louis just orders some water, he’s not hungry, and he doesn’t really think he’s going to be here for long, either. Will gets the same, and they sit in silence for a bit, and there’s this weighty apprehensive mood to the air, and it feels like they’re both waiting for the other to say something.

Louis ends up being the one to bite the bullet. “So, Will, I just wanted to have a chat. I think, well, I think you’re a really great guy, and everything, but I just don’t really see this going anywhere,”

Louis fiddles with the fake flower that’s sitting on their tiny table, anything to not have to look Will in the eye and say this. It’s not that Louis’ rude, it’s that he’s just shit at confrontation, always has been. He gets nervous, and even though he doesn’t really feel anything for Will, it’s still awkward, and Louis would just like for the moment to be over as soon as possible.

“Oh, okay,” Will says, in such a chilled, no worries way, and Louis’ eyes dart towards him, and for a moment all he can think about is that he wishes he could have the same approach to his issues in his own life.

“Are you… that’s it?” Louis asks, incredulously, to Will, who’s smiling so sweetly and reassuringly, and Louis doesn’t know what he did to deserve this.

“Yeah, I mean, I guess I sort of knew this was coming. But I was being a bit selfish, because I do quite like you, so I guess I was sort of… pretending I didn’t notice that it was obvious that you weren’t into me nearly as much as I was into you.” Will says it so sheepishly, like he’s in any way guilty, and Louis just feels like utter shit. Why does he always fuck things up?

“Will, I’m really sorry, I should have ended it sooner, I didn’t meant to lead you on, or anything, not at all–” Louis tries to protest, but Will waves it off.

“Don’t worry about it, seriously. I’ll get over it. Been kinda preparing myself for it, anyway. And I understand, you obviously like Harry, so–” and wait, what?

“Sorry? What did you say?” Louis asks, incredulously, and a little in shock, because he certainly did not see that one coming at all.

Will’s smile just grows, though, and he leans forward in his seat across the table, “Louis, come on,” he says it accusingly, and knowingly, and with a smile, his eyebrows raised in jest. “It’s obvious you fancy him! You talk about him all the time. That’s sort of, all you talked about, really. How proud you are of him, how far you guys have come since that first day. Which was fine, because I love *The Cahoots,* you know I do, so it was kind of cool, I guess. And I’ve also, you know, seen you two together. Saw the way you looked at him, when I met him that one time. Saw the way he looked at you, too. It’s fine, honestly. You should go and be happy, it’s obvious your feelings are for him.”

Louis feels so positively blindsided by Will’s speech, he thinks he probably fish mouths for a full on minute before he can make his brain work long enough to form a coherent sentence in response.
“I did? I… fuck, I didn’t realise I was doing that, I’m so sorry, I…” Louis trails off, not really knowing where to go with his speech. Now, obviously Louis knows that Harry’s pretty much all he thinks about, but he hadn’t realised that he was all he spoke about, too. God, how embarrassing, he’s so bloody far gone and he didn’t even realise. He thought he knew the extent to his feelings for Harry, but evidently he didn’t.

“Louis, seriously, it’s fine. I get it, I’m not… angry, or anything, you don’t have to worry about that,” and Will is just so sweet, and so easy, and Louis wishes for a moment he could just like him instead, but then he remembers Harry, and everything about him, and casts that thought away as quickly as it materialises.

“Wow, Will, thank you, so much, for being so understanding, honestly I–” Louis’ in the middle of trying to think of a way to convey to Will how cool he’s being about all of this, when his phone goes off.

It’s lying face down on the table, where Louis had put it just after he’d sat at his seat. It’s probably Niall, asking him about going to the pub to watch the footie match later. He shoots Will an apologetic smile, and this whole moment feels eerily familiar to Louis.

Louis picks up his phone, and stares at the screen. It’s… definitely not who he expected.

Hi Louis, it’s Harry. I’d really like it if we could meet. I’d like to talk to you about some things, if you’ll let me. H.x

Louis feels his stomach drop at the words, a ball of nerves materialising inside him, and he sort of has no idea how to respond to this. He hasn’t heard from Harry at all, not since whatever that was in that meeting the other day. Louis had considered texting him a few times, but he’s not sure what he would have said. He’s not sure whether Harry would have wanted to hear from him, either. He’s so surprised, was almost sure that Harry didn’t want anything to do with him, after his declaration that Louis didn’t care.

“Is that him?” And oh, yes, Louis’ here with Will. God, Louis’ such a tosser.

“Shit, sorry, I feel like I keep doing that,” Louis apologises, but Will doesn’t seem to mind, “and yeah, that was him, actually, um. I was just a bit surprised, is all. Wasn’t expecting this text…”

“Is it important? I don’t mind if you need to leave,” God, Will is so bloody nice, and Louis doesn’t deserve it, but at the same time, he’s so intrigued by this mysterious text from Harry, Harry, who he hadn’t expected to hear from at all.

“I…” Louis’ got two options here; he could go and meet Harry, confusing, rude, but lovely Harry. He could see what he wants, maybe get a step closer to understanding him, maybe understand why he said what he said the other day, maybe finally get some answers. Or, he could ignore the text, and stay here, with nice Will. Suddenly it doesn’t seem like he does have two options after all.

Maybe the pause was answer enough, or maybe he could just read it on Louis’ face, like everyone else can, apparently, but Will tells him to, “Go, seriously, it’s fine,” with a wave, and after about a second of deliberation, that’s exactly what Louis does.

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It takes about 10 minutes to walk from Hammersmith Tube Station to get to the river. Louis knows this because he used to do it all the time when he was younger. He used to walk himself to Barnes and back, basking in the summer sunsets as a fresh-faced teen, having just moved to London for the
Harry had asked Louis to meet him at a pub near his house, that he’d described as tucked away in a little cobbled walkway by the river, and immediately, Louis knew that Harry was talking about a place called The Dove. It’s somewhere where Louis used to go while he was at Uni, with his mates, when he wanted to get away from the loud busyness of South-East London. He’d travel for ages on the tube to get there, but the atmosphere, and the pints, were always worth it. Along the river, this particular part actually, is one of Louis’ favourite places in London, but he barely comes here anymore after moving North. It’s funny that Harry should pick that particular pub, then. It’s a strange location choice, all things considered, but Louis had come to realise now that Harry has next to nothing normal about him.

So here Louis is now, about to walk into the pub and see Harry for the first time since that dreadful meeting. His palms are slightly sweaty, and he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t nervous. He’s just, so very confused at what Harry might want, or what he might say, especially after what he’d said before. But of course, of course Louis gave him the benefit of the doubt, is giving him it right now, because it’s Harry, and Louis’ come to realise that he’s just a little bit weak for Harry.

He walks through the entrance, not wanting to stall by buying a pint, or anything - he’s not sure he has the stomach to drink one, anyway. He makes his way towards the back of the pub, where he knows the outdoor terrace overlooking the river is, and where he’s almost sure Harry will be.

He sees Harry before Harry sees him, and, well. He’s glad it happens this way, and not the other way around, because it means Harry doesn’t see Louis quite literally lose his breath at the sight of him. He almost doesn’t notice the few empty glasses on the tables, remnants of dark drink still in dregs at the bottom. Almost, but he does. Louis makes a note of it for later, too occupied with the sight of Harry himself to think about his unhealthy drinking habits right now.

He can just see Harry’s side-profile, and he’s sitting in the corner, hidden almost, near the railing, probably watching the rowers as they train along the river below them. God, he’s so stunning, he really is. The setting sun is catching him so well; his face is glowing, haloed by the honey-coloured light. He’s wearing a hoodie pulled up over his head, tiny almost-curls escaping, looking so cosy and warm, and every bit the angel that Louis knows he is, all bright and light and beautiful.

Louis must’ve made a sound, or moved, or something, because one second he’s admiring Harry’s features so intensely, trying to capture this pretty picture in his mind so that he can always come back to it, and the next Harry’s gorgeous green, kind eyes that he’s missed so much are locked onto his own, wide and lit up with surprise, and something else, Louis can’t quite tell.

“Lou,” Harry breathes out, and it’s like all the tension between them dissipates with one word. Harry’s once-tense shoulders relax, and a slow, shy smile forms on his face. “You came.” And Harry looks so relieved when he says this, disbelief laced with happiness clear on his features, like he didn’t quite believe Louis would show up. As if Louis could possibly stay away from him, not after Harry had asked to see him specifically, despite everything.

“Yeah…yeah.” Louis’ standing there, staring at this boy, wondering what on earth is running through his mind. He always seems to be wondering that, actually.

The light is on Louis, and next to Harry his eyes are fixed on the horizon; he can see the sun as it sets. Rosy pinks, that almost match the colour of Harry’s cheeks perfectly, are abundant, and golden rays that remind Louis of the flecks in Harry’s eyes are painting the sky, too. In that moment, Louis can’t help but wonder how he got so lucky as to be standing here with two incredibly beautiful sights in front of him, right next to each other.
“Please, can we– can I please explain?” Harry rushes out, almost stuttering, out of nerves, or something… Louis isn’t sure. None of this makes sense, but he sits down opposite Harry all the same. Harry’s eager eyes are full of apprehension, maybe, and although he seems more relaxed, that damn crease is in his brow, again, and Louis wants to reach up with his thumb and ever so gently soften it. He wants to, but he doesn’t.

“Yeah…yeah, okay,” Louis repeats, slowly, measuring every word that falls from his lips, because this is all a little overwhelming. He’s seeing Harry for the first time after a week of thinking he wants nothing to do with him, and he’s getting this sort of… elated reaction to Louis being there, meeting him, and Louis’ just very confused, still, and he hopes that Harry’s about to give him some answers.

Harry wrings his hands on the table, and Louis notices an empty pint glass or two resting on it. He decides not to think about it, though, about that issue, not right now. Instead, Louis concentrates on Harry’s shoulders heaving, as he takes a few deep breaths. Harry’s nails are black today, and chipped, all messy at the edges. He looks a bit of a mess in general, actually, now that Louis is getting a closer look at him. His wild eyes are smudgy at the edges and his movements are erratic. Louis can feel the nervous energy seeping off him from across the table; it’s tangible.

“You, um, you came so quickly. I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything, when I texted,” Harry begins, ducking his head as he speaks. Louis can’t help but notice how slightly sweet the gesture is, even now. “Didn’t really think about that, until now. Sorry,” Harry folds into himself even more, words sheepish and low, and God, how the fuck could Louis tell him that he didn’t have to think longer than a second to decide that he was coming, without sounding pathetic or desperate? Louis will add that to the long list of problems he’s facing right now.

“No, no, I…” Louis starts, and Harry’s still looking down, fiddling with the edge of the table, and the slight breeze is making his little curls dance in the wind; Louis’ a bit captivated by it. “I was with, um, Will, you know–”

“No, Harry.” Harry looks up then, at Louis’ slightly desperate tone, finally, eyes even wider than before. The furrow in his brow is gone, too, which Louis is thankful for. “He’s not my boyfriend. He never was. We’re… there’s nothing between us.” Louis is focusing hard on getting the words out, at a normal rate, but it’s rather difficult to do this when he’s watching Harry, whose features have smoothened out, and whose eyes are bright with a sudden curiosity, eyes that are watching Louis’ lips as he speaks, all the while Louis’ trying his best not to read too much into it all.

“Yeah.” Louis doesn’t know what else to say, doesn’t really know how they got onto this topic, all he knows is that it feels important to him for Harry to know this fact, even if it makes no difference to Harry.

“I–,” Harry begins, eyes locked with Louis’ again now, but Louis’ come here for a reason, not to discuss inconsequential non-boyfriends.

“You said you have an explanation for me?” Louis asks, then. He tries to come across as slightly cold, or detached, or hardened, or something to make it less obvious how much he cares about the answer, but the way the words spill out of his mouth betray all notions of being subtle.

“Yeah, yes. I do, I’m…,” Harry trails off as he goes back to his fiddling again, picking at his
fingernails, evidently nervous. Louis almost thinks he’s lost his train of thought, or zoned out, or something, and is about to prompt him, but then Harry speaks, softly. “Do you remember when I told you about that person I knew? The person I’d… the person I’d lost?” Edie, of course Louis remembers. It was the moment Louis first realised he was somehow getting through to Harry, uncovering new parts to him.

“Yes, Edie.” Louis lets out a breath, and he doesn’t really know where this conversation is going, but he’s come to never really expect anything predictable with Harry, knows the boy is full of surprises.

“Well, I know I didn’t really tell you the, um, full story? Before? About her, I mean,” Harry’s eyes flicker back and forth from Louis’ eyes to his own fidgeting fingers, as if he can’t quite cope with extended contact. Louis almost chuckles; he can definitely relate to that. “And I’d really like to, if you’d let me? I think it'll, um, hopefully explain a few things,” and Harry looks so hesitant, so timid, looking at Louis with such unguarded eyes, as if him telling Louis more about his life and his past would be anything other than music to Louis’ ears. This is what he’s wanted, all along, for Harry to open up more to him, to understand Harry, and Harry finally seems like he’s willing to do it.

“Of course, of course you can tell me Harry. I’d– I’d really love to know, actually.” Louis responds, encouragingly, eagerly, because right now he’s abandoned all attempts at trying to conceal his interest in Harry, attempts which were never very successful in the first place, anyway.

“Do you…” he starts, slightly wavering and quiet. He clears his throat, and starts again, “D’you know the name Edith Valentine?” Harry inquires then, open expression still in place.

“Yeah, of course. Everyone knows her.” Louis furrows his brow, confused at this starting topic, and at the fact that Harry even has to ask him this. Everyone who’s anyone in the music industry knows that name. Everyone in the western world knows that name, really. Edith Valentine was a rock legend; anyone with any basic music knowledge would know this and would agree.

Edith Valentine was in a band originally, Louis remembers, and they were huge. One of the most successful mixed gender music groups ever. Grew from starting out playing gigs as teenagers in Manchester, to selling out stadium tours in the early seventies, and then she went solo quickly after. Louis was basically raised on that era of music, remembers growing up listening to her records, his mum insisting on playing them every morning in the kitchen before he went to school. He also remembers his mum being heartbroken when it was reported that Edith Valentine had overdosed a few years ago, barely sixty years old.

Louis focuses back on Harry, eyes no doubt full of questions. “What about her?”

Harry takes a breath, face measured and calm, and responds in earnest.

“Edith was… well, Edith was Aunt Edie.” And oh. Edie… Oh, it makes sense to Louis now, why Harry would be evasive before. Louis’ surprised he didn’t guess this sooner. He’d never known Edith Valentine to be called Edie, but. It’s not exactly a stretch. Louis’ realisations are interrupted by Harry continuing.

“She was actually my godmother, had known my dad as a kid, but my sister and I knew her as Auntie. No one, um. No one really knows this… publicly, I mean. We were– we had a very close relationship, she was like my second mother. I looked up to her a lot, she’s kinda the reason I wanted to do… all of this. Wanted to become a rockstar just like my Auntie Edie.”

Harry stops then to chuckle, shaking his head to himself, face wistful. Louis is speechless, trying to keep up with all of this new information, but he doesn’t want to ask questions, doesn’t want to interrupt under the fear that Harry may change his mind about revealing this all to him.
“It’s silly, I know,” Harry murmurs softly, rubbing mindlessly at his eyes, further smudging his already ruined liner.

It’s not silly, it’s sweet and endearing, him wanting to copy his godmother. Louis has to bite his lip to stop himself from saying so aloud, because he wants to tell him this, tell him never to think that being inspired by someone you idolise is silly, but he doesn’t. He sits and waits in silence, because he knows, he knows, now, that this moment here is important, that this side of Harry he’s seeing is rare and delicate, and he wants to be able to preserve every second of it in his memory.

“Anyway, I admired her, hero-worshipped her really. Every time I’d see her as a kid, whenever she came off tour, I’d ask her to sing me a new song, or tell me a new story about a place she’d been. Whenever she’d look after me, she’d take me to her house, and she always made sure I was happy and entertained by an instrument of some description, usually. Or she’d leave me to myself, and just let me listen to endless vinyls that she’d picked up on the road.

“I grew up surrounded by this Rock ‘n’ Roll lifestyle, was sort of exposed to it from a young age, I guess, and I was always so fascinated by it. And, I guess with that came exposure to hard drugs and alcohol from a young age too. Came with the territory, really. Edie protected me though, from that, always. For as long as she could, anyway.

“As I got older, she’d take me over to her friend’s houses, and let them teach me all types of shit. How to play bass guitar, how to write and read music, even how to fucking roll a spliff the right way, regardless of how old I was at the time,” he pauses there, smiling fondly to himself, out of place in comparison to his already glistening eyes, that travel their way back up to Louis’ a moment later.

“She taught me everything. Every instrument I play now, she’d spend hours and hours of her rare free time coaching me, and she really fucking cared too. Would always call me from continents away, asking if I’d been keeping up with my practice. She was so fucking great. She helped to make me feel comfortable in my own skin too. Was always my voice of encouragement. I felt so free to be myself, felt allowed to be myself. I was never really close to my mum and dad growing up, they were always so busy. So it was kind of up to Edie to be my parent figure, which is fucking hilarious when you think about the crazy shit she must’ve been getting up to in those years.” Harry’s breath catches, and Louis feels his own do the same at the sound.

“’Fuck it, Harry,’ she’d always say. Told me I should wear whatever the fuck I wanted to wear, love whoever I wanted, wear nail varnish and eyeliner if that was something I wanted to do. Just fuck it, that life’s too short to care about what other people think. She’d say, ‘Don’t give a shit about them Harry, because they don’t deserve it. Just be who you are, and the right people will still love you all the same’. As a kid growing up, being sort of shy and lost and confused, most of the time, that was something I really bloody needed to hear.”

Harry takes another breath then, a deeper one, and Louis is quite literally on the edge of his seat. He can’t believe Harry is telling him all this, revealing it all to Louis. He’s almost forgotten where they are, what time it is, everything. He’s utterly enthralled by what Harry’s saying, and is semi-aware of a niggling feeling in the pit of his stomach because he knows, he knows how this story ends.

“When Edie died—” Harry’s eyes immediately drop from Louis’, his fists clenching on the tabletop, a quickly deteriorating paper napkin tight in his grip. He’s ripping it to shreds currently, the tense topic evidently affecting him.

Louis doesn’t think when he places one of his own hands on top of Harry’s restless ones, in an attempt to offer some comfort; he just does it. He hears Harry’s breath catch at his touch, feels his hands immediately still, flinching only slightly before relaxing. They’re so incredibly soft, Harry’s hands, so warm, and such a contradiction to the callous character Harry seemed to be playing the
other day. He strokes his thumb up and down Harry’s knuckles, trying to settle Harry’s quickening
breaths, and at this point Louis’ body seems to be acting completely of its own volition. In any other
circumstance, Louis would be questioning what the fuck he’s doing touching Harry’s hand in such
an intimate way, why the fuck he’s allowed himself to, especially when he has no alcohol to blame.
Wondering even more why Harry’s letting him; if it means anything. But then he hears Harry’s
breaths slow, sees his shoulders relax, tension easing. It feels natural, almost, like they’ve done this a
million times before. Like their hands were made specially, with this particular moment in mind, just
to fit each other’s. Louis gives him a soothing squeeze for a beat, and then finally lets go.

Harry looks back up then, eyes shining with unshed tears. Louis thinks he feels a crack form in his
heart at the sight.

“I was just… utterly absolutely heartbroken, when she died. I looked up to her more than anyone. I
couldn’t understand it, couldn’t process it in my mind. I was distraught at first and then— and then
they told us it was a suicide, and I just… lost it. Completely. And that’s around the time I got really
into drugs, I guess, and every night would sort of… end in a blackout, and, and… I was really self-
destructive, back then,” you still are, Louis wants to say, yearns to say, remembering the night they’d
had at the club, and all the other times Harry’s exhibited that sort of behaviour, but he holds his
tongue.

A lone tear slips from Harry’s eye, then, and Louis wants to do nothing more than wipe it away
himself, in the hopes that maybe with it would go some of Harry’s anguish. This time he ignores his
instincts telling him not to, telling him it’s a stupid idea, and just bloody does it.

He leans forward, and reaches up, slowly, and tenderly swipes the tear away from where it’s rested
atop Harry’s cheekbone. Harry’s skin is smooth and soft under Louis’ calloused thumb, and Harry’s
wet eyelids flutter shut at the touch. He lets his hand rest on Harry’s cheek, for a beat, so lightly; he
can barely feel it, only the warmth radiating from Harry’s face giving its’ placement away.

Louis lets out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding, and Harry seems to do the same, eyes
opening slowly, like he’s just awoken from a dream. Louis reluctantly removes his hand, and feels
his face heating up from what he’s just done, and casts his eyes towards the tabletop, instead of at
Harry’s own widened ones. The intimacy in the gesture seemed fine in the moment, it
seemed right, but now he’s getting insecure again, wondering if Harry thought it may have been
inappropriate, or strange.

He chances a look back up at Harry’s face, then, but instead of it portraying an expression that Louis
doesn’t want to see, Harry’s giving him this look that almost makes him lose his breath again. It’s so
reverent, so in awe, and Louis feels relief course through him because he’s the same. Harry’s plush,
pillowy lips are slightly parted, and Louis can’t help but think about how soft and sweet they look.
For a moment, it’s as if it’s just the two of them, on their own plane of existence, and it’s so heavy
and intense that Louis feels a bit light-headed at it all.

Harry starts a bit, then, and clears his throat, intent on finishing. “I was a mess. I was a mess because
I couldn’t understand why my incredible, insanely vivacious, fucking cool Aunt Edie would take her
own life. And, mainly, why she would just leave me here, alone, to fend for myself in this fucking
ruthless industry.” Tears continue to pool in Harry’s eyes and escape down his face, his supple skin
shiny and wet with them. Louis doesn’t reach out again. Harry’s throat seems to have constricted
with held-back sobs, his voice is coming out tinny and thin through raw, bitten lips.

“We were a team, and I counted on her, and she left me.” Harry squeezes his eyes shut, as if he’s
trying to block out a memory or emotion, like he’s trying to rid himself of whatever he’s feeling. It’s
too late for that, though, he’s practically just bared his soul. Louis can tell this isn’t an often
occurrence. He’s lost someone so close to him, so incredibly close, and Louis can’t imagine what that’s like, how in pain Harry must’ve been, must still be in, to have someone you love so much ripped away from you like that, with almost no warning, it seems.

“I just—” Harry’s openly weeping now, tears streaming, shoulders shaking. His silent sobs and heaving breaths are being carried away by the wind, and suddenly Louis sees his own vision swimming, feels his own throat tightening, is suddenly feeling so incredibly much for this heartbroken boy sitting in front of him. “I, I miss h-her, so. Fucking. Much! Every damn day of my life, and I, I would give anything, absolutely anything, to just get one. Just one of those days back,” Harry sobs, having lost the ability to even talk properly, his cries interjecting his speech, and he looks so incredibly miserable, sitting there, curled into himself, eyes pooling with tears, bottom lip quivering and chest heaving, and arms wrapped around himself in some sort of self-soothing position.

Louis sits there, unmoving, in shock, maybe, because God, Louis’ never felt so much for one person, has never felt so sad and hurt on behalf of someone else. He feels helpless, wishes he could bring Edie back, or something, anything to make Harry smile again, that’s all he wants right now. This feeling, that he has for Harry, it’s so unfamiliar and terrifying and all-encompassing, all at the same time, and Louis can’t get away from it; he doesn’t want to get away from it, not right now.

Their eyes meet, finally, from across the table, and under sooty smudged eyeliner and thick eyelashes, Louis can see the pain in Harry’s up close, can almost feel it, gazing into them. Those glowing, golden-green eyes are tainted with sadness, and it’s not right, it’s not right, and Louis desperately wants to fix it, wants to make it all disappear, but he doesn’t know how.

“Harry, I’m so–” he says then, because he doesn’t know what else to say, but he needs to say something, to this weeping, withering boy in front of him.

Harry cuts him off, though, mumbling, wiping a hand down his face, “No, I’m fine. Shit. Sorry. Shouldn’t be crying, it’s stupid. Sorry I told you all that, it’s not your burden to have. This wasn’t the point, of this story, anyway, the point is…” Harry trails off, and Louis’ speechless. It’s not your burden to have, either, he wants to say. It’s not stupid that you’re upset, or that you told me about it. Louis doesn’t though, just sits and waits, pity in his expression and what he hopes is sympathy in his eyes.

They sit opposite each other like that, for a minute, or maybe longer, Louis can’t really tell. Gazes wandering away from each other, just the sound of their low breathing to accompany them. Louis spends his time then trying not to think about how pretty Harry looks when he cries.

Harry looks up again, eyes soft and shiny but determined, “The point is, I—” he takes a deep, weary breath, and seems to think about something for a minute. “It was the anniversary of her death, last week. That day at the studio, actually. And I was upset, and frustrated, and angry, and I took it out on you, and it wasn’t fair, not in the slightest,” Harry rushes out, all at once, and Louis tries his hardest to keep up with it all. “And I’m so sorry, Louis. I’m so sorry. You didn’t deserve that at all.”

Before Louis can say anything in response, though, Harry is up and out of his chair, and rounding the table, and he stands next to Louis, arms slightly widening, and Louis feels his own breath catch, again. Harry’s movements are delicate and cautious, as if he’s not quite sure if this is what Louis wants. God, as if Louis would ever refuse being held by Harry, as if he’d ever have the willpower to.

Louis stands up, and steps forward, tenderly, slowly, but that’s all the confirmation that Harry needs, it seems, because not a moment later, Louis finds himself wrapped up in Harry’s soft, strong embrace, and he feels so comfortable here, so warm, and, really, he’d live in Harry’s arms if he could.
Louis feels Harry’s arms fold gently over his back, holding tight and sure, and *fuck*, it still doesn’t make sense, none of this kind of reaction makes *sense*. Not in regards to the last time they saw each other, he thought Harry hated him, for Christ’s sake, and now he’s just told Louis absolutely everything, but Louis still doesn’t know why. In the moment, though, this precious moment, Louis doesn’t care, he really doesn’t, he just wraps his arms around Harry’s waist and holds on just as tightly. His chin is resting on Harry’s shoulder, and Harry’s nuzzled his nose into Louis’ neck, and Louis can feel Harry’s warm, tiny breaths on him, and he goes light-headed at the feeling, can feel a shiver begin to run down his spine, and it’s all so addictive; he wants *this* Harry, he’s been craving *this* Harry.

“I’m so sorry, Lou,” Harry whispers, apologising again, so reverently, so softly, so sadly, almost like it’s a secret, and Louis’ reaction is to just hold on a little bit tighter to him. “S’just that… I just… I do this all the time, this sort of thing. Every time,” and his voice sounds so desperate, so regretful, right next to Louis’ ear, that Louis can’t help but ask the question that will hopefully give him the answer he’s been wanting.

“Do what, H?” Louis whispers back, voice dry and quiet; it’s the first thing he’s said in a while.

“Push people away. People I… People I care about. Or begin to care about,” Harry sighs then, and Louis can feel his muscles relaxing under his fingertips, and he’s so glad Harry can’t see his face, his reaction to those words, because he’s almost certain he wouldn’t be able to cover the shock and confusion at them. He hopes his body isn’t tensing up too noticeably under Harry’s hold. Harry… Harry’s just told Louis that he *cares* about him, and Louis can’t quite believe what he’s hearing. Doesn’t know what it means, how deeply Harry is talking, if it’s in the same way Louis cares for him, or… probably not like that, actually, Louis realises. He needs to stop letting himself get his hopes up with Harry.

Harry pulls away then, lets his arms drop from Louis gradually, and Louis does the same, but they stay in the same close proximity as they were, neither of them quite ready to move too far away from each other just yet.

“S’why I said, those things, before,” Harry’s emotion-riddled gaze flickers between Louis’ features, and Louis is trying his hardest to school his expression. “About you not caring, I–” Harry stops, takes a breath, hooded eyes still locked on Louis’. “That was so cruel of me, because I *know* you care, Lou. You care so much. You’ve helped me so much. But it scared me, and I said what I said because… because sometimes I feel like I’m fucking *cursed*, and I’m used to losing people close to me, and… and I knew our time together was coming to an end, at the studio, and I realised I was sort of beginning to rely on you a bit, I think, and I wasn’t sure–,” he takes another breath, voice going smaller and words coming out on an exhale, “I guess my thinking was that it hurts less making someone walk away, by any means necessary, rather than having to do it myself. But that’s just me being selfish, I think.” Harry’s voice is so tender and feeling, and it’s so overwhelming to Louis, who seems to have lost the ability of speech in the past few minutes. He swallows, finally, and finds his voice.

“I… think I understand, now, but…,” Louis starts, and then tries to ignore the pit of nerves in his stomach as he says the next thing. “You weren’t going to lose me, Harry. Not if you didn’t want to,” he chances, hoping that he’s understood what Harry’s saying correctly, hoping the sincerity he feels is coming across in his voice. He’s also hoping Harry understands that, if it were solely up to Louis, losing contact with Harry, even after their time working together ended, would never happen. Louis had even acknowledged this as a likelihood, had accepted that them not really talking after would be pretty much inevitable, because Louis is *Louis*, and Harry is *Harry*, and that’s just the way it seemed like it was going to go.
Harry’s eyes widen at what Louis’ said, such pure relief flooding his features; Louis’ never seen anything like it. “Oh… okay,” and his lips curl ever so slightly as the words leave them, a soft, pleased smile making its way onto his face. “Good. Because I don’t want to lose you, Lou.”

And there’s a difference between deciphering the gist of what Harry’s saying from disconnected sentences, and hearing him say the words so simply and plainly like this. Louis doesn’t know how to react, is so overwhelmed by this feeling for Harry, and the fact that Harry doesn’t want to lose him, and their close proximity, how he can feel Harry’s warm breath on his face, and how pretty Harry’s eyes look this close up, all shining and smiling and full.

“And I’m sorry about the other night, too. I know you took me home and we never really talked about it, because I didn’t remember, and I– I’m really grateful for that. Thank you, you didn’t have to,” Harry adds, rushedly.

"I wanted to," Louis says, without thinking, because it seems like he doesn’t really do much of that when it comes to Harry, not anymore.

There’s a beat of silence between them, where Harry’s just staring at Louis, mouth slightly parted, eyes bright, and Louis’ sure he has the same exact expression on his own face.

"You’re so good, Lou," No, you are, Harry, and you don’t even realise it, "And I was horrible to you before–"

"It doesn’t matter now, H," Louis cuts in, because it doesn’t, not really, not now that Louis understands why Harry’s mood was so awful, and why he said what he said. Then again, Louis would probably forgive Harry for anything, really.

"It does, I– just, thank you, Lou. For believing in me, and... and letting me tell you all my shit." Harry’s words are so determined, desperate to show his gratitude, and Louis would never deny him that. God, Harry doesn’t realise that it’s the simplest thing for Louis, to put his faith in him, and listen to him talk; could do it for days, even.

"I’m just… glad you felt you could talk to me about it. Trust me enough," Louis breathes, trying not to make it too obvious how incredible it makes him feel that Harry actually chose to speak to Louis, of all people, about personal stuff, stuff he hasn’t even told his older friends. Harry takes a breath then, and his words leave his lips like a secret, all soft, and barely there, "I do trust you, Lou."

And then Harry gives him that look, that same look that Louis hadn’t been able to decipher before, hadn’t really been letting himself decipher. Harry’s looking at Louis with such wonder in his eyes, such reverence, and it almost feels like… but no, it can’t be that, Harry can’t feel the same way towards Louis, it’s– it’s just not possible, there’s no way, surely there isn’t? Harry is… Harry is so much, all at once, and he came into Louis’ life like a storm, but instead of destroying everything in his path, he just managed to destroy whatever walls that were wrapped so tightly and so securely around Louis’ heart. And Louis had resigned himself to Harry not feeling the same, never feeling the same, even, because that’s just always what happens with Louis, and it’s fine, that was never the issue; but looking up at Harry now, at the way he’s looking at Louis, so softly, and tenderly, Louis actually… isn’t so sure.

And then, and then, Harry leans impossibly closer, eyes going hazy, and Louis isn’t even sure if he’s
breathing anymore, isn’t sure if he’s even there, this all feels like a dream, like he’s going to wake up suddenly and none of this would have happened, because it’s all so unbelievable. His eyes flutter shut at the feel of Harry’s soft, sweet breath on his lips, getting closer by the second, and fuck, this can’t be real, Louis’ getting lightheaded, can feel a ball of anxiety just growing by the second within himself, can’t believe it actually seems like Harry may be about to kiss him, never would have even imagined this happening, not today, not ever.

The moment balances precariously between them, and Louis can feel the ghost of Harry’s lips on his own, and it’s so close, so tangible—

And then, suddenly, the moment drops.

Louis’ made a choked off noise, trying to catch his breath, probably, because of course he bloody does, of course his body decides to betray him at the most inopportune moment.

He releases his laboured breath, and the mood is broken; he feels Harry’s presence leave their close proximity, and opens his eyes to Harry, who looks as surprised as Louis feels. The unsaid question hangs in the air, were we just… about to…? But neither of them say anything, just stay gazing at each other as the wind wraps around them on that terrace for a minute, or an hour, Louis can’t tell, is too captivated by those eyes, the precious pale green gems that he can’t possibly look away from, can’t even force himself to look away from.

“Um, sorry, I–,” Louis starts, finally, needing to say something, anything at all, to break whatever tension that has built up between them in the past few moments.

“No, no… I, um. It’s fine,” Harry quickly answers, giving Louis a small smile, and his cheeks are all flushed and pretty, matching his rosy lips, which Louis’ eyes seem to have permanently travelled to.

Louis takes a tiny step back, creating some more distance between them - takes a shallow breath, too. He shakes himself a bit, trying to get his fuzzy thoughts into some semblance of an order. He stands there, trying to process what just almost happened, can hardly believe how much he wanted it, how much he’d craved the feeling of Harry’s lips on his, without even realising it. He can’t help but mirror Harry’s smile, though, too, and let out a breathy laugh when he focuses on Harry’s face, and notices, again, how stunning he looks today. He also tries to push down whatever distant, anxious feeling that’s trying to crawl it’s way up his insides, leaving it to deal with another time.

“So, I, wasn’t, um, entirely certain that you were going to meet me, here, today,” Harry starts, nervous laughter trickling through his words, “So I, uh, I actually have a meeting to get to, about touring, I think, I wasn’t really listening when they told me. I’m already late, actually,” he glances at his watch, quickly, and then his eager eyes come back up to meet Louis’ own. His dimples are out, and he looks so happy, and Louis can’t help but feel the same at the sight.

“Oh, uh, that’s– that’s okay, Harry, don’t worry,” Louis can’t even be disappointed at this, can’t get the smile to leave his face. He’s.. he feels all light, and tingly, and warm inside, and Louis doesn’t know exactly what it means but it feels good, and so he can’t really find it within himself to be at all put out that just a minute after making up with Harry, they have to part ways again.

“Okay, I’m sorry I have to leave, like, straight after…,” he trails off, not sure what to refer to it as, whatever has just happened, and Louis isn’t sure, either.

“Like I said, don’t worry about it. I’m sure I’ll, um, see you soon enough. We’ve got that party, the one celebrating finishing the album in a few days, don’t we?” Louis reassures, a relieved feeling spreading within him, happy that they seemed to have figured it out, happy that he finally, finally seems to have figured Harry out.
“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.” Harry says then, still beaming, with his gorgeous dimples on full display, and Louis gets all dizzy at the sight; Harry is just… so lovely. “Okay, well,” Harry continues, gesturing over his shoulder, towards the exit of the pub, but making no move to leave, “I better go, then.”

“Alright,” and Louis can’t help himself at what he says next, not at all, and doesn’t even care about the consequences of saying this sober, “Goodbye, lovely Harry.”

Harry seems to melt on the spot at Louis’ words, face going all dreamy and eyes glazing over, and Louis… Louis can’t even think about what that reaction could mean, because it sort of scares him, quite frankly, how quickly he’s been able to garner this kind of a reaction from Harry; the kind of reaction that, before, Harry would only get so easily from Louis.

“Goodbye, Lou,” Harry responds, shyly, the tips of his cheeks flushing a delicate pink. He turns away then, and walks off slowly, leaving Louis breathless in his wake.
Over the next couple of days, Louis thinks about Harry, of course, because that seems to be his primary pastime now. It’s mid-afternoon on a Saturday and the party is tonight, the one celebrating the wrapping up of *The Cahoots*’ album, and Louis’ sat on his sofa, mindlessly watching the telly as he goes over everything in his head. He thinks about the almost-kiss with Harry, and how *alive* it made him feel, having Harry’s sweet breath prickle at his own lips, how incredibly unreal it seemed. Louis realises how much he’d wanted it, craved it, how much he had *been* craving it. At the same time, though, the more he thinks about it, the more he realises how fucking terrified this all makes him.

It’s just that, before, it never really felt real; the idea of having anything with Harry, of *being* anything with Harry. But the way Harry had looked at him made Louis realise that his unrequited feelings perhaps weren’t so unrequited, and that thought alone makes sparks of anxiety shoot through him like bullets. It's the fact that he'd never entertained the notion of Harry ever liking him back, so he'd never had to worry about that or the consequences of it, but now, as he's remembering the way Harry had looked at Louis, whilst the wind was whipping around them, like he was the most precious thing in the world, while he leaned in to maybe, probably kiss him, it’s all catching up to Louis, and he feels a bit overwhelmed, to say the least.

Louis’ always been careful with his heart, is the thing; never really let anyone in, and that was *fine*, it was the way he operated. Louis constantly feared showing any kind of weakness or vulnerability, and wearing your heart on your sleeve is a sure fire way to get it broken, and Louis knows that, has seen it happen time and time again, all around him as he’s gotten older. But Harry... Harry has somehow wiggled his way in there, and he won't bloody budge, and Louis is fucking terrified because Harry is *sometimes* erratic, and he *sometimes* has mood swings, and he *sometimes* has blackouts and *definitely* has an alcohol and drug problem and Louis knows this, he does, but he also knows that Harry's *always* lovely, and really, he’s known that for a while. The thing is though, despite that, maybe it's not *enough*. Louis is scared, he’ll admit it, because what if he gives his heart to Harry and Harry isn’t careful with it? What if Louis ends up getting hurt, like he has before, but worse, and then what? He’s not prepared for that, has never been prepared for that, because he’s never willingly put himself in a position like this, a vulnerable position, where he could get hurt; not until now.

And also, *also*, Louis can’t forget that this could be difficult, right? A situation like this, where he’s so brash about his evident feelings for Harry. Because Louis knows, everyone knows it seems, that Harry isn’t well, not really. Someone who has blackouts every time they go out and takes drugs to feel interesting, for Christ’s sake, and all that fucking bullshit Harry had told him, and never knows when to stop - that’s not *normal*, and Louis knows this, too.

Louis’ told himself from almost the start that he’s wanted to help Harry, eventually, maybe, if he’d let him, because for some reason, Harry had chosen Louis to talk to about his personal stuff, about his issues, and the death of his relative, and why he’s a little bit fucked up. He’d chosen Louis to tell these things to over even some of his older friends, and fuck, that has to mean *something*. Louis has
somehow got through to Harry, in a way that was rare, apparently, and he can’t take it for granted. And the fact is, Louis can’t throw that away, that pure trust that Harry has put in Louis, and so by telling Harry how he feels, or doing something stupid like that, no matter how Harry may feel in return, it doesn’t matter, it could still fuck everything up, surely it will, won’t it? Yes, he’s almost sure it will, which is exactly what Louis doesn’t want to do. Because by telling Harry how he feels, he could confuse him, or something, probably, and fuck, Louis’ just positive that it won’t end well, okay? What Louis wants to do, what he’s wanted to do for a while, is help Harry get better, maybe, if he can, because Harry has such a beautiful, yet pained soul, and Louis wants it to be just beautiful, and only beautiful. Helping Harry is at the top of his priorities, and he can suppress his feelings, it’s fine, he’s used to it, because they can wait, but he fears that perhaps Harry’s mental wellness, or lack of it, can’t.

The club where the album party is being held is dark and hazy, every room full to the brim with bodies bustling about, all under some kind of influence, whether it’s from the alcohol or the atmosphere. Louis’ just arrived with Niall, and they’ve swiftly made their way to get some drinks, no special treatment this time, it seems. Although, it is an open bar, so Louis can’t really complain. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t nervous about seeing Harry tonight, and maybe his current urge to down a shot has something to do with that. It just feels like something’s shifted between them, like their dynamic has changed, and Louis doesn’t quite know how to act, feels more self-conscious than he has in a while.

Niall speaks up while Louis’ in the middle of downing his second shot, “You alright, lad? You look a bit pale in the face tonight.”

“’M fine, thanks,” he responds, and turns around and leans against the bar in what he hopes is a casual stance. He’s facing out into the club, eyes searching over Niall’s shoulder for nothing (or no-one) in particular. “Just, uh, ‘ave you seen Harry about yet?” Okay, so perhaps he is looking for one person specifically. Sue him.

“Ah, so that’s what this is about then? You worried about seeing him since your little date at the pub?” Louis isn’t looking at Niall, but the smirk in his voice is unmissable. Louis rolls his eyes; he knew telling Niall about meeting Harry the other day would be a bad idea in hindsight.

“Nialler, pipe down, you know that’s not what it was,” Louis’ eyes continue to roam as he speaks, only vaguely aware of Niall standing off to his side somewhere. “We just talked. Worked things out. Was nice, like I said. I just haven’t seen him in a few days, and I’m wondering if he’s here yet, is that such a crime?”

“Whatever you say, Tommo,” Niall chuckles, and Louis fixes him with a look then, as piercing as he can muster whilst his bloodstream is already swimming in alcohol.

“Oh shut up,” Louis grumbles, sick of Niall’s antics. He feels his cheeks slightly heat up, though, and casts his face to the floor in an attempt to not give his best mate the satisfaction. Jesus, just the mere mention of Harry’s name is enough now, apparently.

“Hey, maybe over there,” Niall says then, voice slightly further than before, and Louis lifts his head up, follows Niall’s eyeline to whatever he’s looking at.

Through the gloominess of the room, and the numerous people between him and the other side of the club, Louis can slightly make out three very familiar figures ducked together, all happy expressions and languid movements, arms draped over one another. He smiles to himself, they’re such children, he thinks, fondly, as he watches them. Harry looks up, then, from where he’s sandwiched between
Zayn and Liam, and really, Louis doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to the disarming beauty that this boy possesses. It almost takes Louis’ breath away, again, because that’s what the sight of Harry seems to do to him now. Louis feels his features softening, feels a smile creeping it’s way onto his face, as him and Niall gravitate towards the other boys, and even through the dark, he thinks he sees Harry’s expression mirror his own. He tries not to let himself blush for a second time in a space of five minutes, but it’s proving to be quite difficult when Harry’s just there, looking at him like that.

“Alright boys?” Louis hears Niall say, as they finally come to a stop opposite their friends. They’re standing on some kind of raised platform in the corner of the club, where there’s a bit of space away from the crowd of people, all from the studio and label (and friends of friends, Louis’ assuming) dancing and singing rather off-key, on the floor behind them. For a second, Louis remembers the last time they were all in this situation, and how the evening ended, and finds himself praying that Nick person wasn’t able to make it to this particular party. Louis would enjoy not having to take Harry home again… well, not in the same way as before, at least.

“Yeah, good. Nice to see you,” Harry speaks up then, in response to Niall’s question, but he’s just looking right at Louis, and fuck, he’s so fucking beautiful, even just in this lowly lit room, and Louis can tell that, if there’s some kind of creator up there, they must’ ve spent extra time on Harry, surely, or perhaps he’s a demigod or something, because this kind of beauty can’t be natural, it can’t. He’s wearing an unbuttoned black sheer shirt, for Christ’s sake, tattoos on full display, two little sparrows that Louis would just adore to trace the lines of with his tongue. He’s also got these sinfully tight stripy monochrome trousers on that make his legs look even longer than they already are, and Louis has to give himself a long moment to take it all in. Harry’s voice registers then, and it’s all low and lazy, and syrupy sweet, matches the gorgeous little dimples appearing on his face, and just the sound of it is enough to relax Louis from having an actual mental breakdown at just the sight of Harry alone.

“Yeah… yeah, you too,” Louis says then, on an exhale, because he realises a response should probably have been offered a little while ago, but he supposes it’s better late than never. He smiles shyly up at Harry, and Harry’s giving him that bloody look again, like Louis’ made of gold dust or something, and it’s equally exciting and terrifying for Louis. For now, though, the alcohol’s telling him to just embrace it, let it happen, and so he just does, just stands there and feels the warmth of Harry’s gaze overcome him, and fixes Harry with a look which he hopes conveys his own feelings similarly.

“Uh, anyway, congrats on the album, lads!” Niall chuckles, and Louis can feel his eyes on him, his amusement no doubt due to the airy way Louis’ words came out. “Can’t believe it’s all done already.”

“I know, it’s crazy. Doesn’t feel like long ago we were just meeting Louis for the first time at the studio. Feels like a lot’s happened since then, though, at the same time. S’weird,” Liam responds to Niall, but Louis’s eyes are still on the gorgeous boy in front of him, and then he catches a flicker of movement on his face. Hi, he sees Harry mouth at him, through smiling lips; and it’s so sweet, and intimate, and private, Louis feels his heart clench ever so gently. It’s a soft little whisper between them, amidst the chaos of the club, and it’s just for Louis. He just smiles back at Harry in response, lets out a breathy giggle at the ridiculousness of it all, at how much just a simple two lettered word could have such an affect on him.

“Yeah, I guess so. Been great having you guys, though, really. I don’t think I’ve ever enjoyed working with any other client more,” Louis says at last, sincerely, finally finding the ability to rip his eyes away from Harry’s ever so magnetic ones, and look at Liam while he’s talking to him. He’s met with a knowing smirk, of course, because that seems to be the default expression he gets from him, Zayn and Niall these days, if Harry’s not too far away. It’s not so bad, though; Louis’ come to grow
fond of Liam and his smug grins. Except, it’s this thought that just serves to remind Louis at how quickly their time all together is running out, and suddenly he feels a tad more sober than he did a few moments ago. He casts it away, though, wants to just enjoy tonight, and not think about how he won’t be seeing Liam and Zayn, and Harry (especially Harry) regularly at all anymore. Wants to not think about how much the thought of that really stings him.

“I wonder why that could be,” and Liam’s smirk has grown now, and he’s tapping his chin in mock curiosity. He’s obviously being sarcastic, but Louis is puzzled, wonders what he’s referring to. When he looks over at the others and sees them looking at Harry, who’s now biting his lip and fiddling with the chain around his neck, eyes cast downwards, it becomes clear. Louis feels himself blush, again, at the idea of how obvious he’d probably been. How obvious he’s probably being. He forces himself to roll his eyes, and he tries to play it off, “Oh shut up Liam, you know I love you all, no matter how annoying you might be.

“Whatever you say, man,” Zayn chimes in now, laughing as he speaks, because of course he does. On second thought, perhaps Louis will just miss Harry. (He’ll miss them all, quite terribly, really, but he wouldn’t ever admit it.) “Anyways, shall we get some drinks? Don’t think I’ve had nearly enough, yet.”

Louis gives in to himself, and casts one more look at Harry, again, and he’s already looking at him, focusing all his attention on Louis, just Louis. It radiates warmth onto Louis, makes his insides flutter, makes his breath catch, something that Harry seems to be a master at now. Harry offers him a tiny smile, as he angles his body forward, and Louis realises the rest of them are moving to the bar now. He should probably attempt to get his legs to work properly for at least a minute in order to get there, too, but it’s difficult when Harry’s looking at him like that, all soft and dimply, momentarily inhibiting Louis’ ability to walk, it seems.

Harry saunters up next to him then, and even just his body heat is enough to make Louis’ heart rate increase ever so slightly. “Come on, trouble. We’ll lose them otherwise,” he says, a grin in his words, and perhaps it’s hearing Harry’s voice so close to him, or his intoxicating smell that Louis’ mind is focussing on, but, either way, Louis’ knocked out of his little reverie all the same, and gives Harry another breathy little giggle, not quite letting himself look fully up to his face, because that’ll probably just get them back to square one again. Louis then feels Harry’s arm rest gently over his shoulders, warmth radiating from the touch, and causing a shiver to run through Louis’ body, as Harry starts guiding him towards the bar. Louis notes again, for whatever time it is now, how well they seem to fit together, and, actually, how used to it he could get.

They’re in another part of the club now, sitting all together, on their third, or fourth, or fifth round, Louis’ not fully sure. The music seems louder, booming all around him, and the room seems warmer; he can feel the cool sweat dripping down the back of his neck, or perhaps that’s just because he’s seated next to a bloody human furnace. (Louis’ not complaining, though, not at all.) Either way, he’s a bit drunk, and very happy, squeezed in between Harry and Niall, sitting opposite Zayn and Liam, who are currently, hilariously, trying to proposition Niall. No, he’s not joking.

“Mate, mate… lissen,” Zayn slurs, gesturing across the table to an amused Niall, who’s all rosy cheeked and absolutely delighted at this topic of conversation, even though Louis knows he’s just indulging them both. “You, me, Liam. Together. Just one night. What could possibly be bad about that? We’re all attractive males of the not-so-straight persuasion! ‘Iss absolutely perfect!” Zayn ends up spilling about half his beer as he says this, gesticulating wildly at a now-giggling Niall, trying his very hardest to convince him that a threesome would be a brilliant idea. Louis’ just finding this bloody ridiculous, but entertaining all the same, and as is Harry, if his endearing but ear-piercing
cackles are anything to go by.

“I don’t know, mate, what’s in it for me?” Niall offers, as if he’s actually thinking about it, and Louis just shakes his head at his friend, wondering how on earth the evening’s come to this.

“Um, hello? A night with this gorgeous man to my left, and I? How could you refuse?” Zayn says, incredulously, gesturing to Liam, who also seems to be half in fits of laughter, but still half serious, keeping his eyes locked on Niall to gauge his reaction.

At Zayn’s somewhat ridiculous response, Harry’s simpering, subdued chuckles turn into full on hyena-like howls, and he lifts his arms up in obvious glee next to Louis, laughing with his entire body. Louis finds it bloody adorable, and starts chuckling himself, finding Harry’s happiness a little bit contagious. He’s almost so distracted by the sound that he doesn’t notice Harry’s hand coming back down to rest on Louis’ thigh, under the table, instead of his own lap. Almost. As soon as he feels the touch, his laughter turns into a splutter, and the rest of the boys look at him in various states of confusion.

“You okay mate?” Niall asks, amusement in his tone, from next to him, and he’s so very thankful that, from the angle his mate’s sitting at, he can’t see Louis legs, or thighs, or any kind of wandering hands that may or may not belong to a very pretty green eyed boy sitting next to him. He’d never bloody hear the end of it otherwise.

He takes a breath, tries to sound normal, which is proving increasingly difficult for him whilst Harry’s large hand is inching its’ way up, fingers on the inside of his thigh getting dangerously close to his crotch. “Yeah, fine.” Harry’s hand tightens, and Louis’ sure he hears a breathy chuckle escape from the boy in question’s mouth. “Just peachy,” and he knows it came out all high and tinny, but he can’t really do much about that, can he? Not when Harry is touching him like this, getting him all worked up, right in front of their friends too, which really isn’t doing anything good for Louis’ health whatsoever.

“So, that’s a no, then?” Louis hears Zayn or Liam say to Niall, he isn’t sure which one because Harry, the absolute tosser, chooses that moment to lean in closer to Louis’ side, and breathe out a request into Louis’ ear.

“Come dance with me,” he purrs, letting his lips ever so slightly graze the shell of it, and Louis’ eyes flutter shut at the feeling, his breath quickening at the whisper of a touch.

“Yeah, okay,” Louis chokes out, opening his eyes to see Zayn and Liam’s bright ones looking right at him with eyebrows quirked in amusement, but he really doesn’t bloody care right now, because Harry’s hand, Harry’s hand, is still on his thigh, his breath still warm on Louis’ cheek, and he’s just asked him to go and dance, which means more touching, and how on earth could Louis possibly say no to that?

“’Scuse us, boys,” Harry says to the table, but Louis’ just watching Harry now, and he can’t bear to take his eyes away for a second, not when he’s looking like that, all eager eyes glinting with mirth. He knows, Louis’ sure Harry knows, what his touch and his proximity is doing to Louis, but he actually can’t really give a shit right now, not when Harry’s voice has suddenly gone all low and rough, because the sound of it ignites something within Louis, something primal, and he needs to get his fucking hands on Harry immediately.

Harry’s moves his grip from Louis’ thigh to his hand and Louis is simultaneously relieved and left wanting, missing the heat of the touch already, but grateful he can finally fucking take a normal breath. Louis looks back and the other boys, then, as Harry leads him out to the dancefloor, and they’ve all got equally smug faces on, watching them disappear. Louis knows it looks suggestive,
knows they look like they’re slinking off together, because, well, they sort of are, but he holds two fingers up to his friends (good-naturedly, of course) anyway.

He turns around, and Harry starts weaving them through hot, mingling bodies, creating space where there is none, to get them right to the middle. Harry stops suddenly, and Louis bumps into him, lets out an airy chuckle at his little mishap. He rests his head on Harry’s muscled back for a moment, and through the sheer material, he smells all salty, probably from the sweat, and Louis inhales the scent deeply, for no other reason than the fact that it makes him feel dizzy, makes his insides burn with desire.

Harry quickly turns around, places his massive hands on Louis’ waist, pulling the smaller man towards him, their chests pressed against each other. Louis snakes his arms around Harry’s neck, breathing getting shallower and shallower by the second, and he thinks they start dancing, or maybe they just stare at each other for a bit, get lost in each other’s eyes, because it’s easy, now, second nature to them almost, to just entirely forget the world around them as soon as their gazes lock.

Harry’s eyes are shining, and glazed, darting back and forth between Louis’ own, and there are crinkles by them, Louis’ close enough to see, and he looks so incredibly happy and young and carefree, the sight of it makes Louis’ heart almost bloody burst in his chest.

Louis breathes out, slowly, carefully, and begins to hear the booming of the music trickle into his ear drums again, registering with him, finally, so he starts to move his body in time. This movement seems to break Harry’s spell, too, and his eyes start to focus a little more; they never once leaving Louis’ face, though.

The press of their bodies against each other is enough to make Louis wild already, and then Harry slowly starts to turn Louis around, so his back is against Harry’s chest, and Louis’ almost positive his heart stops beating for a second there, because fuck, this is really happening, it’s all Louis’ wanted; they’re on each other, feather light fingertips touching skin, and Louis can’t fucking believe it. Louis presses his back against Harry, feels Harry’s heaving breaths, along with his hands that come to rest on Louis’ waist again, gripping even tighter than before, almost possessive, and fuck, this boy is truly going to drive Louis mental, he’s sure of it.

Harry leans down, then, from behind Louis, and Louis feels his warm breath on his neck, just under his ear, feels goosebumps prickle his skin in reaction, and his eyes shut again involuntarily at the feeling. Harry’s lips aren’t touching him though, are never touching, it’s just a hint of a feeling, a reminder that he’s there, waiting, for what, Louis has no fucking clue, because it’s not enough, it’s never enough, and Louis wants more.

Louis angles his body downwards, as he moves his hips to the rhythm of the music, so his bum lines up with Harry’s crotch, and bends his knees even more and there. The sudden pressure elicits a gasp and a quick, clunky exhale from Harry, which Louis hears shoot past right above his ear, and Louis chuckled to himself, right before feeling Harry grind up into him too, and then he’s the one grasping for air in this too-stuffy room.

It’s almost too much, being in this room full of people, surrounding them, and only feeling Harry everywhere at the same time: his hands on his waist, his hard dick through his too-tight trousers, and the ghost of his lips ever so slightly grazing his neck. But it’s not enough, Louis needs more, craves more, thinks he’ll go insane if he doesn’t get it.

“Harry–” he chokes out, because he doesn’t know what else to say, his eyes squeezed shut in an attempt to isolate all his senses so he can focus on the ball of heat and desire in the pit of his stomach, the same one that’s growing by the fucking second.
This is when Louis feels a soft release of breath from above him, tickling his ear, and then finally, finally, trembling lips touch skin, and it’s like the ball within himself explodes, flames coursing through his veins like he’s a fucking supernova, uncontrollable heat reaching every inch of him, just from a graze of petal-soft lips on the juncture between his shoulder and his neck, and he feels like he’s vibrating, so much energy within him from this one tiny touch, and yet, and yet, he still needs more.

Before he has the chance to do anything, though, Harry’s mouth leaves its’ spot on his neck, and Louis fucking whimpers at the loss, and he can’t even bring himself to care about his pathetic reaction. He turns around, and there are stars in Harry’s eyes, and they’re boring into Louis’ skin, burning and full of desire, too, and Louis almost melts into a puddle right there on the dancefloor. Harry’s breathing is heavy as he watches Louis, and Louis feels a hand slip into his own, fingers linking, and then they’re walking off somewhere, folding their way back through the crowd, in the opposite direction to where they’re friends are. Louis’ not really concentrating, though, just focusing on Harry’s back, on the muscles moving underneath as he walks ahead, at the way his hair looks all fluffy and floppy from behind.

Then they’re alone, in a darkened, deserted hallway somewhere, the sound of the party muffled and subdued, and they’re alone. Harry turns around then, and Louis finally looks up at him, at this stunning boy, and feels even more lightheaded, if it’s even possible. Harry’s eyes are dark and deep in this low-lit area, but they’re still exhibiting as much want in them as Louis’ sure his own are, and it takes Louis by surprise for a minute, because this can’t be real, surely, Harry can’t be looking at him like that, there’s no way. This must be a dream, or something, Louis would never be so lucky.

And then, and then, Harry moves impossibly closer, and Louis finds himself stepping backwards in tandem, until his back is pressed against the cool wall, but Harry doesn’t stop moving, continues until he’s right in front of Louis, hovering over him, arms up on either side of Louis’ head, bracketing him in and fuck, fuck, fuck, Louis’ mind is running at a million miles a minute, his breath coming out in tiny exhales, and Harry’s giving him that look that says I want you, right now, gazing down at him through content, hooded eyes like he’s never seen something more precious in his entire life.

Harry leans down, then, and Louis is going insane, has been craving this so terribly, with every single fibre of his being, feels like he’s never wanted anything more in his entire life, than to feel this. He lets himself breathe, though, lets his eyes slip shut, as Harry looms closer. It only occurs to Louis now that Harry is a client, and this probably isn’t allowed, is probably written in a Human Resources manual for the studio somewhere, but Louis could really not give less of a shit at this point. Instead, he tries to relax, exhaling quietly, and just as he does so, he feels the touch of feather-light lips on his own; so soft, and barely there, and Louis is rooted in the spot, while the built up tension between them seeps away, slowly, and Louis feels utterly intoxicated by it all.

Harry’s hands come down to cradle Louis’ jaw, and then Louis’ jolted out of his frozen moment, and he shifts his hands up to grip Harry’s waist, and moves his lips and kisses Harry hard, harder than he’s ever kissed anyone before. He feels Harry let out a sigh at that, almost, and then he’s kissing him back, their lips moving and slotting together like two puzzle pieces, and fuck, they’re kissing, and Louis can’t quite believe it, and he almost cracks a smile at it, can barely contain his elation, but he refrains, because he never wants his lips to leave Harry’s, not even for a second. This moment is so precious and fragile and delicate, and he wants nothing more than to just stay in it forever.

And Louis thought nothing could make him feel more on a high than he does right now, but then he feels the slick warmth of Harry’s tongue run along the seam of his lips, and he gasps at the sensation, getting dizzier and dizzier by the minute due to Harry’s smell and his hands and his mouth. He opens up his own mouth for Harry, and then it’s all sloppy and desperate and hot, and Louis wants to cry and scream and die all at once because nothing, nothing could ever top this, he’s never felt like this
before about someone ever in his entire life, and the feeling of them molding together like this, right now, pressed against each other, licking into each other’s mouths like bloody teenagers, is something Louis knows he’ll never quite forget, never want to forget.

It’s fast and then it’s slow, going from desperate and quick, to languid and lazy, and then Harry’s just giving him tiny little pecks, so soft and sweet, and Louis might cry, he’s never felt so treasured in his life. He finds himself smiling then, can’t contain it this time, their lips coming apart little by little, and he tightens his hold on Harry to make up for it.

“God, Lou,” Harry mumbles then, words slurring against Louis’s lips, his lazy, low, voice floating into Louis’ ears. “Fuck, ‘s even better than I imagined, been wanting to do this for ages,” and Louis almost gasps again because, what, Harry’s just admitted that he’d imagined kissing Louis before, and that causes so many thoughts to run rampage in Louis’ mind that he has to lean all his weight further against the wall in order to stop him legs from giving out. This is all so much, all at once, and Louis can’t even speak, instead presses his lips harder against Harry’s in response, hoping to convey that he agrees with Harry’s sentiments exactly.

He takes a breath then, beginning to see stars from the heat of the hallway, and of the moment, and finally finds his voice, “Lovely, lovely Harry,” he whispers, and then leans back to look at the celestial being in front of him from under his lashes, admiring the view. Harry’s staring down at him, intensely, pupils dilating at Louis’ words, and his hands are clutched onto Louis’ jaw like it’s a lifeline, and he dips in again, licking into Louis’ mouth sinfully, dirtily, messily, changing the sweet mood to something more intense. Louis isn’t complaining, though, not at all, can feel the arousal building up within him, can feel his jeans tightening around his crotch and fuck, he needs Harry, all of him, right the fuck now.

“Harry,” he gasps, “Can we–” he doesn’t even get to finish his sentence, because Harry closes the gap between them and presses their lips together again messily, teeth clacking together noisily.

“Yeah, yes, let’s go, please, please, can we go?” Harry begs, he fucking begs, desperation seeping into his tone, and Louis pulls back to see his features almost pained, eyebrows furrowed and jaw tight, evidently anticipating Louis’ response. Louis truly doesn’t know how he survived without seeing this part of Harry before, this vulnerable, gentle, worshipping Harry, who’s quite literally begging Louis to take him home. He doesn’t know, because he can’t imagine living his life without this Harry now.

“Yeah, yeah, c’mon,” Louis mumbles, his smile and his eyes lazy, from the alcohol, or the heat, or the high of having Harry’s lips on his. Probably all of it, actually.

Harry’s face splits in a grin then, hard expression replaced by something soft and gentle, eyes bright and warm, and Louis almost wants to kiss him again right then and there, but he knows if he does they’ll never leave, and right now, that’s his priority. Deep within himself, Louis feels tiny tinkerings of anxiety sparking up, telling him this is a bad idea, and to remember what you told yourself before, remember what you warned yourself about. Louis pushes them down for now though, lets himself be selfish, because he’s drunk, and Harry is here, and Harry wants him, and he really has absolutely no self-control.

So Louis takes Harry’s hand in his and tilts his head back towards the direction of the dance floor (and also the exit). Harry eagerly nods his head in agreement, lips bitten and raw and so, so pink, and Louis thinks they’re the prettiest little things in the world. Louis feels his chest flutter at the feeling of their fingers linking together, as he leads Harry towards the exit of the club, decidedly a different way than they came, since he’s hoping not to bump into any of their mates on the way out, knowing that they’d just sneer and be all smug about it, especially Niall.
They find themselves outside, stumbling into the dark blanket of night, and the breeze is chilly; summer seems to be fully over, now. It doesn’t feel like that for Louis, though, not at all, because he can feel Harry’s palm cradled in his own, electricity sparking where their hands meet, and every single second of that kiss is replaying in his mind on a loop, and it just keeps adding to the fire burning within him, this untamable heat, reaching every part of his body, keeping him warm and completely unaffected by the chill.

Because Harry is… Harry is all heat, and Louis’ realised that he never wants to know what it is to feel the cold ever again.

There’s not much time for talking, because a car’s appeared in front of them, and Louis recognises it but he can’t remember where from, and Harry’s guiding him into it now, hand on the small of Louis’ back, and to be honest, with Harry touching him like that, he’d probably get into any bloody vehicle he saw.

“‘S my driver, tell him your address, you’re closer, I think,” Harry mumbles, and he piles in after Louis, whispered breath floating against Louis’ ear as he leans forward. Louis has remember to breathe for a moment before he rattles off where his flat is to the guy sitting in front of him, the same man who must’ve picked Harry up from the studio that day. He’s looking at Louis in the rearview mirror as he starts driving, so Louis can only see his eyes, but he can still tell they’re glinting with amusement, even in the low-light of the car.

Louis’ distracted from blushing too much at the man’s evident knowledge at what’s happening when he feels Harry’s breath on his neck yet again, and really, Harry is truly going to be the death of him. A large hand comes to rest on the side of Louis’ jaw, and tilts it, granting better access for Harry to fucking suck at his neck, and Louis just about holds himself back from letting out a low moan, feeling overstimulated but desperate for more both at the same time.

Louis’ breath is caught in his throat, shallow exhales escaping here and there, and Harry obviously knows what he’s doing, because Louis feels the heavy heat of Harry’s tongue leave his neck and get replaced by warm air, and Louis realises Harry is chuckling, the bastard, at Louis’ current weakened state. Louis huffs then, and reaches his arm out from where it’s been flopping lazily at his side for the duration of the journey, and wraps his hand around Harry’s bicep, pulling up. “Come here, you,” Louis says, voice gruff and rough and almost unrecognisable to himself, and Harry’s quick to oblige, at once straddling Louis in his seat, neither of them seemingly giving a shit about whether or not the manoeuvre was strictly legal in a moving car. Harry’s thighs are tight around Louis’ own, which does absolutely nothing to aid the growing problem in Louis’ trousers, and immediately Louis leans up to kiss Harry, licking straight into his mouth, desperate to taste him again, and it’s also the only way to distract himself from that issue, although, really, it doesn’t do much to help.

Louis’ hands travel from Harry’s arms, up to his soft, ever so slightly curly-at-the-tips hair, and Louis tangles his fists in it, finally, finally gets to run his hands through it, and it feels almost as heavenly as he imagined. Harry’s hungrily kissing him now, nipping at Louis’ lower lip, leaning down into him, and Louis can’t complain, but he is almost being a tad crushed in the process, and he’d really like to survive this car ride so he could possibly ride something else a bit later. He tugs at the strands of Harry’s hair gripped between his fingers, in an attempt to get Harry to ease up a tiny bit, but the gesture elicits half a pained whimper, half a pleased groan out of Harry; Louis feels it vibrate right against his mouth, and then, any chance of Louis’ previous problem getting under some sort of semblance of control goes out the window, because fuck, Louis’ just pulled Harry’s hair, and Harry may have actually liked it? Louis feels lightheaded for perhaps the millionth time that night.

“D’you like that, love?” Louis chuckles, then, his eyes widening with every word, as he looks up at Harry, just to make sure.
“Fuck, yeah, Lou, I–” Harry whispers, all tight and whiny, and that’s all the confirmation Louis needs, before he’s tugging at Harry’s short dark hair again, and then Harry’s sentence just trails off into small little breathy gasps. Louis looks up in wonder at the boy hovering above him, in amazement, too, and uses his fist clutching at the hair to bring Harry’s lips back down to meet his, in one last searing kiss before the car comes to an abrupt stop, and one glance out the tinted window lets Louis know they’re at his flat.

Harry gingerly, and bashfully, peels himself off of Louis and takes the empty seat next to him, a blush smattering his cheeks as he does so, and Louis is helplessly endeared by it, of course. Louis misses Harry’s warmth pressed against him immediately, a reaction that doesn’t surprise him much anymore. He mumbles a thank you to the driver, not quite able to look him in the eye, before quickly and, as efficiently as he can do in his inebriated state, slips out of the door smoothly, turning around as soon as he’s standing to make sure Harry’s done the same.

Louis walks round the back of the car that’s already on it’s way off, and is met with the sight of Harry staring back at him, eyes glinting with mirth. Louis takes in this image in front of him; Harry’s standing on the pavement, outside the entrance to Louis’ flat, ever so patiently, hands linked behind his back, looking so sweet and animated and adorable. Louis almost starts to let his gaze travel down to look at the rest of the boy, not quite believing that they’re here, and this is happening, with Harry, of all people. Before he can do that, however, Harry mouths a small Hi at him again, just like earlier on in the night, or maybe he whispers it, Louis doesn’t hear, but it’s lovely and heart wrenching all the same. Louis just gazes fondly at Harry in response, who looks so utterly gorgeous under the starlight; uncommon for London. Louis thinks it’s fitting, though, that on this delicate, precious, rarity of a night, the stars choose to make an appearance, reminding Louis just how special this moment is. Louis can feel the smile on his face splitting his cheeks it’s so big, because Harry is here, standing in front of him, outside Louis’ flat, and Louis doesn’t know, can’t quite comprehend, how he got so goddamned lucky.

He wordlessly takes Harry’s hand then, leads him up to the front entrance, where after a few attempts (that aren’t aided by Harry literally, and figuratively, breathing down his neck) he gets the door open, and pulls Harry up the stairs with him, to his flat door. Louis gets it swiftly open and leads Harry to his bedroom, working straight from muscle memory in the complete darkness of the hallway. The door’s been left open, and then they’re there, in the room, and Harry’s in front of him, and fuck, it’s all feeling a bit more real now, like this is happening, with Harry, and all those anxious feelings he pushed down earlier start to resurface. Louis shakes his head, tries to rid his mind of the nerves, tells himself it’s just him being silly because he feels… so incredibly much for Harry, and he doesn’t want to fuck it up at all.

And then, a lot of things all seem to happen at once, and Louis starts to spiral, and it goes like this.

Louis stands there, facing Harry, their heavy, ragged breaths mingling in the small space between them, and Harry, ever so slowly, leans down to kiss him, all soft, and tender, and warm. But then Louis tastes alcohol on Harry’s tongue, sweet and strong, a cocktail that Louis hadn’t seen him have, and suddenly Louis’ reminded of how much they’ve had to drink, how much Harry’s had to drink, and it leaves him uneasy, because he knows, Louis knows, that Harry has a record of not remembering his evenings after he’s been drinking, and how the fuck is Louis to know that this isn’t one of those nights? What if Harry forgets this all tomorrow? Fuck, what if it doesn’t matter either way to Harry, what if this is only intense, and serious, and big, just on Louis’ side? All of these questions create a gaping black hole in the pit of Louis’ stomach, anxieties and worries seeping out of it like slick oil, smothering every inch of Louis’ insides.

Because, really, how’s Louis to know that this means the same to Harry as it does to Louis? Because to Louis, God… to Louis, this is everything, this is getting as close as humanly possible as he can to
Harry, and this is a big fucking deal to Louis. He’s not one for one night stands usually, and it doesn’t feel like that with Harry, but then again, he wonders if that’s how Harry thinks it feels too, or if Louis’ alone in that. What if all this is is just a fuck to Harry, nothing significant, and Louis’ misread all the signs? And then, fuck, what if this is because Louis’ made himself too available? Because, surely, Harry can’t possibly feel the same for Louis as Louis does for him, it makes no sense, of course it doesn’t, because Louis is Louis, who’s let himself feel too much, and Harry is Harry, who enjoys feeling less, and it doesn’t work.

And then, and then, Louis realises how fucking selfish he’s being, too late, of course, because Harry’s still kissing him, but Harry’s also not well, he’s fragile and has his issues, he needs help, and Louis’ stupid feelings were never supposed to get in the bloody way, because Harry’s health is the most important, and Louis can’t just forget about that, just ‘cause he wants to be selfish and have Harry for a night, for Christ’s sake. Harry’s also drunk, and maybe he’s even high, and he’s vulnerable, and Louis’ probably taking advantage of him, perhaps they’re taking advantage of each other, and maybe they really should have talked about this more, and fuck, fuck, fuck, now Harry’s taking his clothes off, right in front of Louis, and Louis has to stop this, has to stop this right now.

“Wait, wait, we… I…” Louis starts, voice sharp. He steps back, not sure what to say, because he’s looking at Harry now, focusing on him properly, and Harry’s standing there, almost naked, in Louis’ fucking bedroom, smooth milky body half lit up by the moonlight that’s trickling in through the open windows, looking so soft and beautiful and there.

“What is it, Lou?” Harry asks, and his face, his fucking face, features all slackened where they’d just a second ago been tight and focused, looks so dazed and sad and innocent, Louis can’t bear to look as he says the next thing, but he knows he has to.

“I, I can’t do this, I– you need to leave, I’m sorry.” His voice is shaky and shallow, and Louis busies himself by picking up Harry’s shirt that had slipped off his shoulders so prettily onto the floor, and the black boots that Harry had shucked off as soon as he’d walked into the room. He presses Harry’s possessions into the tattooed chest belonging to the boy, fingertips almost burning from the heat radiating off him, and Louis’s breath gets caught in his throat, and he’s sure Harry notices, but he won’t look up into Harry’s eyes to check, he can’t.

“What? What happened? Did… was it something I did?” Harry starts, confusion and a hint of desperation lacing his voice. “Please, tell me, Lou, I–” and Louis can’t hear it anymore, because he thinks if he lets Harry stay in his room for much longer, he might just give in, and this will all be for nothing.

“No, please, just,” Louis responds, and takes a breath, glancing up near Harry’s face, but not quite focusing, and then he decides to fix his stare at the floor, too tempted otherwise, “This was a mistake,” he mutters. “You need to leave.” And fuck, Harry lets out this sound, then, somewhere in between a sob and a scoff, and it breaks Louis’ heart a little bit, because the idea of himself being the reason for any of Harry’s discomfort causes Louis more pain than he imagined.

“Oh… oh. Um, okay, then,” Harry responds, and Louis’ still studying the floor, unable to move for fear of catching eyes with Harry, being caught in the heat of his gaze yet again, scared at what that would make Louis say, or do, in this increasingly vulnerable moment between them.

Louis hears Harry move about the room, hears the rustle of fabric and the squeak of leather, and footsteps that head toward the door, slowly, and tentatively, almost reluctantly.

“You’re not even gonna look at me?” Louis hears, and he squeezes his eyes shut just in case his body betrays him and his head starts tilting upwards to meet Harry’s. “Lou?” and fuck, it’s the way Harry says it, all dejected and defeated and small, that makes guilt slice through Louis like tiny
Louis hears Harry heave a shaky sigh, and, finally, the sound of footsteps slinking out of the room, and then Louis hears the front door shut, gently, and he lets out a breath he’d been holding for a while, apparently.

Louis feels awful, fucking terrible, really, but letting Harry leave under the impression that Louis’ just changed his mind, that he realised it was about to be a light hearted mistake between two friends, or something along those lines, that could be avoided, is better than letting Harry leave knowing the truth. The truth being that Louis knows if he had let this night happen, then there’s absolutely no going back for him; his heart would be laid out, bare, and ready for the taking, and that’s incredibly fucking scary to Louis, and when he’s not a hundred percent sure if the feelings are reciprocated, then he’d actually just rather not, and save himself the pain.

Because Harry's the fucking sun, isn’t he? So bold, so bright, so beautiful. And Louis can't help but gravitate towards him, can't help but be drawn to him, to keep near him at all times. But here's the tragedy of it all, though; Harry's the sun, which makes Louis terrified that if he gets too close, even by just a bit, he'll only end up getting burnt.

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Chapter Notes

Track: If You Love Me, Come Clean - Flatsound

Louis wakes up the next morning to a loud, high, buzzing sound. He feels disoriented and as soon as he shifts his body slightly, a wave of nausea hits him and a headache quickly sets in.

He’s laying down, in a bed, he realises, and as he squints his eyes open, slowly, he confirms that it’s his own. Good. At least he knows he didn’t get up to too much trouble last night.

Before he can think more on the subject, he becomes aware that the incessant sound is still blaring, not showing any signs of stopping, and Louis’ forced to blindly reach toward his bedside table to where he assumes his phone is.

Finally grasping his device, he fumbles with it for a moment before accepting the call without looking at the screen. It’s probably just Niall, anyway.

“Hello?” Louis asks, voice coming out like a whisper, all dry and grating. He coughs, clears his throat, and tries again. “Niall?”

“Louis? Is that you, mate?” Ah, okay, that most definitely isn’t Niall.

“Zayn, sorry, yeah. What’s up? What time is it?” he asks, and why is Zayn calling him? Louis’ eyes wander over to his windows, where there’s a trickle of dim light peeking through the blinds.

“Hey, um, I dunno, maybe eight? Maybe earlier?” Eight O’Clock? Jesus Christ, this wake up call better be for a good reason. “Listen, what happened last night? With Harry?”

Oh. Harry. Fuck.

As soon as the words reach Louis, it all comes rushing back to him. How they’d… they’d finally, finally kissed, and then had left together, without their friends’ knowledge. He remembers Harry’s face as he had kissed Louis, the radiance that had poured out of him, the pure happiness, and how Louis had felt the exact same. Harry’s face as he’d begged Louis to take him home, his face when Louis had eagerly agreed. And then Harry’s face when Louis had freaked out, told him it was a fucking mistake, and asked him to leave with no explanation. Fuck. Louis feels like shit.

“Um,” Louis’ voice was high and tinny, nerves prickling his tone. “What… what d’you mean?”

“I mean the fact that you guys seemed to be having a pretty great time together, and then you both disappeared for a bit, which, you know, we all thought was good… but then the next thing I know Harry’s back, in a shit mood, and drinking his weight in alcohol, three sheets to the wind within about 10 minutes. And you were gone. What happened?” Zayn asks, his voice confused, and pleading, like he’s gone from frustrated to exasperated in a matter of seconds.

So Harry had gone back to the club, then? After leaving Louis’? Fuck, that… that doesn’t sound good, not at all. Shit, this is all Louis’ fault, because he let his stupid fucking feelings get in the way, of everything, like he told himself he wouldn’t, and… and he made Harry upset. Fuck. That’s
exactly what he didn’t want to do.

“I– I went home.” The words taste bitter leaving his mouth. It’s not strictly a lie, because Louis did go home, he’s just… leaving out the part where he took Harry with him.

“You went home? Then I don’t understand…” He trails off, pausing for a moment.

The thing is, Louis doesn’t know whether to tell Zayn everything about last night, because what if he’s the only one who remembers what happened? What if Harry has no recollection, especially after drinking even more? What if Louis’ getting too invested, again? If he told Zayn everything, he’d have to explain why he sent Harry home, and… he doesn’t want to do that, because it’s embarrassing, and stupid, so fucking stupid of him.

He could tell Zayn it was because he realised it was a bad idea, for them to sleep together, considering Harry’s mental state and his fragile trust in Louis; how he didn’t want to ruin that. But that would be slightly withholding facts because, truthfully, Louis got scared of how he had felt, well, terrified, really. He had gotten scared of his intense feelings towards Harry, of what they could mean, how deep they go. Mostly, though, he got scared of what would have happened if he had let himself give every part of himself away, scared of what he would say or do in such a vulnerable situation with Harry, because what if Harry didn’t want to do the same? What if it meant something different for Harry; what if he didn’t return Louis’ feelings? The thought alone sends a shiver up Louis’ spine, but he ignores it. Tries to, anyway.

There are so many what-ifs that Louis can’t get into, won’t let himself get into, especially with Zayn, because he’s avoidant and that’s how he deals with his problems, always has, and he’ll have to just keep it that way in order to get on. It’s fine.

“Yeah.” Louis exhales, “I went home.” The reply is simple, and final.

“Well, something must’ve happened, because then he disappeared again, went off with some of his… friends, those people you met before, you remember?” Oh, Louis remembers. Remembers how they let Harry get so fucking intoxicated he passed out, then left him in a random booth in the corner of the club, alone. Louis scoffs at the thought, can feel residual anger bubbling up inside of him.

“Anyway, when Liam and I finally found him, he was so fucked, was pretty much paralytic. Couldn’t even walk, actually. It was, um, kind of scary.” Zayn’s voice crackles through the phone; Louis’ gets caught in his throat. “Haven’t really seen him that bad in a while.”


“I mean, I guess. Spoke to him this morning, before you. S’why I called you, actually. He wouldn’t tell me anything, said he doesn’t remember. So I thought you might have some answers, but. Guess not,” Zayn sighs, and he sounds tired.

Oh. So Harry doesn’t remember anything. Nothing about last night. Of course he doesn’t, though, Louis knew this would happen. He sort of… saw this coming, but it doesn’t make it hurt any less. Still leaves him feeling empty, and disappointed, like he’d been expecting that whatever happened between them was… special enough to Harry for him to retain. Well, before Louis fucked it all up, that is. Obviously not, though. God, you’re such an idiot. Fucking get over yourself, it doesn’t matter.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Louis rushes out, suddenly eager to get off the phone. “Listen, mate, I have to–”
“Wait! Louis, I was gonna ask... I know you two have grown close, recently. And he trusts you. And I wondered—Look, Liam and I don’t wanna see ‘im get bad again. But he’s sick of talkin’ to us, sick of us asking if he’s okay, and everything. But his drugs, and his drinking, it’s all just... breaking ‘im down, more and more, Louis. He never wants to talk to us anymore, never wants to talk to anyone, really, and it’s not healthy. But maybe... maybe you could try? I think... I think he might want to talk to you, Louis, about everything. He’s already told you more than he’s told a lot of people, and it’s... surprising, but in a good way. Maybe you could even help convince him that he should see someone? What I’m saying is, maybe you could help.” Zayn’s voice has transitioned into something rather small, and sad, almost, yet at the same time there’s a hint of hope. Louis feels like it’s somehow his fault.

“Oh, um...” Louis hesitates and trails off, lets his words hang in the air, because of course, of course Zayn has asked this of Louis at the most inopportune time.

Had Zayn asked Louis to talk to Harry about everything at any point before last night had happened, Louis would have jumped at the chance to help him, because that’s always been the priority. Now, though... Well. Now, it’s as if the universe is playing some sort of cosmic joke on him because now, the relationship between him and Harry has been permanently altered, they’d transitioned from just friends to... something else, because Louis had let his stupid feelings get the better of him.

And the worst part of it all, is that it's all bloody one-sided.

Harry doesn’t remember a thing, because of course he doesn’t – why would he? This means it's all on Louis, which then means that Zayn has no reason to believe that perhaps it isn’t a good idea for Louis to go and talk to Harry as if everything between them is normal, because it's not, of course it's not.

He... he can’t go and see Harry, can’t face him, not after what he did. He was such an arsehole, and even if Harry doesn’t remember, Louis still feels shit about it. The fact is, Louis literally kicked Harry out of his flat because he all of a sudden got terrified of the strength of his feelings towards him, terrified that they may mean something more, something that Louis is far too afraid to admit to even just himself, and that’s not bloody normal, is it? Louis’ the only one who's aware of all this, though, which is simultaneously frustrating and also a relief. Also, perhaps it's not a very good idea because Louis feels a bit stupid and guilty about everything, but he can’t say that, not unless he wants to tell Zayn the whole truth about what had happened between him and Harry. He can’t do that, because it's embarrassing, and there's really no fucking point, all it'll do is probably make Zayn pity him, or hate him, or something, so, no, he can’t. Which means that Louis doesn't really have a choice in this, it seems. (If he’s being honest, he was always going to say yes).


“Yeah, sorry, uh,” Louis starts, feeling more uncomfortable by the minute and hoping his voice doesn’t give it away. “I, um, I suppose I could try, yeah, if you think I could help, of course.”

“Great, oh, Louis, thank you so much. I really think you can, you know;” Zayn replies, relief evident in his tone. “Listen, we’ve got another meeting at the label all day today, they’ve just told us about it, this morning, actually, the bloody twats, so I’ve gotta go get ready. But, seriously Louis, thanks for doing this. I really think you can get through to him.”

“Yeah,” Louis breathes, already planning to go straight back to sleep after this conversation ends, in order that he might perhaps calm his growing nerves about inevitably seeing Harry later. “Sure, no problem.”

“Cool. See you soon, man. Take care, bye,” Zayn says, in a rush, and then hangs up the phone.
“Bye,” Louis replies, belatedly, to the dial tone currently ringing in his ear. He sighs, rubs a hand down his face in frustration, and puts down the phone.

Shit. He’s a bit fucked, isn’t he?

Louis had fallen back asleep after the phonecall with Zayn, only for a few hours, but it hadn’t really helped much with the uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach, a feeling which was making Louis less and less eager to go and talk to Harry.

It’s not that he doesn’t want to see Harry, because he does, of course he does. Louis can barely go a day now without craving the sight of that gorgeous face, it’s actually a bit pathetic, really. So, no, it’s not that, it’s more that Louis’ nervous about how he’s going to behave around Harry after last night, especially because he’d made a fool of himself in front of the boy enough already before anything had even happened between them, but now, now it’s different, and Louis doesn’t know how much more embarrassing he could get.

Plus, Louis feels guilty about how he behaved at his flat, and stupid too, because honestly, the way he feels about Harry - this constant tightness and heaviness in his chest, like a vice wrapped around his heart every time he so much as looks at him - it’s... it’s getting rather difficult to ignore now, and Louis almost sort of regrets letting Harry leave.

Well, he regrets telling him to go, rather rudely actually, so it’s his own fault. Of course. Also, Louis can’t even bloody try to make it up to Harry, not unless he wants to give him a reminder of what happened, and, no, that’s definitely not happening. That’ll just end in embarrassment on both of their parts, most likely.

Harry’s forgotten about it for a reason, and that means Louis should too. Even if it means having to bury his own ever-growing feelings for Harry, he can handle it. He has to handle it.

It’s fine.

Regardless, Louis had told himself before this mess that he was going to try to help Harry despite everything, or rather, in spite of everything. Zayn had also asked him to, on behalf of him and Liam, which convinced Louis even more that this is what he had to do. ‘This’ being sitting on his sofa, safari open on his laptop, knee deep into all kinds of articles he’d been looking up all morning.

He’s dressed now, phone in hand, about to text Harry to try and meet up with him later. Louis realised it’s probably got to be today, else he’ll freak out again, or something stupid like that, so, yeah. That’s what the current situation is. Louis is trying to wish away the anxiety already blooming inside him, just at the sight of Harry’s name on the screen, to absolutely no avail. He types out a text anyway.

**hi harry, was wondering if u wanted to go get a coffee later maybe? after your meeting? let me know :)**

That sounds casual, right? Not too strange or alarming? Jesus. *You’re only asking him for bloody coffee, not to have an orgy or something, relax.* Louis sighs at himself. Sometimes he wishes he could just tune out of his own mind, even just for a minute.

A sudden buzz sounds, from the table in front of Louis, where he’d set his phone, and he thanks God for the distraction from his stream of thoughts.
Louis, it’s good to hear from you. We’ve actually just finished early, if you want to come meet me? We can have a chat. H .x

Oh. Louis wasn’t expecting such a quick reply. Well you better bloody type something, now that you’ve opened it, you tosser.

Yes . okay. Sounds good. Where ?

Louis’ text is so stilted, and he’s not sure if it’s because of his nerves that he can’t form normal sounding sentences in his brain to translate onto text, or if it’s the fact that his hands are shaking so badly. Probably both.

I’m actually on my way to get a coffee now. That place we went to before, near the label building. I’ll meet you there. H .x

Ha. Of-fucking-course. This would happen. Of course Louis’ got to go and see Harry, after last night, at the same café where they first sort of bonded, when they had no bloody clue what would develop between them. Seems like ages ago, now, even though it’s really only been a bit more than a month. It would be a bit symbolic - that Louis’ seeing Harry there, of all places, for this chat, where he’s got to pretend like everything’s fine, and not as if he feels as though everything’s sort of caving in on him - if it wasn’t so bloody typical.

Louis sighs. So bloody typical.

okay . See you soon .

Louis locks his phone, not waiting for a reply, and sits up. He takes a breath, before shoving his feet into the trainers lying haphazardly in front of him on the carpet, and steels himself before getting up and making his way out the front door.

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A bell chimes as Louis opens the door to the café in Piccadilly, where he’s meant to be meeting Harry. The twinkling sound almost makes him jump (pathetically) due to the fact that he’s currently the human embodiment of nerves, completely and utterly fretting about how this conversation with Harry is going to go.

He looks around and spots a few empty tables, but seeing as it’s early afternoon-ish, lots of people are lounging around, drinking their coffee and tea and eating their pretty cakes, probably without a care in the bloody world. Unlike Louis. Twats.

Okay, he didn’t mean that. He’s just a tad stressed, and he can’t see Harry either, and what if he’s left already? What if Louis took too long to come, and now he won’t get a chance to–

“Louis?” he hears from his left, and oh. Louis would recognise that voice anywhere. Never mind.

Louis turns, and he thinks his mind is quicker than his eyes to register Harry, because by the time they focus on the beautiful boy in front of him, sitting at a corner booth, cap pulled over his head with those pretty little curls poking out, his heart is already rabbiting rapidly in his chest. Jesus. Louis’ in so fucking deep.

“Hi, Harry,” Louis breathes, an automatic smile forming on his face, and he thinks he just about melts into the seat on the other side of the booth. It’s just that Harry is so lovely, in every way, and the sight of him always seems to distract Louis, even in the worst situations. God, Louis’ meant to be
avoiding this type of behaviour, meant to be shutting away those feelings for Harry. It’s difficult, though, when Harry’s just sitting here, looking so effortlessly gorgeous like this.

Louis lets himself look at Harry, really look at him, and hopefully forget his embarrassing entrance. There are dark, purple bags under his hooded eyes, Louis notices. Understandable, seeing as he basically went out twice last night. Not that Harry remembers, though. Louis tries not to let himself delve into that again.

What isn’t understandable, though, is Harry’s smile. It’s not… the same, really, as it usually is. It’s all small, and timid, oddly, and… it’s not the open, soft smile, that Harry usually saves for Louis. The one that Louis adores the most.

“Everything okay?” Louis asks, confused, his own smile falling from his face.

“Yeah, fine. What did you want to talk about?” Harry asks, words coming out quick and sharp, and he’s got this funny look on his face, Louis can’t quite place it. His eyebrows are raised, eyes focused on Louis’, but he almost seems a bit tired, or annoyed, or something. Irritable, definitely. Must just be hungover because of last night, then.

“Um, I was just–,” Louis stutters, eyebrows furrowing as he focuses on the table, still slightly caught off guard by Harry’s demeanour. It doesn’t help the nerves that Louis still possesses due to what he’s about to say to Harry, but it’s fine, though, Louis’ probably just overreacting, as always. Especially now, when he’s trying to remain neutral towards Harry, remain in the safe, just-friends zone that they were in pretty much up until last night. The one that only Louis remembers breaching, tragically. Jesus, shut up about it would you? He obviously doesn’t fancy you back in the same way, get over it.

“You were what?” Harry voice materialises into Louis’ thoughts, and it kicks Louis into action, finally.

“Sorry, um, I was just thinking, about last night,” Louis starts, voice small, looking back up at Harry’s face. It’s gone all relaxed, all of a sudden. Features softening, lips slightly curling into a small smile. Ah, there it is.

“Yeah?” Harry leans forward in his chair, his voice is airy, and lighter than before, expectant, too. He’s looking at Louis now with those bright eyes of his that are always so hard to look away from, and so easy to get lost in. The sight loosens the tightening in Louis’ chest, ever so slightly.

“Yeah, um,” Louis fiddles with a random sugar wrapper on the table, unsure of how to go on, “So, I think that, maybe, we should talk about, you know…” Louis sighs, still fiddling. He’s got to do this, though. He’s got to help Harry, in any way he can. “I think we should talk about your drinking and drug habits,” he rushes out, finally forcing himself up to look at Harry again. The sight of him makes Louis’ stomach drop.

He’s got his brows pulled together, yet again, and it’s like the shutters have been drawn on Harry’s face, soft smile from before completely gone. It’s as though Louis is seeing Harry physically retreat into himself, and he doesn’t like it one bit. It reminds him of before, of when Louis knew nothing about Harry yet, when Harry hadn’t let him in, and it slightly scares Louis, that they seems to have regressed like this, that perhaps he’s made some massive mistake.

“Oh,” Harry says then, after a beat, and it’s short, and simple, but there’s clear shock evident in his voice. He looks and sounds very confused, and Louis doesn’t really understand why. Harry leans back in his chair, as he says it. Away from Louis.
Fuck. Maybe this was a bad idea. He didn’t once think Harry wouldn’t want to get this lecture from Louis, just trusted Zayn that Harry would listen to him. *Fuck*. That was bloody stupid of him.

“Harry, listen, you just…” Louis begins, because he might as well. Harry’s not looking at him, eyes to the floor instead, with his arms crossed, and this tight smile on his face that breaks Louis’ heart a bit, because it’s not a genuine one, not at all. “You can’t keep behaving this way, you said yourself you were self-destructive—”

Harry scoffs at that, and rolls his eyes, and the mood has completely darkened, but Louis tries his best to ignore it.

“Harry, look, I really…” Louis takes a breath, eyes still focused on Harry, who’s still not looking at him. “I really just want to help you. I think I can, if you’ll let me. Last night, you were—”

“I was *what* last night, Louis? What was I?” Harry shoots, and his voice is so defensive, and cutting, and so very unlike Harry. He smiles derisively, at the end of the sentence, and it makes Louis feel even more nervous, and guilty, because maybe this isn’t his place, and he’s making Harry upset, but he can’t seem to let it go, can’t seem to get himself to shut up.

“You were drunk, Harry! Really badly. Paralytic, I think is the word Zayn used, and he said you were probably high as well. You had to be taken home, not for the first time. And you black out, a lot. It’s not *normal*, and it’s just not healthy, Harry—”

“You spoke to Zayn? What did he say?” Harry asks, head whipping up, finally, eyes meeting Louis’, and curiosity lacing his biting tone.

“Yes, Harry.” Louis sighs, hoping this is them getting somewhere, “He said he’s worried, Liam, too. About you, and your health. Said you’ve been getting bad again. Said it’s because you won’t speak to anyone, not even them.” Louis tries to make his tone soft and understanding, and not accusatory at all, but Harry still glares at him.

“So, you’ve all been talking about me, then?” Harry asks, a knowing look on his face, voice sarcastic and angry, now, and Louis doesn’t fucking know how he’s cocked this all up so quickly. He’s vaguely aware that they’re still in this bloody caféd, and their raised voices are garnering them a bit of unwanted attention. Louis finds himself praying that no one recognises Harry, no matter how slim the chances are, because bad press is the last thing Harry needs, right before pretty much the beginning of his career.

“They care about you! I—” Louis’ voice wavers, as Harry’s eyes widen slightly at his words. He doesn’t finish the sentence, though, worried about where *I care about you* would lead him. Probably to some dangerous territory, where Louis has put everything he doesn’t want to confront, and he can’t have any of that making an appearance. Not when none of it even matters, anyway.

“You what, Louis?” Harry’s voice is quiet, but hard, face even harder, and Louis has to look away, in case he ends up admitting everything in a moment of weakness, a moment of wanting to soften Harry’s features in any way he possibly can, with any words he has.

“I… think that you should go and see someone, maybe,” Louis says instead, reluctantly, and hates himself for it. “Talk about everything. Zayn said you told him you didn’t want to, but, I think it’ll help. I think that, maybe, like you told me before,” and Louis takes a breath before he says the next bit, because he knows it’s a sensitive topic, he does, but it’s also something Harry had chosen to speak to Louis about, so Louis decides to approach with caution all the same, “Maybe… the loss of Edie… triggered something, and that’s why you’re still like this, even this long after. Maybe it’s the grief. I– I don’t know, Harry, I honestly don’t, I’m just going from what I’ve seen, but.”
Louis exhales, and Harry’s looking at him with this blank stare, and it’s distracting, because he’s never shown that little outward emotion, not to Louis (not for a while, anyway), and Louis has to avert his eyes to his lap before he starts talking again. He sees the window out of the corner of his eye, can hear the tell-tale tapping against it to indicate that it’s raining. Of course.

“Maybe if you spoke to someone, about it all, a professional, they could help you, with… with your grief, and– I was doing some reading about it, actually, earlier today. Um, it says that it’s, uh, really unhealthy to not grieve, can lead to all kinds of stuff. And I obviously don’t know Harry, I’m just guessing, I don’t want to make any assumptions, but. It makes sense, to me, anyway. I obviously know nothing, though, but maybe…” Louis trails off, unsure of where to go with what he’s saying, unsure of whether what he’s just said was alright, was allowed.

“It’s just not that simple, Louis,” he hears after a pause. It’s a small and almost, but not quite, defeated voice coming from Harry. Louis looks up, to find Harry still watching him. They stay staring at each other for a beat. Wet, gloomy green eyes meet sympathetic blue ones, and the world stops for a moment.

“What do you mean, H?” Louis says, after a bit, and he’s forgotten that it’s a slightly hostile conversation, because Harry’s face just went all crumpled, and he just looks so small and sad, and the nickname just slips out.

“I mean,” Harry says, voice with a certain edge, again, and Louis’ heart plummets in his chest, all hope for them overcoming this… argument, or discussion, or whatever it is, vanishing. “That I’m marred.” No you’re not, oh my God, you’re not. “I– there’s nothing– look, no one could help Edie, with all of her shit, so how could they possibly help me?”

Louis’ alarmed at this, at what Harry’s implying. “Harry, please, that makes no sense, you’re not her! It’s a different situation, you can’t just accept that–,”

“Accept that what? I’m a messed up, alcoholic druggie? Well too bad, I’ve accepted it! Well done you,” Harry flails his arms around as he speaks, and again, Louis hopes no one’s noticing them too much. There’s a sarcastic tone to Harry’s voice that grates against Louis, makes him feel like nothing he can say will shift this mood.

“Harry, no. That’s not what I was trying to say,” Louis sighs, scrubs a sweaty palm down his face, combs his fingers through his fringe, a nervous habit. “I’m just trying to help! Help you get better, I just want to–”

“Let me guess, fix me? Well I can’t be fucking fixed. It doesn’t work like that,” Harry growls, and Louis stares at him, aghast, in utter disbelief at the person sitting in front of him. Why is he so angry? Louis never intended… it wasn’t supposed to happen like this.

“I… I know it doesn’t, I– I just wanted…” Louis trails off, unsure of how to continue, and trying his hardest to ignore his chest tightening, and eyes slowly start to sting.

“So, this was all this was about, then? This was all you wanted to say to me today?” Harry says, accusingly, almost; he’s asking for something, waiting, and Louis doesn’t know what for, just knows that he’s most certainly fucked everything up. “You just wanted me to be your little charity case, a project, or whatever, something you could fix, and then send me on my way? Unbelievable.” Harry shakes his head, knots his fingers in his hair out of frustration, and plants his other fist on the table.

Louis, on the other hand, is immediately speechless in response to Harry’s words, immediately hurt at the accusation, and it’s like that day in the studio again, when Harry said Louis didn’t care, and Louis feels his heart break ever so slightly at the implication, and at the fact that after all this time, of
trying to show Harry that he cares, deeply, as much as he’ll let himself, anyway, Harry still believes it.

“I… Harry, that is so, so incredibly far from the truth. You know that. Tell me you know that?” Louis looks at Harry pleadingly, who’s just staring blankly back, tight-lipped, face not giving anything away. “I really, truly just want to help you get better. Zayn and Liam are worried about you.”

“Just Zayn and Liam, then?” Harry grits out, bitterly, and Louis shuts his eyes a moment, silently berating himself. This is probably why Harry thinks Louis doesn’t care, because he says stupid shit like this. If only Harry knew how much Louis cared, how it literally makes his chest hurt, sometimes.

“No, of course not, I just mean that your close friends really care about you, and you’re scaring them, and I think—,”

Harry sighs, cutting Louis off. His voice is frustrated, and he looks Louis straight in the eyes again, finally, “Louis, I don’t want you to be my bloody therapist, I…”

Harry takes a breath, and then another, steeling himself. His eyes are a gleaming green.

His voice comes out softer, quieter, this time. “I just want you…” and then he stops, trails off, gives up, or something, but Louis’ breath is caught in his throat, and his mind is caught on Harry’s words.

“You just want me…?” Louis coaxes, light-headed but alert. What does Harry mean?

“Nothing, forget it. It doesn’t matter anymore,” Harry finally says, voice thick, and it’s so defeated, and small, and angry, and Louis feels so fucking confused, and terrible, and guilty, and everything in between.

Harry looks away, and his eyes are angled downwards, but Louis doesn’t miss the swipe of the back of a hand at the corner of one of them, a quick, frustrated gesture. Fuck. What has Louis fucking done.

They sit at the table like that, in silence, for a minute, or maybe it’s an hour, Louis’ not really sure. All he’s sure of is that this was a terrible fucking idea; he’s never listening to Zayn ever again. Obviously, he needn’t have worried about fucking this conversation up by revealing too much about himself. No, he managed to fuck it up an entirely different way. Of course. He should never have started this conversation, it’s just made Harry upset, and angry, and far less likely to accept Louis’ help, which is exactly what he didn’t want to bloody do.

It’s just that… now, he’s got this boy, this dejected, despairing boy sitting before him, wilting like a sad rose, and in that moment, impossibly, all he wants to do is be the light that brings life back into him. But Louis can’t. He’s fucking everything up, because of course he has, and Harry can’t even bear to look at him. Louis doesn’t blame him.

At some point, the boy sitting opposite him gets up from the table, and leaves without another word. Louis’ not entirely certain, but he’s pretty sure Harry takes his heart with him when he goes.

—

Louis’ laying on his sofa, idly watching an old episode of Great British Bake Off, when he hears three sharp knocks on his front door. He cringes at the sound, and reluctantly looks over towards it, as if by some miracle he’s developed X-Ray vision within the last few minutes, and can as a result see who it is without getting up.
He's not really in the mood to talk to anyone right now, is the thing. Still feels shit about his conversation with Harry the other day. The heaviness of their bitter exchanged words weighed on him, wrapped around him like a vice, his chest growing tight whenever he thought back to the sight of Harry’s face before he left. Perhaps if he doesn’t move for the next few moments, and makes no noise, they'll just leave him to mope in peace...

“Tommo! Open the bloody door, I know you're in there!” Niall’s voice travels to Louis through the door, all muffled. Louis sighs. This visit was inevitable.

Louis says nothing, but starts to get up to open the door, anyway. He knows Niall will just use the spare key if he doesn't. Although Louis has explicitly told him many time that it's for emergency use only, Niall still insists on using it whenever he wants to come and harass Louis.

“I'll just use me spare key! You know I will!” Niall shouts, and yes, unfortunately, Louis does know.

“I'm coming, I'm coming,” Louis announces, as he walks over. “Tosser,” he mutters, just loud enough for Niall to hear.

“I heard that!”

“You were supposed to,” Louis finally opens the door, to an unimpressed Niall. “What do you want?”

“Well,” Niall bellow, pushing past Louis and into the flat. “You haven't been answering my calls or texts, so I thought I'd try a more hands-on approach.”

“Please, do come in,” Louis replies, sarcastically, still stood at the door. He sighs, and then shuts it, “Oh yeah, and help yourself to a beer, too.”

Niall’s already made his way to the fridge across the way, tucked in the corner of Louis’ kitchen, and taken out two bottles, presumably for himself and Louis. This is going to be a chat, then.Louis sighs to himself as Niall hands an opened beer over to him wordlessly, before depositing himself on the sofa that Louis had previously been ever so comfortable on.

Louis stays standing, with his arms crossed and his eyes on Niall, who’s currently patting the space rather enthusiastically next to him for Louis to sit down. Ugh. Louis knows where this is going, and he’s really not in the mood for it.

“Come on, Lou, take a seat. Let’s talk,” Niall says, and it’s worded so casually, but Louis doesn’t miss the firm tone in his best mate’s voice that means Louis’ going to sit down, one way or another, even if Niall has to force him to, which has definitely not happened before.

So, Louis reluctantly drags his feet over and sits on the sofa next to Niall, ready for the onslaught that he knows is coming. “About what exactly?”

“Well, let’s maybe start with the fact that you’ve been pretty much uncontactable the past few days,” Niall starts, taking a pull of his drink, and fixing Louis with a focused gaze. He leans forward to face Louis properly when he says the next bit, voice taking on a more serious tone, “Is everything okay, mate?”

Fuck. He knew Niall was going to pick up on his low mood sooner or later, it was sort of inevitable. Since meeting with Harry he’s sort of just… cocooned himself in his flat, feeling sorry for himself, and then feeling guilty because he doesn’t deserve to mope around like this, there’s no bloody reason for him to feel sorry for himself; he was the one who started that conversation, and drove a wedge between what was an already precious and delicate thing that he and Harry had. He just ruined it,
ruined any chance of there being something between them, even if it just stayed as a friendship, all because he opened his big mouth. He was trying to help but he only made things worse, of fucking course, and ended up probably making Harry hate him. So, no, everything’s not really okay.

“Everything’s fine, Niall,” Louis lies instead. “Why d’you ask?”

He’s trying to go for a light, casual tone because, despite the current internal crisis Louis’ going through, he doesn’t want to drag Niall into this. It’s Louis’ shit to deal with, and it’s fine, he doesn’t need help, he just has to deal with it. Preferably alone. He gives Niall what he hopes is an easy smile, but one look at Niall’s unimpressed face tells Louis he isn’t buying it one bit.

“Louis, come on. Stop with the bullshit. What’s happened in the past few days that’s made you go into your avoidant little bubble again? I thought we agreed you would always tell me stuff now instead of just dealing with it alone…” Niall says so sincerely and concernedly, and, yeah, he’s also right.

Louis was hoping Niall had forgotten about that little deal they’d made, one night at the pub, the one where Niall made him promise to talk about his feelings whenever he was going through something, instead of just bottling them all up inside. Louis knows it’s unhealthy, to deal with shit like this, but it’s something he’s always done, so it’s a hard habit to break.

It’s just. Louis knows that whatever it was, between him and Harry, it’s gone. He’s fucked up and overstepped, or something. Louis’ still a bit confused about it all, but he knows it was his fault, and that he had no one else to blame for it but himself. He’d hurt Harry, lovely Harry, if the way he’d stormed out of the café was anything to go by. He feels shit about it, and frustrated at himself, and so, so fucking idiotic. He’d gotten too emotionally invested, let himself feel too much for Harry, after he’d bloody told himself not to, and it had come back to bite him in the arse.

He doesn’t even want to think about the feelings he still harbours for Harry, because every time he does he just gets more terrified at how intense they are, and how likely it is that they’re sticking around for good.

His feelings don’t matter anymore, anyway. They never did, really, and that’s just something Louis has got to accept.

“No, it’s– it’s nothing, really. It’s stupid,” Louis tells him, sighing. “I was just… really stupid.”

“Hey, I’ve told you this a million times, nothing you feel is ever stupid. Jesus, Lou, you’re making me sound like me mother.” That earns a small chuckle from Louis. “Just tell me what happened.”

“But I was avoiding it because I was terrified,” Louis says, focus on his wringing hands, feeling uncharacteristically nervous. “It’s just an amalgamation of stuff, really. Me letting myself get in way too deep with something, again. The usual!” He tries again for that light tone, but when he glances back up at Niall, all he sees is pity in his eyes, and it takes the humour right out of him.

“Tell me exactly what happened,” Niall says, with furrowed brows and a small frown. Louis feels his cheeks heat up, and shakes his head, tries to deflect Niall’s concerned gaze.

“No, you’re not fine, mate. You always do this, pretend like something doesn’t hurt you, that it’s all fine, when it’s not. You always try to protect yourself, shield yourself from feeling too much, you’ve done it for years. But it’s obviously not fine - you’ve been moping in your flat for days now, come
on, what is it?"

Fuck. Louis knows he behaves that way, knows he shoves his feelings aside, but to hear it told back
to him isn’t exactly pleasant. He’d much rather live in his ignorant little bubble where nothing can
hurt him because he doesn’t let it.

Well, that’s what he tells himself, anyway.

“Niall it’s… it's really nothing.” Louis shakes his head at his friend, desperately trying to derail this
trip into a scrutiny of his emotional state, because that's never a good time. “I just… I messed
something up, something quite important, it turns out, and – and it doesn't matter, anymore, we don't
have to talk about it. We don't need to.

“Lou, stop with all this cryptic nonsense,” Niall sighs, “What’s this about?”

Louis takes a breath, calculating his next sentence.

He could lie to his best mate and say he fucked up with someone at work, or something, and avoid
this whole conversation. It sounds tempting, but Louis’ realised that keeping stuff inside just comes
back to fuck him up later on, so perhaps that’s not the wisest choice. Also, Niall’s his best mate, the
only one he talks about stuff like this with. If he doesn’t tell Niall, who else would he tell? Louis
sighs then, finally giving in, and realises that, to be honest, it doesn’t really matter if he tells Niall
everything, not now, not anymore.

“Harry. It’s about Harry.”

Niall lets out a huff in response. “Well, thank fuck you finally bloody said it, Tommo. Jesus. Was like
trying to pull teeth. Honestly.”

Louis’ eyes widen, and he feels his cheeks heat up, yet again. “What? What d’you mean ‘finally’?”

“I mean the fact that since the other night, when we all hung out and you two couldn’t keep your
bloody hands off each other, you haven’t been answering my calls. Of course I assumed it was
something to do with him,” Niall explains, with a tone that Louis finds rather offensive, actually. “I
just wanted you to admit it before I brought him up.”

“Well shit, Niall, that just makes me feel heaps better!” Louis’ annoyed, mainly at himself, that
Niall’s managed to have got it all in one go so easily. But then again, of course he has, because
he’s Niall, and Louis’ known him for years; he should have guessed this was how it was going to go.

“Mate, no, come on, don’t get hissy. I’m trying to help, yeah? Just tell me what happened with him,
and then we can see how we can fix it,” Niall says kindly, clapping his hands together once for
finality. He looks so warm and hopeful, and Louis can’t help but let a bitter smile form at his words.


“I don’t think it’s something that can be fixed unfortunately, Nialler,” Louis argues, letting out a sigh.
“Think I may have fucked it massively this time.”

“Well, what did you do? I’m sure it’s not that bad, mate,” Niall coaxes, curious but holding back,
giving Louis space to talk, probably trying not to scare him back into his self imposed shell.

“I, um, well,” Louis starts, trying to get his thoughts in order. “He… Harry’s angry at me, basically,
we had an argument, I think? Which is shit, because we were really… getting along, I guess?” Louis
would probably say it was more than getting along on his behalf, but no one else has to know that.
“And it was my fault, because I tried to talk to him about his issues, you know, and that was a bad idea, apparently, and now I’m worried that he hates me and never wants to speak to me again, because I pretty much fucked up whatever kind of… relationship we had. And it’s also shit because I really thought that— that something was—” and Louis cuts himself off.

His words had all been coming out in a rush and he hadn’t given himself a chance to breathe. Or think about how much he actually wanted to share. Fuck.

“Thought that something was what?” Niall asks him, eagerly, a glint in his eye. Louis pretends not to see it, doesn’t want to get into his feelings for Harry, for God’s sake.

“Nothing. Doesn’t matter anymore, anyway,” Louis replies, praying that Niall won’t push him to admit that.

He looks like he wants to, and his eyes are heavy on Louis, not wanting to give anything away.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, you’re not really trying to tell me that, are you, you absolute tosser? On what planet would that boy not want to see you?” Niall chuckles condescendingly, and Louis is alarmed.

“What are you talking about, Niall?” Louis asked, puzzled at Niall’s choice of words. He shakes his head, “You weren’t there, anyway, you didn’t see him. I promise you, he doesn’t.”

“I didn’t have to be there to know that Harry would still want to see you, now, regardless of anything. Louis, come on, are you really that blind?” Niall asks, and what? What’s he talking about?

“What on earth are you on about, Niall?” Louis asks, face crumpling with confusion. “What d’you mean?”

“I mean the fact that Harry is completely gone for you, Louis,” Niall rolls his eyes in exasperation, while he takes another drink of his beer, and Louis just gapes at him, in complete shock. “Honestly, didn’t realise I had to spell it out.”

Harry is completely gone for you, Louis.

The words ricochet inside of Louis, like heat seeking missiles sent straight to his heart, and he feels himself grow hot, hands shaking and short of breath, and what the actual fuck?

“Wh… what?” Louis can barely form the question, is still reeling from what Niall’s said, so casually, and so matter-of-fact, as if it isn’t something that is making Louis feel like the world is completely caving in on him at this very moment in time.

This makes absolutely no sense. What Niall’s saying isn’t true, it can’t be, there’s no way.

“Mate… It’s painfully obvious the way you two feel about each other. Come on, Lou! You know, sometimes I think you must force yourself not to see things, really.”

“How… How’d you know? Like what— what makes you think that Harry… Harry! Of all bloody people, Niall, could ever think of me like that? I just don’t—”
“Oh for fuck’s sake, Lou. Look, think about it mate! Remember what Zayn and Liam told us, that night at the club? About how Harry hadn’t told many people at all about Edie, yet he told you when he barely knew you? What the fuck do you think that means, then?”

“I… it just--” Louis stumbles on his words; he’d never thought about the implications of Harry telling him about Edie - everything about her, in fact - he’d never let himself. Niall doesn’t even know that Harry had told him the entirety of it, and if he’s still saying this, then Louis… Fuck, Louis doesn’t bloody know.

“It doesn’t mean anything, Niall, he just told me because, I don’t know, I was in the right place at the right time, or something, I don’t--”

“Oh, stop with that! What about that time at the studio, when I came and met him, he was miles away from the uptight guy you’d described to me. He acted all silly and sweet towards you - it’s sort of disgusting, actually, watching you two flirt,” Niall reasons, and Louis feels himself get hot all of a sudden.

“No, I, he just… He’d just warmed up to me by then, I guess, but it doesn’t mean anything, Niall,” Louis can’t think about this, can’t let Niall’s silly suggestions get into his head, there’s no way Harry feels that way for him, the same way Louis feels, not at all.

“Jesus, come on, Lou, I remember what you told me after, about how he told you he was willing to work with you and not against you all of a sudden. This guy suspended all his disillusionment with the industry for you. He put his faith in you! Do you really think that means nothing at all?”

Louis furrows his brows, trying to process everything, to understand what Niall’s saying, while at the same time trying to see Harry’s actions from a completely different perspective from where he had been. It’s exhausting, and terrifying, because it sparks up this tiny flicker of hope inside Louis, something he hardly ever lets himself feel, especially in regards to things like this, things like Harry, and it’s all so much.

“I-- yes, of course it means something, it does, it means that he started trusting me, for whatever reason. I just… I don’t think--”

Niall groans, obviously frustrated, and it only serves to make Louis equally more fucking confused. “Okay, what about that time at his flat? You were all sweet and romance-y with each other, and I don’t think you even realised, Louis. I walked in on you bloody cuddled in his arms, mate! A bit peculiar if you were ‘just friends’, don’t you think?”

Louis’ cheeks heat up at that, and he remembers the moment, after he embarrassed himself by tripping over, but then also at how good it felt, being held by Harry, and how he didn’t really ever want it to end.

“Come on,” Niall continues, lifting Louis out of one of his many Harry hazes, “I’ve seen the way you act with each other! That time at the club, Harry couldn’t keep his bloody hands off you! Not to mention the time he was jealous of Will, remember that? Jesus, Lou. And don’t think I don’t know that you took him home - I saw you two leave together, you twat. You still haven’t bloody told me about that, either.

Louis visibly gapes at Niall then, completely in shock at this new information. Louis was sure they’d disappeared without anyone knowing, so as to avoid conversations like this, probably, or maybe it was just because Louis likes sharing secret things with Harry. He doesn’t exactly remember what his thought process was, though, when Harry’s hands were all over him, wandering and firm, and his lips were sucking on his neck, intoxicating to a level that Louis had never once been at before.
“You… you saw that? Fuck, I didn’t–” Louis starts, and then mutters, “Niall, there’s a reason I didn’t tell you about that.”

“Is it the part of the reason you’ve been in this flat for days without answering my calls?” Niall fires back, interrogatively, and Louis quite literally stops breathing, has never felt so called-out in his entire life.

*Fuck.* Shitting bollocks. Now he really does have to bloody tell Niall everything.

“Niall, I…” he starts, vying for time, any time, for him to think up something to say apart from the truth, because he knows it’s stupid, and embarrassing, but he can’t think of anything. He sighs instead, “Yes, Niall. Yeah, it is.”

“Okay. Well, out with it then. It’s obviously affecting you, Louis, so please, can you just stop being stubborn for one second and just let me help?”

Niall, fuck him, he always knows what to say, how to get Louis to open up. Louis pretends he hates it, but really, he knows it’s what he needs.

Nevertheless, he’s still nervous about what he’s about to say, because speaking the words out loud makes it real, makes the way he *feels* real, and no longer something he can just repress, hoping it will fade away. It makes that night a thing that actually happened, not just something that only Louis remembers, and it’s scary, what that could mean, because he kind of has an idea about what Niall will say, and Louis’ dreading it.

“I, uh,” Louis starts, turning towards his friend. “I did take him home, yeah, but…” and he has to pause, holding his thumb and forefinger to his eyes while attempting to brush past the embarrassment.

“But what?” Niall asks. “Come on Lou, ‘m not gonna judge you, or anything, you know that.”

“I, fuck.” Louis steels himself, and why is this so bloody hard? “I took him home, and before anything could happen, I made him leave. I was a prick and told him it was a fucking *mistake*, even though I’m now sort of feeling it wasn’t, but… Fuck, Niall, I don’t know anymore? I– I just, I thought it would be better, if nothing happened, between us, because I really… Fuck, Niall, I don’t know anymore? I– I just, I thought it would be better, if nothing happened, between us, because I really… Fuck, Niall, I’ve never felt this way before, about anyone, and it was terrifying, it is terrifying, because he doesn’t feel the same, there’s no way he can, and, and…” Louis takes a breath, lets the words settle between them. “And then I went and spoke to him, the next day, and Zayn told me Harry didn’t even remember that night, so I thought it obviously didn’t matter as much to him as it did to me, before I fucked it all up, anyway, and then I bloody pissed him off, and now I just… feel fucking shit, really.”

He feels like a weight has been lifted from his shoulders, and Niall’s looking at him with a face that’s half proud, half surprised, and, well, he supposes that makes sense. Louis doesn’t think he’s ever been this open with anyone in his life, not even Niall, but there’s a first time for everything.

After a moment, Niall breathes out heavily, and finishes the rest of his beer before speaking. His voice is soft and calm, and it relaxes Louis, even if his words don’t. “You really, really have got to stop thinking you’re so unloveable, Louis. It’s not fair on yourself, or other people. People like Harry.”

Oh. *Fuck.* Unloveable? That’s… far too close to home than Louis would like, and the words cut into him, because he’s never thought of it that way, but actually, maybe Niall’s right.

Louis lets himself take in what Niall’s said, then, and finally, *finally*, lets himself properly recall all
the moments he’s shared with Harry up until that point. Moments that he’d dismissed as friendly, or lacking the depth on Harry’s side that he had felt.

Moments that he wouldn’t let himself think over because he was scared of what conclusion he might come to.

He thinks back to the time he first saw Harry, how hypnotised he was by those gorgeous, emerald eyes, how immediately intrigued he was by him, despite the way Harry had behaved. Thinks about how attractive he found him, how much he denied it, before it got too overwhelming and he had to admit to himself that he did, in fact, fancy him.

He thinks of the time Harry told him about Edie, that first time, how he’d opened up in a way Louis had never expected and had surprised Louis. At the time, he’d told himself Harry would have told anyone that but, as Niall said, Zayn and Liam thought otherwise. Fuck. Maybe… Maybe Niall might have a point there.

He thinks of all the other times he’d caught Harry watching him, the pure, tender softness in his eyes that made Louis’ heart pang incessantly against his chest, a feeling that Louis had tried his hardest to ignore, because he didn’t want to think about what it could mean, wouldn’t let himself.

And then he thinks about that night, that perfect night, before Louis fucked it up, when everything that had been building up between them seemed to come to some sort of intense crescendo. How Louis felt like his heart could burst from the feeling of Harry’s lips on his, and the touch of Harry underneath his fingertips.

He thinks of how fucking happy Harry looked, as happy as Louis had felt, at them being together, finally, how affected by it he was, and how Louis had brushed it off as it probably meaning something less intense for Harry.

He thinks of the times Harry had said certain things to him, things like I’m not sure now, actually, and nothing happened with him, Lou, and I don’t want to lose you, and been wanting to do this for ages, and I just want you. All these words swarm in his mind, these sentences that he told himself weren’t what he thought, that he was taking them the wrong way, that Harry couldn’t possibly feel the same, because he’s so bloody insecure.

God, Louis’ been so fucking stupid, so impossibly fucking stupid.

“Fuck,” he says, because what else is there to say really, when you realise that what you’ve wanted has been under your nose the entire bloody time.

“Louis?” Niall’s voice distracts him from his thoughts, his realisation that Harry may actually feel the same, and it takes him a moment to get his voice to work.

Harry is completely gone for you.

“How, he whips his head around to his friend, eyes wild and alive. “I think… I think you actually might be right,” Louis breathes, and his mind his whirring, going over everything, how he’d denied himself so much, just because he thought Harry hadn’t felt the same, when really, Harry… Harry might have felt the same way the whole time, and now he’s probably fucked it up beyond repair.

Fuck.

“Of course I’m bloody right, you tosser. Jesus, took you long enough!” Niall practically cheers, face breaking out in a relieved smile, but Louis can’t quite match it. “Right, so what are we gonna do, then?”
“Nothing, Niall. I told you, it doesn’t matter anymore. He wants nothing to do with me.” God, of course Louis would only realise something as monumental as this after he’d messed up. So bloody typical.

Niall leaps off the sofa, then, and stands with his hands on his hips. He looks like an angry mother. Normally Louis would find the sight amusing, but now’s not really the time.

“Louis, for God’s sake!” He throws his arms up in frustration, and Louis’ eyes widen. It’s a tad alarming to see Niall move so much in one go. “Were you not listening to a bloody word I was saying? Who the fuck cares what you said to him, you were just trying to help! As long as you apologise for it, it doesn’t matter, some petty argument isn’t gonna change the way he feels about you! Look, regardless of anything, it felt real, between you both, didn’t it?”

Niall sounds exasperated, and Louis… Well, Louis might actually be a bit stumped. Niall may have a point, perhaps Louis was being a bit melodramatic about Harry wanting nothing to do with him again. Fuck, why wasn’t his first instinct just to go and apologise? He was too focused on being frustrated at himself and his stupid emotions, that’s why. Thank god for Niall, honestly.

“Oh… yeah, yeah it did,” Louis starts, because Niall’s right, Louis had felt something real between him and Harry, that was almost tangible, something he’d never quite felt before. “Hadin’t really, uh, thought about that. Fuck,” he breathes, “I’ve really fucked up, haven’t I?” Louis mumbles the last bit, slightly embarrassed that Niall’s simplified it so easily, and made Louis realise how stupid he’d acted.

“It’s not too late, Louis,” Niall reminds him, and yeah, maybe it's not. “Christ, you’re lucky you have me,” Niall mumbles to himself, as he slumps back down, worn out, it seems, and Louis’ not surprised, this chat has been rather exhausting, in the midst of all his realisations.

Harry is completely gone for you.

“Yeah. So… Maybe I should try and fix it, then?” Louis asks, already knowing what Niall will say, and already having made his mind up at what he’s going to go and do.

“You better bloody try, Jesus, didn’t come here for you to just sit on your arse and continue to mope.”

Louis chuckles then, finally, a genuine one. He feels relieved, actually. Wired, like something’s sparked inside him. It’s so clear now, so obvious to Louis, and he can’t believe he didn’t see it before. He can only hope that when he goes to speak to Harry, to tell him how he feels, his feelings will still be reciprocated.

Louis’ never felt so nervous in his entire life, this is so drastic for him, so out of character, but… Regardless of all that, this is, by far, a chance he’s willing to take.

—
Louis can feel the beat of the music vibrating in his chest, as soon as he arrives at the venue, syncing up to his ever increasing heart rate; a steady, quick pounding that just reminds him of how nervous he is.

It’s *The Cahoots’* big gig tonight, the one the label’s been going on about for weeks, apparently, according to Tom. Louis must’ve missed the memo. Perhaps he was too busy thinking about Harry, *always* about Harry, in these past few days, to remember to check his work emails, and that’s why he’s felt nothing but rushed this entire evening.

Apparently, everyone who’s anyone has been invited to this show, courtesy of Decca Records, as a way of generating some publicity for the band before their album comes out and the proper promo begins.

God, the album. Louis hadn’t even thought about that, about the whole reason for him being here, being in his current situation, really. If it weren’t for this job, this album, that he was asked to write on, he would’ve never met Harry. Just the thought of that alone makes Louis’ stomach turn because, despite everything, he now can’t actually imagine living a world in which he doesn’t know Harry. *Lovely* Harry. It’s terrifying to admit to himself, but it’s true, and Louis was never very good at lying, not even to himself.

There’s a few faces he recognises as he walks up to the entrance with Niall, both of them dressed rather smartly, and gives their names at the door. He realises that he knows some because they’re famous and others because they’re Harry’s… *friends*.

There’s even paps, who by the way have no manners *whatsoever*, with their extremely blinding cameras and raised voices, which does absolutely *fuck all* to calm Louis’ nerves at the thought of seeing Harry. Really, though, it does seem a bit overkill, and Louis’ sure Harry would hate this sort of thing, but he supposes it’ll be beneficial in the long run, or something.

It’s been about a week since he saw Harry last, when they had that awful chat in the cafe that had somehow ended disastrously, and left Louis feeling shitty and hopeless. It’s been a few days, though, since Niall knocked some sense into him, made him see reason, made him understand that perhaps Harry has always felt the same this entire time, and perhaps Louis has (definitely) been an idiot.

He’s glad, then, that he’s got Niall with him tonight, by his side, when he has to see Harry for the first time since their… disagreement. He hasn’t spoken to him, thought maybe a text, or even a call, would seem like he didn’t care enough. He wanted to apologise, and talk things out with Harry in person, hopefully after the gig.

“Drinks? You might need a bit of liquid courage, mate. Look like you’re about to shit yourself,” Niall ever so helpfully tells Louis as they stand in the foyer of the venue.

It’s quite fancy, Louis thinks, as they line up at the open bar. All carpeted entry and chandelier lights
hanging above them, and is that man next to them really wearing a suit? Jesus.

He’s only been here once or twice before, for a small awards show, or something like that. Never for a gig, but he supposes the label really wants to show off their new and fresh talent, (which he doesn’t blame them for) and it seems as though throwing money around is their way of doing it.

“Yes, Niall, thank you for your kind words,” Louis rolls his eyes at his friend, and tugs at the collar of his jumper. Why the fuck did he wear a jumper to a gig, anyway? How many gigs has he been to in his life, and how many times has it been cold enough to necessitate a bloody jumper? None, is the answer, he thinks as he peels it off, but Louis was rushed, and anxious earlier, and perhaps that’s why he chose the exact wrong clothes to wear to someplace where he’s already going to be sweating in a big crowd of people, as well as the fact that he’ll probably also be sweating from nerves, too.

*Jesus, get a grip of yourself, just relax, everything’s fine.*

“Mate, relax,” Niall reassures him, as he hands over a beer, “You’ll be fine. The hardest part’ll just be having to watch him up there for an hour, when you haven’t spoken to him yet, probably, but after that you can sort things out. It’ll be perfect, promise.

“Perfect’s a very strong word, Nialler,” Louis berates, as they get ushered through the doors into the actual room where the stage is, where some opening act Louis’ never heard of is playing. Fuck, it’s quite small, and intimate; Louis could even get up to the front if he wanted to.

“I know what I said, Tommo,” Niall responds, and tugs him into the throng of people already inside at the front, and it seems as though actually Louis has no choice in the matter of where they stand, Niall has apparently taken over that responsibility. Louis is secretly relieved, but he wouldn’t ever tell Niall that, knows that he’d probably just tease him for wanting to be as close as possible to the stage, to Harry, even now.

“We’re really going straight up to the front?” Louis asks, well, shouts, over the music and the people around them, as they squeeze their way through all the swaying bodies clumped around them.

“Don’t pretend like you don’t want to, mate. Can read you like a book, remember?” Niall yells back, right as they get up to the barriers, and fuck, they really are front and centre, and Louis really is getting more nervous by the minute, at the thought of seeing Harry again.

Although it’s only been a week, it feels impossibly longer, and Louis’ heart leaps when he thinks of the moment he’ll finally see him again, up there, hopefully in better spirits than he had been.

“Yeah, yeah, and I hate you for it!” Louis chimes back, hoping Niall can hear his sarcasm over the sound of the applause around them. Niall just laughs, and Louis smiles, feeling slightly relaxed. He looks back at the stage and, oh. The opening act is leaving, that applause was for the end of their set, presumably - Louis hadn’t noticed - which means–

“Hey, think they’re probably coming on soon, then! You ready?” Niall, ever so helpful, leans in to tell him, as if Louis’ heart rate hasn’t just bloody skyrocketed yet again at the prospect of seeing Harry, face to face, almost.

“Of course I’m bloody not!” Louis shrugs, before taking a large gulp of his beer. He looks around, and spots Tom in the corner of the venue next to the stage, chatting to that lady from the record label, the one Louis had definitely *not* been afraid of. They seem to be having quite the intense chat, though obviously there’s no way Louis can hear them over the recorded music that’s currently blaring through the speakers, before *The Cahoots* come out.
He feels a nudge at his side then, distracting him from his boss and Harry, Zayn and Liam’s, and then Niall shoves a phone in his face. He has to squint a moment to focus on the bright screen in the dark, but he quickly realises it’s a text that Niall’s showing him. From Liam, apparently.

**Hey guys, happy you’re here to watch us!! Just having a few problems with Harry, so might be a bit late coming on. It’s fine, don’t worry, just wanted to let ya know**

Louis’ brow is furrowed, and he keeps reading over the text until Niall pockets his phone. Problems with Harry? Hopefully it’s not… the type of problems Louis’ dreading. The type of problems he’d tried to speak to him about, the other day.

Louis isn’t very optimistic.

“Well what does that mean?” Louis asks rather pointlessly, trying to keep the panic out of his voice, as if Niall has any more information than he does. Niall just shrugs in response, not bothering to attempt to shout over the blaring music again.

Louis sighs at that, suddenly feeling all jittery and a different kind of nervous. It’s not really his place, he supposes, but he wants to know how Harry is, what’s going through his mind, if he’s… If he’s alright.

He doesn’t have to wonder for long, because just after he takes another (quite large) sip of his beer, the room is blanketed in complete darkness for a moment, and then the stage lights come up.

Glaring crimson red is the primary colour, bathing the stage completely in its tint. A hazy fog appears, caressing the edges of the stage and slightly obscuring Louis’ view. There’s also a red neon sign hanging up that he can just make out though, one Louis hadn’t noticed before. On it reads the words ‘THE CAHOOTS’ in block letters, and it’s balancing in front of a heavy, velvet curtain at the back. Louis can feel his body buzzing in anticipation for what’s just about to happen, can hardly wait for the boys to come onstage; he’s already going lightheaded from the beer, and the atmosphere, and his desperation to see Harry.

There’s movement, suddenly, and then music starts; it’s a harsh, electrifying sound, coming from somewhere vaguely in front of Louis, but the fog’s too thick and he can’t bloody see.

He realises after a moment someone’s playing the guitar, and squints his eyes to have a look, trying to cut through the murkiness. Nothing.

*Harry plays the guitar,* he reminds himself, and then his nervous energy reaches new levels, he can’t take this, he needs to see him, needs to know he’s here.

Then a drum starts beating, creating a low, loud and constant note that reverberates throughout the room and there’s a ringing in his ears.

People are probably screaming next to him, but he takes no notice, his eyes and his attention only focussed on one thing.

The fog starts to clear, and his eyes immediately dart to where he heard the sound before, but he only sees Liam and Zayn onstage, both of them behind mics, accompanied by the instrumental band, and when did they come on? He doesn’t know, and his mind isn’t cooperating, because he’s only got one question flashing through his head right now, over and over again like some constant film reel: where is Harry?

He tries to concentrate, tries to focus on the music for a moment, tells himself to calm down.
He looks directly in front of him, and sees a lone mic stand. Vacant.

Louis clenches his free fist, grounding himself, and why’s he so fucking anxious? He needs to relax, Harry’s probably fine, probably just a little late, and coming on in a minute.

A minute comes about 10 long seconds later.

Louis sees a hint of movement from the side of the stage, a curtain twitching, and he whips his head up, craning his neck to see who it is and spilling his drink on Niall in the process, if the squawk of indignation he hears is anything to go by.

Louis’ distracted for a moment, doesn’t see the figure that basically falls out from the wings until he’s stumbling across stage to the microphone. Louis glances up at the increased volume of the cheers around him and the flicker of movement in the corner of his eye, and sees… Harry. Finally.

Harry situates himself centre stage, looming over Louis in such a way that makes himself incredibly hard to look away from. He’s wearing bright pink embroidered trousers, hair all tousled the way Louis loves, and he looks like an absolute dream, like something Louis’ conjured up in a fantasy.

Perhaps standing at the very front was a bad idea, because now Louis’ close enough to hear every breath Harry takes, see every little movement, can even smell him. Louis’ senses are completely overcome by Harry, and after a week of no contact at all it’s completely overwhelming, in the best of ways.

It’s only when Harry starts talking that Louis realises something’s definitely wrong.

The music is still playing, somewhat sporadically, in the background, and Harry waits a bit for the audience to settle before he starts to speak.

“Hellooooooo ooohh evrybodyyyyyy,” he starts, words coming out long and languid and unnatural. “How’sit… How’ssit going to–,” Harry giggles half way through his word, but it’s not a pleasant sound, more like it’s put on, clearly not genuine, “Tonight?”

Louis notices from his close proximity that his eyes look glazed over and hooded, and he’s not concentrating. He casts his eyes over Louis’ head completely, flickering instead to the people at the back, and Louis thinks that might be for the best, just so that Harry doesn’t notice the troubled look he knows is on face. He probably wouldn’t be able to see Louis anyway; it doesn’t look like he is seeing much at all, really.

Harry’s stumbled movements and slurred words make one thing clear to Louis: he’s drunk. Louis feels Niall nudge him, knows he’s going to voice Louis thoughts, and just ignores him.

Hot frustration is brewing inside Louis, both at himself and at Harry, as the music for the first song begins to play, and Harry looks as though he’s holding onto his bloody mic stand for support.

_Cheated and lied, broken so bad
You made a vow, never get mad
You play the game, though it's unfair
They're all the same, who can compare?_
Harry’s resounding voice ripples through Louis, scratchy and slurred. But he can’t concentrate on the pleasant feeling because, fucking hell, of course after Louis tries to intervene, tries to stop this sort of thing from happening, it goes and bloody happens. Maybe if Louis hadn’t had gotten involved with Harry and his problems, hadn’t tried to talk to him about it, they wouldn’t be in this situation. Maybe.

First you lose trust, then you get worried

Night after night, bar after club

Dropping like flies, who woke you up

The music swells, and it’s all so much, because while Louis’ trying to listen and simultaneously push his anger away, he can’t help but want to scream, because Harry knows, he’s been told, how important this gig is to practically introduce them to the industry, and he’s turned up drunk off his face as if no-one’s going to notice? The fact that Harry’s boss from the label here is enough to make Louis extremely nervous on his behalf, despite everything, for the talking-to he’s going to get after the show.

How am I the lucky one?, I do not deserve

To wait around forever when, you were there first

First you get hurt, then you feel sorry

There comes a time, in a short life

Turn it around, get a rewrite

Louis can barely understand the lyrics, and Harry’s just flailing about onstage in front of him, half of the time not even near his mic. Louis can see Liam and Zayn exchanging looks, looks you wouldn’t see if you weren’t waiting for them, but they’re there, and they confirm Louis’ suspicions that Harry’s not alright.

Louis’ so close as well, could almost touch Harry, but he can’t do anything, and he feels so fucking useless. He can’t quite imagine being able to stop an entire concert at all subtly in an attempt to salvage Harry’s, salvage The Cahoots, reputation.

You’re going silent, the silent treatment

It’s not inviting now, don’t deny what you meant

You get excited, you get excited
You got a feel it, oh, at least you can pretend

You wanna light it, you wanna light it

You wanna light it now, the candle from both ends

You get excited, you get excited

Louis realises he can’t do anything but stand there and watch the disaster unfold, and pray to God that Harry doesn’t fall over, or make it too obvious to the important people watching that he’s at a point past inebriated.

He takes a deep breath, and lets the music overcome him, listens to the lyrics, listens to them being sung. God, they’re a bit angry, actually, and if Louis didn’t know better he’d think they were aimed at him. He almost feels guilty.

They recorded this particular song at the studio though. Louis remembers because it was the same day Harry turned up dressed in a bright yellow jumper that Louis couldn’t stop thinking it, about how well yellow - a happy yellow - suited him, for hours after the session ended.

Fuck. Louis’ only now realising how pathetic that sounds. Only now realising how evocative of his feelings for Harry it is, how obvious it was, even back then, how gone for Harry he is.

“Tank youuuu evry’boday!” Louis hears, and it’s Harry again.

Just hearing his voice is enough to calm him, despite how obviously choppy it sounds and the disaster unfolding. Louis looks up above him and sees Harry, barely standing, black shirt all but completely unbuttoned, those little sparrows peeking out, chest glistening with sweat, and still undoubtedly as beautiful as ever.

“The next one… Now, the next one… We ‘av for ya….” Harry starts, squinting at the bright lights streaming on him, and Louis cringes at his obvious struggle at getting the words out. He looks around anxiously, tries to see if he can spot Harry’s boss, or his boss, anywhere about, knows they’re watching somewhere. Fuck. Come on, Harry.

“The next one’s… Issa new one. Brand spankin’ new.” Harry unlatches the mic and starts dragging the stand along the stage with him as he speaks, tripping over his feet and a rogue wire a few times in the process. “Wrote it the other day, in fact. S’about someone. Ha. That bit’s obvious though, right? Every song’s s’about someone. Is’ just who is’ about is the mystery, innit?” Harry laughs, bitterly, and Louis doesn’t like the direction that this is going. Harry seems to take a measured breath, before his next words come out, features hardening, “For this one, though, people– people write songs about boys like mine… so that’s exactly what I did.”

The invisible vice around Louis’ chest tightens at Harry’s words. Wrote it the other day… after they met up? And boys like mine … Louis can’t ignore that, but could it… Is it possible that it might be about Louis? Louis shakes himself, tries to get out of his own head.

Of course he wouldn’t write a bloody song about you, Jesus, who do you think you are?

Harry’s walked up and down the stage by now, is standing a bit further back than before. His eyes dance over the crowd, never catching Louis’, and there seems to be a buzz of anticipation in the air for this new song, a sense of secrecy and exclusivity. Louis just wants it to be over, but at the same time, can’t help but be curious and nervous about what he’s about to hear.
“Anyway, enough faff, let’s jus’ get on wi’ it. I’m gonna be singing this one alone, if that’s alright wi’ you lot?” It comes out in a tumble, words falling all over each other, and Louis absent-mindedly inches further towards the stage, transfixed, his body now pressed up against the barrier - the only thing separating him from Harry. “This is, *Meet Me in the Hallway.*”

Louis watches as Zayn and Liam leave the stage, reluctantly, it seems, and the lights dim to a sole spotlight on Harry, and it’s all Louis can see, all he can hear, all he can smell.

It’s Harry, all *Harry,* and Louis feels his chest tighten and his stomach flip at the sight.

The music starts, a twangy tune that Louis likes immediately. Harry looks ethereal alone up there, something god-like, like nothing can touch him. He’s staring blankly out, listening to the music as it surrounds him, eyes tracing the crowd again, but he still doesn’t look at Louis’. This time, Louis finds himself willing Harry to look over, to *see* him, to know he’s there, just in front of him, watching, waiting.

Louis realises though, quite quickly, that he’s not prepared, not in the fucking slightest, to hear Harry sing this particular song.

*Meet me in the hallway*

*Meet me in the hallway*

*I just left your bedroom*

*Give me some morphine*

*Is there any more to do?*

The lyrics cut into Louis, and he replays them in his mind. A hallway? A bedroom? *But Harry doesn’t remember that, he blacked out, didn’t he?*

It all sounds so familiar, the night when everything went wrong, when Louis had ruined everything. That deserted little corridor Harry had kissed him in, when the combination of alcohol and unsaid feelings had built up and burst, wonderfully, in a haze of heated words and touches, and a bedroom, *Louis’* bedroom, the one that he made Harry leave almost immediately.

Fuck, and Harry sounds so in *pain,* his voice all shaky and thick, and did Louis do that? Louis can’t even look at him, just shuts his eyes and grips the cool metal of the railing in front of him, has to feel something, anything, to try and relax the pounding in his head.

The ever-increasing chance that the song is about Louis shocks him to the core; he feels a sudden chill overcome him, and almost forgets to listen to the rest of the song.

*Just let me know I'll be at the door, at the door*

*Hoping you'll come around*

*Just let me know I'll be on the floor, on the floor*
Maybe we'll work it out

I gotta get better, gotta get better

I gotta get better, gotta get better

I gotta get better, gotta get better

And maybe we'll work it out

He opens his eyes to watch, which is a stupid decision, because all he sees are those glistening green eyes, staring right ahead, so full of pure emotion, and it knocks the breath out of him.

Louis’ eyes attempt to lock in on Harry’s, try so hard to make him to look his way, but Harry’s eyes are unfocused and hazy, staring straight over his head, eyebrows furrowed in concentration, or pain, or something.

Look at me, love, please just look at me, he thinks, as if somehow Harry could hear him.

Louis feels guilty, and hopeful, and terrified all at once, and maybe the lyric I gotta get better makes sense, after their chat, but fuck, it hits Louis hard, because he thought Harry didn’t remember? He spoke to Harry that day as if it never fucking happened, and what kind of message would that send to Harry? That Louis was so ashamed of them almost sleeping together that he just ignored it? Fuck, and that’s so far from the truth, so incredibly far, and Louis’ starting to piece everything together and all he wants to do is talk to Harry right now, and explain, but he can’t, and Harry won’t bloody look at him.

I walked the streets all day

Running with the thieves

’Cause you left me in the hallway

Give me some more

Just take my pain away

The hurt in Harry’s voice seems to travel and seep right into Louis, and he wants to, God, he wants to be able take Harry’s pain away, somehow, or better yet, he wants to go back in time and not be the reason for it in the first place. Louis feels the pure frustration heat up inside of him, because he can’t, he fucked up, massively, and he can’t do anything about it.

We don’t talk about it

It’s something we don’t do

’Cause once you go without it
Nothing else will do

The final notes of the song seem to knock any sense of calm that he had still somehow managed to keep a grasp of straight out of Louis, and he feels so stuck, because now Zayn and Liam are coming back onstage, and they’ve all got to finish their gig, got to put on a good show for all the people here.

They’ve got to finish their show, and Louis is expected to just wait and watch until it’s over, as if his entire chest doesn’t feeling like it’s fucking caving in on itself.

“You alright, mate?” Louis hears from his left, and yeah, Niall’s here, he forgot about that. Somehow this moment feels familiar, but all of Louis’ energy goes into remembering how to level his voice properly, remembering how to breathe.

“I’m fine, it’s– it’s fine.” The response comes out all choked off and airy, and Louis manages to take a few deep breaths before turning to face his friend.

Under the limited light in the room, Niall’s looking at him like he knows, he knows what it’s about, and isn’t that just brilliant, because Niall’s realised at the same time as Louis, of course he has, and if this isn’t just one big metaphor for Louis’ cluelessness then he doesn’t know what is.

Louis just looks away, he has to, can’t deal with the reality of the situation right now. He stands, watching, but not really seeing, as they sing another song, and then another, and how many bloody songs do they have? The show goes on, because it has to, but Louis doesn’t even feel like he’s there, just feels like the minutes and seconds going by are taunting him, dragging their feet, keeping him away from Harry for as long as they can.

Finally, at one point, Louis hears a fuzzy, “Thank you very much, good night!”, from Liam maybe, he’s not sure, but oh, wait, does that mean it’s over?

He looks up at the stage, now vacant, he didn’t even see them leave. The crowd behind him’s dispersing too, but this is bad, because Harry’s disappeared, and he’s got to find him, got to figure out where he is, right now.

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He must look ready to run, because Niall grabs his arm suddenly. “Where you going?” he asks, a concerned look on his face.

“To find Harry?” Louis answers, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world, because isn’t it? It is to Louis. He wrings his hands and flicks his eyes around, trying to figure out where the quickest way to backstage is.

“Well. Let’s go then,” Niall says, and leads Louis off, and in any other circumstance Louis would complain and say he can do it himself, thank you very much, but right now he’s grateful for Niall’s hand on his arm, guiding him, tugging him along to the corner of the venue where a security guard is standing in front of a heavy-looking door, because Louis’ not sure his senses would have been in enough order to find it himself.

He feels like he’s in a daze when Niall positions them in front of the man guarding the door, that Louis can now see has the word ‘backstage’ printed on it.

“Hi, we’re friends of the band, we–,” Niall starts, because it’s probably clear to him that Louis’ not about to be forming any coherent sentences any time soon.

“Hey, I remember you two. You came to a gig about a month ago, didn’t ya?” the guard replies, and
then Louis recognises him. It’s the same man from that first gig him and Niall went to, the only other one they’ve been to. What was he called? Geoff?

“Gerard!” Ah yes, Gerard, that was it. Cool, now, if they could speed up this little reunion before Louis develops a stomach ulcer from his nerves that would be great. “Nice to see ya again mate! Listen, my friend Louis here’s got to go speak to Harry, it’s very important, do you reckon you could let us in?”

Gerard doesn’t even glance at the list he’s holding before simply letting them through the door, and Louis wordlessly thanks whatever power is looking down upon him today that he’s been given some semblance of good luck.

Niall thanks Gerard, and then they’re alone on the other side, a row of doors down the right side of the wall, behind one of which is probably Harry. He feels Niall’s presence next to him, shifting ever so slightly, while Louis just looks straight ahead. Louis takes a deep breath, and then hears a few words of encouragement from his best mate that spurs him into action.

“Go get him, Louis.”

Louis nods to himself and hears Niall chuckle as he slowly makes his way down the hallway. He can feel his heart pounding in his chest, his head, his ears, blood and adrenaline pumping through his veins at the thought of what he’s about to do.

His eyes trace over labels on doors, none of which bear Harry’s name, and he gets to the end, he thinks, but there’s a corner, and he breaches it and then–

“Harry.”

Louis’ voice seems to have come back to him, just, because standing right there, right in front of him, hand on the dressing room door, a sight that makes Louis’ chest ache, is Harry. *Lovely Harry*. His eyes are wet, like he’s being crying, and wide with shock, like he’s surprised to see Louis here, and that just makes Louis feel worse, because of course, *of course* he probably gave Harry that impression.

“Louis.”

Harry’s voice is soft, ever so soft, and just the sound of it makes something loosen inside Louis, makes his heart jump at the sound, and everything feels a bit lighter.

Louis takes a breath to say something, anything, but just as he does, Harry’s gaze darts to the floor, eyes screwed up in some kind of anguish, and then just like that, he disappears into the dressing room, leaving Louis alone in the hallway.

Louis exhales roughly at the blatant rejection, but then he decides that no, he’s not just going to leave, not going to let his actions make Harry walk away.

Not again.

He stares at the large black door in front of him, lets his breathing reach a steady pace. It all feels a bit eerily familiar, to another moment, a month or so ago, but what feels like a lifetime. He reads the words *Harry, The Cahoots*, that are taped to it, then takes a moment, and doesn’t think, just opens the door, because he has to talk to Harry, *he needs to*.

“Harry, wait,” Louis says, as he roughly bursts through the door, into the dimly lit dressing room. “I just need to—”
He stops, because he doesn't see Harry, not immediately, not until he glances over to his right and sees Harry laying on the sofa, curled up around a teddy bear, of all things, because it's Harry, and Louis thinks his heart breaks a little bit at the sight.

Harry doesn't look up at him, and Louis can't see his face. In fact, all he can hear are his own deep breaths, and Harry’s laboured ones, and is he crying? Because of him? Louis’ possibly the worst human being alive.

“Harry, please…” Louis attempts, and is met with no response. He feels suspended in the moment, standing in the middle of the room, worried that if he takes another step, if he moves a muscle, the fragile atmosphere will break. “Harry, I–”

“You what, Louis?” Harry’s shining eyes whip up to meet Louis’, and suddenly he’s off the sofa and right in front of the other boy, looming over him, stood only a few inches away. His voice is cold, and hard, words snapping at Louis in quick succession, and his face is wet with just-shed tears, eyes all red and swollen. His lips are all bitten and raw, and he just looks so broken, and all Louis wants to do is take him in his arms and never let him go.

“I, I just want to talk to you, I really–”

“You mean the other day! When you asked to have a nice, little chat? That other day?” Harry seethes, his words all sharp and venomous, and the sound makes Louis cringe, he can’t take it, can’t take the sight of Harry in front of him, tears still steadily streaming down his face.

“Harry, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry, I–” Louis blurts, desperately, and then takes a breath, eyes on the tears that are still trickling down Harry’s face, and he has to resist the urge to reach up and wipe them
all away. “I didn't, I thought you didn't remember, Zayn said–”

Harry scoffs at Louis, at his attempts, “Of course I fucking remembered, how could I not? You kissed the bloody life out of me, I’d never felt anything like it before, not with anyone…” Harry’s voice is now something small, losing all its’ fight, and the words overcome Louis, make him feel lightheaded and warm, but he has no time to linger on them. “And then I was so fucking embarrassed the next day, about how you said it was a mistake, how you said we were a mistake, I didn’t want to talk to anyone about it, except for you,” Harry’s voice breaks, and he takes a frustrated breath, “Of course I bloody lied to Zayn and told him I didn't remember!”

Louis lets the words settle, and they stare at each other for a moment. Shit. It all makes sense now, Harry’s behaviour at the café, why he got so pissed off, and fucking Christ, Louis has seriously fucked up.

“Fuck, Harry, I…” He tries to put as much conviction into his voice as he can muster, needs Harry to believe him, to know how important this is for him to understand, “It was a misunderstanding, I never wanted… I just…” Louis clenches his fists at his sides, trying his best not to reach out and touch Harry, but he's right there, right in front of him, cheeks all wet and hot, and it's torture, “I'm so fucking sorry, it wasn’t a mistake. We weren’t a mistake, not at all, I didn’t mean it, I just, if I had known–”

“What, Louis? What would you have done?” Harry questions, but his voice is unsteady, and his lips tremble as he speaks. “You know, you didn’t… You didn’t have to lead me on like that, or just… If it meant nothing to you, if I meant nothing to you,” Harry tells him, voice losing all its’ volume and confidence, “If you didn't want me, you just had to bloody say.”

Louis recoils at what he's just heard, and the words hang between them for a moment, all broken and small and entirely unbelievable. For a second, Louis can’t say a thing, just gapes at Harry, unable to hold his incredulity in at what Harry’s just said, and his stomach drops at his words, because no, God no, he's got it all wrong.

Harry’s visibly confused by Louis’ reaction, or lack thereof, chest heaving and eyes challenging, but beneath it all he just looks so worn out and miserable. And, worst of all, he thinks Louis didn’t want him?

“Harry,” Louis begins, remembering to talk after a beat, scrunching his brows up in confusion. “I can't believe you think…” he trails off, scoffing to himself out of pure disbelief, and Harry’s eyes flicker straight to Louis’ moving lips.

“What?” Harry replies, and his voice has transformed, gone all soft and anxious.

Louis’ heart is pounding against his chest so violently that he thinks it might escape, and he’s nervous, so fucking nervous, but the next words just spill out of his lips, almost accidentally, voice a breathy whisper.

“Harry,” Louis murmurs, tenderly, voice low and fond, and he takes a small step closer to Harry as he speaks. “My lovely, lovely Harry…”

Harry’s glimmering eyes dart up, then, and flash between Louis’ own pair, and he looks so desperate, and scared, and so very small. And Louis realises then that he really can't let another second go by where Harry is unsure about Louis’ feelings for him. Unsure about something that Louis’ realised he's been sure about for a while now.

The words leave Louis’ lips on a soft exhale, “Harry,” he breathes, heart fluttering in his chest, “I am
so, utterly, in love with you."

A tiny gasp is pulled from Harry’s mouth immediately at Louis’ admission; Louis feels the warmth of its release on his own. Harry's shoulders sag slowly, tension leaving him, and the sight comforts Louis.

It's only then that Louis realises what he's just said, something he hadn't even properly admitted to himself yet, but… But yes, he's… He’s in love with Harry.

Completely and absolutely in love with him.

“You… what?” Harry whispers, voice slow and face contorted in confusion, and Louis lets himself take a small step forward, confidence growing by the minute.

“I’m so in love with you,” Louis says airily, voice thick with tenderness, and he can't stop now, doesn't want to, not ever. “I think I have been for a while, actually, and I’m, I’m so, so sorry that I ever made you think the opposite.”

Each word is laced with warmth, and hopefulness, and adoration, and Louis feels a weight lift, feels a part of his heart go to Harry, with every single one.

Harry’s features smooth out at that, and then Louis feels light, gentle hands come to rest on his waist, making him, for a moment, lose his breath.

“Oh. Louis. I– I thought–” As Harry’s words get caught in his throat, Louis’ lets his thumbs brush any remaining tears away from the tips of Harry’s supple cheeks. Any residual tension seems to leave Harry’s body with Louis’ touch, his shining eyes shifting between Louis’, so full of wonder and relief, and so vastly different to what they were mere moments ago.

“I know, I know, I’m so sorry. I… The truth is there are a few reasons for the way I behaved, but mainly… Mainly I was scared, that night, I was terrified of how strongly I felt for you, and I freaked out, and made you leave and I…” Louis whispers, and he keeps looking up at Harry, grounded by his hands on him, “I didn't know what to say, I couldn't-- I couldn't tell you the real reason because even then I don't think I knew, not fully. But now…”

Louis gets distracted mid-sentence, because Harry's hands on his waist tighten, and he’s looking at him in that special way, giving him that tiny private smile that’s slowly growing on his face, eyes aglow like Louis’ the most precious thing in the entire world, and Louis almost wants to cry because he never thought Harry would look at him like that ever again.

“But now I know that it was because I'd fallen in love with you, and I've never… I've never felt that way about anyone before, and it scared me, but… But I’m not scared anymore, Harry.”

“Oh, Louis…” Harry whispers, eyes going all soft and pitiful. He leans closer, but Louis isn't finished, needs to get everything out, because there's no use bottling anything away; Louis knows this now.

“And I should've just talked to you about it, instead of listening to what someone else told me, should've just apologised for my actions straight away, but I didn't, and I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Harry,” and Louis can hear the desperation in his own voice. He lets his arms travel up to lightly grasp Harry’s shoulders, bringing them even closer, and he hopes Harry understands, needs him to understand that Louis’ an idiot who is so incredibly in love with him. “I just… I love you, and I--”

Louis feels Harry’s lips on his own before he realises what's happening. His words are swallowed up by Harry, whose kiss is so tender and sweet, and Louis goes lightheaded, for the hundredth time that
night, it seems. He can't believe he's survived as long as he has without having Harry’s soft, pillowy lips placed so gently on his own.

“I love you too,” Harry whispers, as they finally break apart, words gently grazing Louis’ lips, and the sound of them leaving his mouth is better than any song Louis’ ever written. He wasn't expecting it, was so consumed by his need to explain himself to Harry that he hadn't even thought about receiving a response to his confession.

“I… You do?”

“Yes, of course I do, Lou,” Harry responds, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world, and Louis releases a relieved breath. Harry laughs quietly, then, a light, twinkly sound that makes Louis’ heart swell. “I have for a little while, I think. Knew before that night. And, um, I understand, I– I forgive you. I probably shouldn't have lied to Zayn, I just… I didn’t think he was gonna talk to you about–”

“No, love, it's not your fault at all, please don't think it is.” Louis' not going to let Harry believe any of this has anything to do with something Harry’s done.

“Lou, please, we both made mistakes. I realise that now, and I'm sorry.” Louis attempts to argue with him, but Harry beats him to it. “Now please, could you possibly be quiet for just one second, so that I can kiss you again.”

And, well, Louis’ not going to drop it just yet, but he supposes they can discuss this properly tomorrow. Because right now Harry's in front of him, has just told Louis he loves him back, miraculously, and now he’s asking to kiss him, and how on earth could Louis deny him that?

Louis lets all the fight leave his body and feels Harry's soft hands travel up to cradle his jaw, feels his fingers threading through the stray ends of hair at the nape of his neck, sending a shiver down his spine. He gives Harry a soft smile, then, still slightly in disbelief at what’s just happened, what’s happening, at this very moment.

Harry gazes at him, and moves closer, lifting Louis’ chin up ever so slightly so their lips can slot together again. They're like two puzzle pieces, Louis' realises, in so many ways.

Louis’ eyes flutter shut at the feeling of their mouths meeting, and the kiss is even more gentle than last time, makes Louis feel like he’s melting in the spot; it's all warm and beautiful. Louis wishes he could bottle this delicate, wonderful feeling up, wants to be able to revisit it whenever he’d like.

“Taste so sweet, Lou,” Harry whispers against Louis’ smiling lips, “Maybe that's what I should call you. Sweet Lou.”

“Sweet Lou and lovely Harry,” Louis breathes back. “Quite a pair, we make.”

This elicits a grin out of Harry and those beautiful, beautiful dimples that Louis has missed so much return, and Louis doesn't think he’s ever felt such pure happiness in his entire life.

Louis moves away then, to get a good look at Harry, but only little bit; they're still tangled together.

“Christ, you're beautiful, H.”

Harry dips his head down, blushes at Louis’ words, a rosy pink tickling the tips of his cheekbones, and Louis adores it, adores Harry.

There's a harsh rapping at the door then, and it makes them both jump apart; Louis had completely forgotten where they were.
“’S’it safe to come in lads?” they hear from the other side of the door, and it's the unmistakable voice of Niall. Harry giggles, followed closely by Louis, at the apprehension in Niall’s voice.

“Yes, Niall, you twat, come in,” Louis responds, through a laugh, and as soon as the words leave his mouth Niall’s in the room, accompanied by Zayn and Liam, eyes wide and searching.

It's clear the moment they all realise everything's okay, because slow smiles start to form on all of their faces, and Louis can't help but mirror their expressions.

“Ah, so… all good?” Liam asks, but he's got one of those smug grins on his face again, and it's obvious that he knows the answer.

Louis looks over at Harry, who’s already looking at him, fondly, that lovely little private smile on his face again, just for Louis.

“Yeah,” Harry says in response, smiling sweetly, but eyes only on Louis, “Really good.”

Louis’ the one to blush now, can’t stop the smile from forming on his face, and he feels like a teenager, completely dizzy with love. It is really good.

“Right, well, I think everyone's gone now and they’re ready to clean up in here, plus everyone’s waiting for you guys outside, so…” Niall says, referring to Harry, Zayn and Liam, and oh, crap, Louis had really forgotten where they were. He's got a good excuse, though; it's not every day that one experiences a grand, mutual admission of love in some dark dressing room.

“Oh, yeah, we better go then,” Harry replies, and one by one they all eventually file out of the room.

They leisurely make their way down the hallway and out through the now deserted stalls, only a few people around - not including Harry's boss, thank God. They step into the foyer, Harry and Louis walking side by side behind everyone, and Louis' so aware of him, of Harry, and it feels so good to not hold himself back from touching him, or smiling up at him, or letting their knuckles graze.

The precious moment is over in a flash, though, as Zayn and Liam are suddenly ushered outside, to the awaiting photographers hoping to get a few pictures of the members of The Cahoots after their big gig. Niall disappears somewhere, out some other exit, and then it's just Louis and Harry.

“You go out, I'll just go whichever way Niall went, and meet you out there,” Louis says to Harry, whose brow furrows at his words.

“Don't be silly, Lou,” Harry says, as his fingers find and entwine with Louis’ own, a firm, warm grip on his hand that grounds Louis immediately. “I mean, I’d like if you walked out with me.”

“In front of all those people? Are you sure?” Louis asks, not sure if it's allowed, if they're allowed.

“I am, if you are,” Harry replies, eyes hopeful and determined, with a tighter grip and a growing smile, and that's all the convincing Louis needs, really.

It's probably stupid, and there are probably going to be consequences for this, Louis has no idea. All he knows is that right now he really doesn't want to stop holding Harry’s hand, not even for a second.

They step outside and are at once accosted by camera flashes and indistinguishable shouts coming from all angles. Louis’ a bit overwhelmed by it all and he's wondering how Harry's so calm when he can only be slightly more used to it. Harry leads him through them all though, grip never loosening, to a waiting car around the corner.
“My driver will take you home, and we can talk properly tomorrow, yeah?” Harry asks, and he doesn't really give Louis much choice, as he says it while bundling Louis into the car.

“Yeah, okay.” Louis smiles, softly, voice coming out all rough, and it's only then that he realises how tired he is; it's been a long day. Louis looks around quickly before giving a giggling Harry another tender kiss on the lips, only lasting a moment, but it still makes his insides melt.

Finally, they bid each other goodbye with soft words and even softer smiles, whispers of farewells fading into the night, before eventually finding it within themselves to go their separate ways, promising to see each other the next day.
Track: You Really Got Me - The Kinks

EXCLUSIVE: Lead singer of The Cahoots, Harry Styles, spotted leaving gig with mystery man!
More pictures inside.

Harry Styles was seen leaving his own concert last night, hand in hand with a male companion, who we can exclusively reveal is Recording Engineer Louis Tomlinson. The two met whilst working on The Cahoots' debut album.

Louis stares at the headline on his screen, and the picture attached, and chuckles.

So weird.
He wonders how they found out who he is, but then again, he'd rather not know about the unorthodox ways that tabloids get hold of people’s information; he's sure it'll just sour his mood, and today that's the last thing he wants.

Today, he's happy, ecstatic in fact, because he's going to see Harry, his Harry, whom he loves, and whom loves him back. Louis’ heart clenches as the thought flits its way through his mind. He still can’t quite believe it.

He locks his phone, not bothering to read the actual article, and looks up at the map on the tube to see how many stops he has left to get to Harry’s house. Only a couple, he realises, a few minutes tops, and he feels a fluttering in his stomach with the knowledge that he's going to see his boy so soon. Even though they just saw each other the night before, it's already been too long, and Louis’ so eager to see him, all jittery and restless in his seat.

Finally, the tube jarringly pulls up to Harry’s stop, and Louis practically bolts out of his seat and off the train, settling into a brisk walk for the few minutes that he knows it will take to get to Harry’s flat.

He can’t help the smile that takes over his face, the joy that swells inside him, he’s just so happy. He knows, though, he knows they have to talk, about a few things, but thankfully he just can’t seem to get himself worked up or anxious, not in the same way he would have before.

Louis knows that whatever happens now, he’s got Harry, and that’s enough. It’ll always be enough.

Louis tucks his hands into his hoodie sleeves as a brisk wind hits him, giving him a slight shiver, and perhaps the anticipation has something to do with that too.

He rounds the corner to the street Harry’s flat is on, and he almost leaps up to the doorstep, he’s so excited to see him. He stands there, and collects himself for a moment. Relax, he tells himself, it’s Harry, just Harry, Harry who bloody loves you. Louis feels a wave of giddiness wash over him with the reminder, before he finally presses the bell. Harry buzzes him in immediately, and Louis’ not even embarrassed to admit that he quite literally sprints up the stairs to meet his boy, a blend of nerves and excitement and happiness all coming to a head when he sees him, sees Harry, stood waiting by his open door for Louis.

“Harry,” Louis breathes, slightly out of breath as he gets to the top of the stairs, as he takes in the image in front of him. Harry’s hair is all fluffy and tousled, and his gorgeous green eyes are sleepy and slow, enveloped by smudged eyeliner from the night before. It’s like he’s just woken up, even though it’s already past midday, and Louis finds it so bloody endearing. He’s wearing a lovely lilac jumper that looks so soft and comfy, Louis’ already got the urge to feel it beneath his fingertips.

“Hi, Lou,” Harry says, dimpling away, and giving Louis a wonderful toothy grin, “Missed you,” and Louis sighs at that because God, how did he end up this lucky. He stands there for a moment and just watches Harry, gazes at him, at the pure beauty that radiates off of him, and it makes Louis feel all tingly and warm.

“Missed you too, H,” Louis replies after a little while, through an equally enthusiastic smile - the one that hasn’t left his face all morning since he woke up.

Louis almost laughs then, at himself, at them, because they’re so sickly sweet; they’re two idiots in love grinning at each other across a threshold. It’s exactly the type of couple Louis would have scoffed at not too long ago, and now that’s who he is, that’s who they are, and it feels… it feels right.

“Come in, then.” Harry tilts his head inside his flat and a short, stray curl falls in his face with the movement. Louis reaches up instinctively and tucks it gently back behind his ear, and Harry blushes
at the gesture, eyes twinkling. Louis chuckles, bites his lip to stop himself, and then nods, slowly, still slightly in a daze. “Can’t just stand outside the door all day,” Harry jokes softly, and then he takes Louis’ hand and links their fingers, which fit so well together, might Louis add.

Harry tugs him in, as if Louis needed any persuading, and they amble to the living room together, dispersing a cacophony of breathy giggles and hushed whispers as they go. Harry leads them past the sofa, and towards his room, hand still gripped tightly around Louis’.

Harry turns around as they get to his bedroom door, his hand resting on the handle as he speaks to Louis. “Before we talk, I’ve, um, I’ve got something of yours.”

Louis is confused, something of his? He can’t think of what it could be, doesn’t remember leaving anything the last time he was here. He follows Harry in anyway, and watches as Harry walks across the room, to the corner, where a set of dark wooden wardrobe doors are. Harry fumbles in it for a moment, and while he’s doing that, Louis casts his gaze to Harry’s expansive wall of pictures again, remembers how fascinated he managed to get the last time.

Louis’ wandering eyes first land on a faded black and white photo, this time, right in the middle of the web of snapshots. It’s curling at the corners, all crinkly and evidently old. In it is a boy, unmistakably Harry, looking only slightly younger, probably from just a few years ago. There’s no doubt it’s him, with his then-long, brunette, cherubic curls and classic dimpled cheeks. With him is a woman, and she looks familiar, but Louis can’t quite place her. She’s blonde and beautiful, possibly about fifty or maybe older.

They’re sitting on a dark sofa together, in what looks like a dressing room, arms wrapped around each other, matching massive grins on their faces. There’s a stuffed bear sitting between them, which has the words Good Luck! written on its tummy, and Louis’ lips curl up at the sight of it. It’s the same one that was in Harry’s dressing room the night before, the one that he found Harry cuddling when he walked in.

“That’s Edie,” he hears Harry say, through a smile it sounds like, coming from behind him, looking at the same picture as Louis. Louis hadn’t recognised her, but of course, of course it’s her. Edith Valentine. “I gave her that teddy bear when I was about ten, maybe, the first time I went backstage at one of her concerts. She kept it the whole time, took it on tour with her. I think it’s been to more places than me, actually. Every time I would come out to see her, wherever she was playing, she’d have it in her dressing room, waiting for me. I always looked forward to it.”

Louis glances over at Harry, and Harry’s eyes have gone all soft, face looking content and a bit lost in a memory. Louis feels his heart constrict involuntarily at the sight, wonders if Harry’s remembering that day, the moment that photo was taken.

“She looks… really fucking cool, to be honest,” Louis breathes; she really does. Red leather jacket, and thigh high boots, long platinum blonde tresses reaching her waist, at least. Her smudgy eye makeup rivals Harry’s, and adds to the rockstar vibe, along with the countless rings and necklaces she’s wearing. Louis understands Harry’s admiration for her, can even see a bit of her in Harry, now.

“She was. So, so cool,” Harry agrees, and Louis can see him nodding his head emphatically out of the corner of his eye.

“D’you miss her a lot?” Louis cringes at himself as soon as he says it, what a stupid question, of course Harry misses her. Louis doesn’t know why he said that, he’s still just so curious about Harry’s life, even now, he supposes, almost to a fault.

“Yeah,” Harry says, his voice dropping an octave, thick with emotion. “All the time.”
Louis turns to face Harry then, gazes at his profile as Harry stays staring at the picture for another beat, breathing deeply at the sight, obviously affected by it. As Harry studies the photo, Louis studies Harry and, really, he could so easily get lost in the soft curves of his nose and lips, and the hard lines of his jaw and chin. Louis would love to, in fact, it’s his idea of heaven, just being able to study every single part of Harry until he knows every inch of him, is familiar with it all.

Louis must’ve let out a sigh without realising, or something, because then Harry turns to face him, an amused smile on his face. “Y’alright there, Lou?” he chuckles, lowly, smile turning into a grin.

“Perfect, H,” Louis responds, even though it was a joke, because he is, he does feel perfect, feels completely perfect, for the first time in his life, it seems.

Harry just laughs at him again, and shakes his head fondly. “Here you go, you muppet,” he says, quietly, and then he hands Louis something he was holding a second ago; Louis hadn’t noticed.

Louis looks down, and it’s his denim jacket, from a few weeks ago, he thinks, the one he wrapped around Harry’s shoulders when he had to take Harry home from the club, and subsequently let him just sleep in it, because he looked so very warm and cosy, and the oversized fit on Louis turned out to be just right on Harry. Louis had totally forgotten about it, thought he’d just lost it somewhere. But no, Harry’s had it this whole time. He glances up at Harry with a look of surprise, and Harry’s currently blushing, eyes quickly flashing to the floor.

“I, um, I kept it, after that night. I should’ve given it back to you after, but I, um, I didn’t really want to,” Harry starts, bashfully. “I– this sounds pathetic, but even though I didn’t really remember you taking me home, or anything, because I blacked out, and stuff, I still, you know, realised that I’d woken up in the jacket that you were in the night before. So I sort of realised you must’ve done something to help me the night before, I guess? And I remember… I remember not even being that surprised, really, I just thought, oh, of course Lou, sweet Lou, gave me his jacket last night.

“I think that day we spent all together was the day I fell in love with you, you know. Or the day I realised it, anyway. So, yeah, even though I didn’t really remember that night, I still wanted to hold onto it, because it was yours, and then you never asked for it back, so I just… kept it, I suppose. And then after that other night…” Harry takes a breath, and that reminds Louis, because he’s not sure he’s breathing himself, not after this heart wrenching little admission from Harry. “After that other night, I thought I’d just keep it, keep my little part of you that I had, if I couldn’t have the rest of you. It’s silly, I know, told you it was pathetic–”

“Harry, no, that’s not pathetic at all. It’s so sweet, and slightly sad, and… and I love you so much, I…” Louis doesn’t know quite what to say, just ends up letting the stupid garment drop from his hold, and he cups Harry’s jaw instead, places a small, soft kiss to his boy’s plush lips, “Have all my jackets, take them, Louis mumbles into the kiss, and Harry giggles, and the noise vibrates right onto Louis’ lips, a fizzy feeling that Louis adores.

“How about I just keep this one?” Harry laughs, as they move apart, smile bright and voice more confident, and Louis’ sure his own expression is exactly the same.

“I think I can handle that, H,” Louis answers, absently letting his thumbs stroke Harry’s cheeks, and his skin is so soft and supple, Louis could do this, all of this, forever.

They have to talk, though, Louis remembers after a moment, and he tells Harry as much.

“Yeah… you’re right. We do. I was hoping you wouldn’t remember,” Harry groans good-naturedly, and Louis feels his eyes crinkle in amusement.
“Oh, well, I could be persuaded to un-remember, just for a few minutes, maybe?” Louis teases, voice affecting a faux-innocence that Harry sees right through.

“Come on, trouble,” Harry shakes his head, and starts to lead Louis out, “Let’s go sit on the sofa, can’t concentrate properly in here…” Louis doesn’t miss Harry’s eyes glancing to the bed, and Louis almost feels a tiny flicker of interest ignite deep within him, just for a second, but no, not *now*, it’s really not the time for *that*, thank you very much.

Louis follows Harry out to the plush sofa, almost tumbling over his own feet to land on top of Harry, but Harry catches him by the waist just in time. Chuckling, Harry deposits Louis next to him, so they’re sitting sideways on the lounge facing towards each other, both with matching expectant expressions.

“So…” Louis begins, voice heavy, and gaze fixed onto Harry’s eyes, hoping to convey the importance of what he’s about to say. “Harry, I know we need to talk about us, but first I’d like to talk about you. And I know I tried that, the other day, and you didn’t like it, but… I’d just like to explain something, and then we don’t have to talk about it after, not if you don’t want to, is that alright?”

Harry nods, simply, giddy expression turned into something more serious.

“I… one of the reasons I made you leave, that night, was because I was scared, yeah. But another reason, something important, was that I was worried that by starting something with you, by starting any kind of relationship, I was risking the trust that you had placed in me, regarding your… Your alcohol and drug problems, all the stuff you’d told me about,” Louis explains, and studies Harry’s face for a reaction. Harry’s eyes aren’t giving anything away, but he’s not angry this time, so Louis takes that as enough to continue.

“And I– Zayn and Liam told me you don’t really talk to people about it that often, and so I thought that it was precious, and fragile, the relationship that we had, and I thought something as fickle as a one-night-stand could ruin that, and ruin my chances of maybe trying to help you, no matter how badly I wanted it.” Louis explains, and Harry listens intently, nodding his head every few moments at Louis words, and it encourages Louis to keep going. “And I know *now* that it wasn’t just going to be a one-off, that night, not to either of us, actually, but at the time I was silly and thought there was no way you could feel the same way, that it wasn’t serious, and I just… It all came down to me wanting to be able to help you, I suppose. And not wanting to risk that.”

There’s a pause, a beat of silence between them, where Louis waits nervously for Harry’s reaction.

“Okay… I think I understand, now. I see where you were coming from, Lou,” and Louis’ glad Harry understands, but he’s also sensing a ‘but’ coming. “But Louis”– there it is – “what I’m getting from this, is that, ultimately, you made the decision that us potentially being together, or starting something, would have been detrimental to you helping me with my problems… and you made that decision for the both of us, as if it didn’t, like, concern me? As if I was some sort of child, almost… It’s like, I know we weren’t really in the position, in that moment, that night, to talk about it, and we’re both guilty of not telling the other how we feel, but you just… I feel like you wrote us off before we could even be anything, you know, and you didn’t think to even acknowledge what I would have thought?” Harry says, voice going soft and quiet as he finishes, and Louis, well.

Louis is floored, he’d never thought about it that way before, because he’d been so sure about how Harry had felt, and so insecure in himself, that he’d just assumed that it could only end badly. Harry’s right, he shouldn’t have been so rash in his decisions, should have just fucking communicated his feelings, should’ve at least attempted to explain to Harry why he was making him leave that night, instead of just wordlessly kicking him out.
“I… yeah. Yeah, you’re right, Harry. I’m sorry, I suppose I didn’t really give us a chance, I guess. In my mind it made more sense, I think. I– I just didn’t want to take any chances, because I really care about you, Harry, and I really do want to help you get better. Only, uh, only if you want help, that is. I know the other day you didn’t seem too happy about it, so…”

“No, I mean, I’m sorry too, I probably should have made it clearer how I felt, as well, so you didn’t feel so unsure,” Harry frets, and Louis heart aches. “I think I might have been a little bit scared too.”

“Oh, Harry,” Louis laughs, softly, and takes Harry’s hand, “That’s okay, love. It’s all okay now.”

There’s a pause, then, before Harry decides to pick up on what Louis had said just a moment ago. “You can still help me when we’re together, you know.” Harry’s hard expression softens then, his lips curling ever so slightly. “Us being in a relationship wouldn’t have changed anything. It doesn’t change anything now, either,” he says, and Louis ears prick on the words relationship and now, but Harry isn’t finished. “And I– the other day, I guess I was caught a little bit off guard, and I was frustrated, because I thought we were going to talk about the other night, so I lashed out at you, but… I do want to get better, Lou. And I will talk about everything, all my problems and stuff, with you; I want to. Just… not right now, not this minute, if that’s okay.”

“Of course that’s okay, H. Whenever you’re ready,” Louis reassures, squeezing his hand lightly, and mirroring Harry’s delicate smile back to him.

Harry says nothing, just holds Louis’ gaze, and it almost distracts Louis from what he’s just heard, but not quite.

“So… we’re in a relationship, are we?” Louis offers, and his voice comes out all teasing and confident, but his insides are going wild, a mess of nerves and excitement at what Harry had said.

Harry blushes, eyes going wide, and petal-like lips falling open slightly. “Oh, I mean, um, only if you–” he starts, stuttering out his words, going redder by the minute, and Louis only finds him even more adorable.

“Of course I’d like to be your boyfriend, H,” Louis says, quietly, heart rabbiting in his chest at his own words, because it means so much to Louis, he’s not used to this, to commitment, to labels, or anything like that, but with Harry it’s not scary. It’s just… It fits.

“Well, that’s a relief, because I’d also like to be yours,” Harry breathes, and he is relieved, Louis can tell by the way he sags back into the sofa, letting his whole body relax, a content smile painted on his lips. Louis can’t help but lean forward and catch them in a kiss, but it’s sloppy, and messy, because they’re both smiling too much to make it a good one. (It’s good anyway).

After a little while, Louis realises the time. It’s halfway through the afternoon, and he remembers the stack of work he’d been avoiding that he’d wanted to do the day after the concert, not realising how busy he’d be when he’d planned it out a few days ago. Harry pouts when Louis tells him he has to go, he looks like a little grumpy kitten, and Louis can’t help but kiss the sour look off his face. He hardly wants to let Louis leave the sofa, much less his flat, but somehow Louis manages to untangle himself.

Harry’s slightly placated, also, when Louis tells him they can spend all day tomorrow together, and after another kiss (and a few more) he reluctantly lets Louis leave.

—

Louis’ been at his flat for quite a few hours, now, and is only a bit of the way through the paperwork
Tom had asked him to do for the studio. He would have gotten further, but Harry’s been texting Louis random, nonsensical things that don’t make Louis laugh at all, such as;

Lou, do you think monkeys know about potassium poisoning from bananas? But also, how can we tell them about it? H .x

and,

Did you know you can actually develop a phobia of music? What if one of us woke up with that one day? There’s our careers down the toilet. H .x

and then, Louis’ personal favourite,

My boyfriend came over to my house, showered me with kisses, and then abandoned me, what should I do?

Sorry, meant to type that into google. As you were. H .xxxxxxx

Louis’ laying on the sofa, trying to concentrate on this work, but it’s all so boring, and it’s now almost 7pm and Louis just really cannot be arsed. He groans as he makes his way through another timesheet, having to manually copy the schedule from his computer to paper, because Tom is bloody ancient and prefers to live in the past, apparently. The only thing motivating Louis to do this, though, is the knowledge that he’s got all day with Harry tomorrow, and he doesn’t want anything left to do, wants to be able to spend the whole day with him.

Louis slowly lets his gaze travel to the TV. It’s on mute right now so that Louis doesn’t get distracted (or so he tells himself). There’s an old episode of I’m A Celebrity on, and even though he can’t hear a thing, too lazy to get the remote, it’s still entertaining to watch semi-famous people eat literal cow anus on national television, no sound necessary.

While Louis’ in the middle of cackling at the misfortune of those on the telly, not even pretending to try and work anymore, his doorbell rings, and that’s slightly confusing.

Who the bloody hell would be coming to Louis’ at this time? Even Niall surely would just text him. Louis reluctantly shifts his laptop and wad of papers off himself, and trails slowly to the door, hoping it’s not one of those people who want to sell you something, that you have to tell ever so gently to please, go away, thanks.

Not a moment after Louis eases the door open does someone burst inside, and for a split-second Louis is terrified he’s about to get burgled, or something, but then he sees a flash of familiar purple - lilac, to be specific - and he relaxes.

“Jesus Christ! You scared the–”

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t wait until tomorrow,,” Harry says, immediately, before kissing Louis hard on the mouth, pressing him roughly up against the wall next to the door. It takes Louis a moment to realise what’s happening, but when he does, fuck, does he realise. Harry’s voice is all primal and full of desire, and the flicker of interest from earlier that Louis had felt turns into full on arousal, aided heavily by the distinct feeling of Harry’s crotch pressing into his own.

“Fuck, Harry, how’d you even get up here?” Louis asks amusedly between laboured breaths, confused at how Harry managed to make it past the front door to be able to surprise him like this, as Harry’s lips trail down his jaw.
Harry pulls back briefly and smirks at Louis’ question, and then replies cheekily, “Niall may have given me a few tips.”

Louis laughs then, at Harry, at the situation, at his bloody best mate giving his boyfriend hints on how to get into his building. Perhaps Louis should talk to the landlord about it… But then again, the feeling of Harry’s lips peppering kisses onto his neck definitely makes him think about the considerable benefits he may lose.

“Well,” Louis says, to no one in particular, “Thank you, Niall!” and then Harry’s warm lips are back on his own, immediately causing a jolt of electricity to shoot through Louis, because he’s here, kissing the person he loves, and it feels fucking fantastic, and this is apparently his life now.

They stay like that for a moment in the hallway, lips moving together in a messy, desperate kiss, before Harry’s hands find Louis’ thighs, and then he lifts Louis up to sit against his hips, and that’s when Louis feels pure heat travel through him at an alarming rate, and he needs Harry, needs him now.

“Bedroom,” Louis mumbles into the sloppy kiss, legs tightening around Harry. “Now.”

After a moment, Louis opens his eyes and vaguely notices that they’re in Louis' room now, though he’s not sure when that happened. He’d probably been too distracted by the soft, supple lips under his own to notice and simply hadn’t processed Harry’s movements from room to room.

Regardless of their location, Louis can feel the anticipation rising within his body, nerves and excitement prickling at his skin, arousal pooling in his stomach at the feel of Harry’s hot skin beneath his fingertips.

Finally sliding off of Harry, he blindly moves them over to the centre of the room, hoping he doesn’t trip on a rogue shoe in his urgent need to get them both on the bed. A few shared whimpered moans, along with his and Harry’s ragged breaths, are the only sounds around them, coming out short and sharp between their still-attached lips.

Their kiss is sloppy and wet, and their hands are tangled in each other’s hair as they stumble around, desire and desperation to just touch each other at the forefront of both of their minds.

The room feels like it’s on fire, and Louis presses up against Harry, slips his fingers underneath his jumper, need to touch, and leads him towards the bed. He hears a low moan come from the back of Harry’s throat, can feel the boy’s chest heaving in and out in uneven pants against him, and he’s sure his is doing the exact same at just the thought of what’s about to happen.

Louis notices in that moment that his jeans are as tight as all fuck around his crotch, almost to the point of being painful, as his cock fills up from the feeling of Harry’s hot skin under his fingertips and Harry’s arms wrapped tightly, possessively, around his waist. Louis takes a breath, needs one, but then Harry’s hands come to rest further down on Louis’ body, and then Harry’s hips come forward roughly to meet Louis’ and Louis can feel Harry’s hard bulge pressed against his own. It’s all so much, all at once, and for a second, Louis only knows white.

Their lips join together once again with a magnetic-like pull, and blood rushes straight to Louis’ head, making him dizzy and dazed. It doesn’t take long for the sensation to travel to his groin, and Louis breaks away from Harry at that, letting out an involuntary, choked-off gasp. Harry just pulls Louis back in though, calloused hands cupping the soft skin of Louis’ neck, and he muffles the other boy’s moan by catching his lips back between his own, doing absolutely fuck all to calm Louis’ steadily increasing heart rate.
They come to an abrupt stop, finally, and Louis assumes Harry’s legs have hit the edge of the mattress, his distracted attempts to get them there having actually paid off.

“H– Harry,” Louis starts, mumbling against Harry’s ever so soft lips, and stammering as his breath gets caught in his throat.

He looks up then, lifts his heavy head, and through hazy, unfocused eyes, he sees an equally blissed-out pair looking down at him. He swallows thickly, tries to order his thoughts. “Want you to fuck me.” His whispered tone comes out as pleading, and Louis thinks it’s fitting, because he’s never felt so desperate for anything in his entire fucking life. He wants to touch Harry all over, every single part of him; wants to burn in his heat, wants to feel Harry in every way possible.

Harry’s eyes widen, arms tightening around him at Louis’ words, and his mouth slackens a bit, lets out a puff of warm air that Louis feels against his cheek. “Ye– Yeah, fuck, Lou, yes, please,” and if Louis’ voice was pleading, Harry’s is positively begging, all breathy and wound-up; the sound goes straight to Louis’ cock, and Louis needs Harry on the bed right now, like, immediately.

Louis applies a light pressure to Harry’s shoulders, and that's all it takes for Harry to let himself fall back against the sheets. He pulls Louis with him, both of them collapsing on the mattress together in a heap. Harry joins their lips as Louis meets him, so that they're a tangle of limbs, grasping at one another tightly, as though they're each other’s lifeline.

Louis feels so much, he's all light and dizzy and warm in Harry’s strong arms, feels so safe and content, and, fuck, he's never felt like this with anyone, ever, and he wants to bottle this feeling so he never has to let it go.

Harry shuffles himself up the bed, tugging Louis with him, hungry, raw lips barely leaving each other's as they go. Louis feels the long, solid expanse of Harry’s body beneath him, and, as pleasant as the feeling is, and as much as it’s doing for Louis’ thickening cock, he can't help but want to feel the heavy weight of Harry on top of him, anchoring him in the best way.

Then Harry disconnects their lips, eliciting a smacking noise that fills up the tiny gap between them, the only sound in the room beside their laboured breaths. Louis whimpers softly at the loss, already missing Harry’s taste, but then, as if reading Louis’ mind, Harry flips them over, roughly and quickly, and Louis goes lightheaded momentarily at the movement, shuts his eyes for a second to get his head to stop spinning.

He feels Harry’s hard, muscular thighs squeezing his own, and his breath gets lost for a second at the feeling. Louis finally finds the strength to open his eyes, and is met with the view of Harry’s hovering over him, a pleased grin on his face, and he's so pretty it's almost unfair, rosy cheeks and bright, shining eyes, and fuck, Louis is so incredibly in love with him, he doesn't even know how his heart is coping.

The words come tumbling out of Louis’ mouth, then, in this quiet, frozen moment between them, almost involuntarily. “I’m so in love with you,” he whispers, breath hitting Harry’s close lips, putting all the tenderness and conviction he can into those six words. It feels like he's telling a secret, almost, but at the same time, he also wants the entire world to know how intensely in love he is with this boy.

Harry’s grin transforms into a fond, soft simper, cheeks growing impossibly pinker as he gazes down at Louis, pure affection in his eyes. “God, Lou, me too, fuck,” he breathes, sounding almost disbeliefing. “I– I love you. So much. More than I’ve ever loved anyone, ever.” Harry ducks his head as he says it, quietly, still shy even now, and Louis is, once again, hopelessly endeared by him.
“Good. Glad we’re on the same page then,” Louis jokes, lightening the intense, charged mood between them and chuckling as Harry’s looser grin returns.

Louis’ never been good at situations like this, where his entire heart and soul are just bare, but with Harry it feels okay, it feels right, and this comfortable feeling is so new for Louis, but so incredibly welcomed.

Louis still feels dizzy, and hot, so fucking hot, in every sense of the word, and staring up at Harry right now, who’s holding him and touching him and letting his eyes wander all over him, is just increasing that feeling exponentially.

“I love you, so much, told you that already,” Harry says then, roughly, rousing Louis from his thoughts. Harry’s voice is now much lower than it was before, and Louis feels both his heart and his stomach flutter. “Now let me show you how much.” Harry lowers his head, breathes against Louis’ neck, and his voice has turned into something rough, and gravelly, full of desire, and determination; Louis’ breath catches at the sound. He can only wordlessly nod in response, as he becomes aware again of their bodies pressed against each other, and how painfully tight his trousers are getting and how desperately he needs them off, right now.

Harry moves his head from Louis’ neck to just below, and he starts mouthing at Louis’ collarbones, growing wetter and sloppier as he moves along. Louis keens at the kisses, breath becoming even more ragged and shallow with each one. Harry’s hot fingertips fumble with the bottom of Louis’ t-shirt, and he thanks his past self for deciding not to wear anything underneath, because it means less time is wasted stripping clothing when their bare bodies could be touching instead.

Louis lifts his arms up, in silent encouragement for Harry to take his shirt off, and Harry does so swiftly, all the while still hungrily peppering kisses to Louis’ sternum, only breaking away to get Louis’ shirt up from between them. Louis’ satisfied with his stripped top half, but it's not enough, because Harry’s still fully clothed, and that's not helping anyone, frankly.

Louis lifts his hands blindly to where he thinks Harry’s jumper ends, grasps onto a material that feels like wool and tugs. “Off,” he orders, against Harry’s lips, and Harry giggles at him.

“Someone's a bit demanding, aren't they?” Harry says, voice twinkling with amusement, but he strips the lilac garment all the same, tossing it away in the same vague direction as he’d thrown Louis’ top.

Harry responds to Louis’ question by palming Louis’ ever-growing bulge through his jeans, squeezing tightly, a shit-eating grin on his face, and it's borderline cruel; Louis thinks he almost flatlines. Louis chokes out a laugh, “Alright, then,” and lets their lips meet again as he moves his hands lower, unbuttoning Harry’s jeans and slowly peeling them off his thick, thick thighs.

Harry kicks the rest of them off, and Louis leans down to have a look, his curiosity and desperation getting the better of him. Harry’s black pants are tented by his erection, and Louis gulps at the sight, and size, Jesus, even imagining being filled up by it means he has to take another deep breath. Louis speedily goes to take his own jeans off too, needing to get naked as quickly as possible, but before he has the chance to unzip Harry bats his hands away with the arm not holding him up.
“No, I want to,” he says, shifting himself so he's on his haunches between Louis’ spread out legs. “You just lay there and relax, please,” and, well, Louis can't really argue with that, even though he's sure Harry taking Louis’ clothes off is going to do nothing for his growing need to touch himself before he positively dies from desperation.

So Louis lays back, hands in fists at his sides and stomach in knots, as Harry teasingly slowly peels Louis’ jeans off him, gently kissing down his thighs as he does, eliciting soft whimpers out of Louis each time. *Finally*, his jeans are off, and they're both just in their underwear, now, and Louis becomes painfully aware of this fact when he looks up to see Harry kneeling between his legs again, tall and solid and broad, all thick muscles and sweet curves and pure *warmth*.

In the dim moonlight streaming through the half shut curtains, Louis can see every hard and soft edge lit up, and Harry looks ethereal like this, looming over him like some sort of godlike creature that Louis’ been lucky enough to catch a glimpse of. *And he chose you*, Louis reminds himself. *Fuck.*

Harry's face comes down, then, and his hands come with it, and they rest on Louis' neck, holding Louis in place, as if Louis would want to *go* anywhere, *be* anywhere else apart from right *here*, in *this* moment. Louis would almost laugh at the absurdity of it if his mind wasn't so clouded by how incredibly turned on he is.

Harry pecks Louis gently on the lips, cradling his face, as if Louis’ something precious, and he feels it, lying like this, being body-worshipped by Harry. Harry moves his lips lower, sucking softly at the juncture between Louis’ neck and shoulder, and Louis’ eyes flutter shut at the feeling; he's always been sensitive there, and he thinks Harry, the cheeky minx, *knows* this and knows what it does to Louis. (He can't even pretend to be angry, though, not when Harry makes Louis feel so bloody good).

Louis’ heart is rabbiting in his chest as Harry moves even lower, hands stroking down Louis’ sides as he goes, thumbs tracing small circles on his skin, eliciting goosebumps. Harry mouths across Louis’ chest, and the soft skin of his stomach, and finally gets to the top of Louis’ groin. There’s a shadow of downy hair which Harry is currently nuzzling his nose into and *fuck*, Louis’ cock is positively full, and he's sure it’s almost peeking out of his pants he's so fucking hard.

“P– Please, H, I–” Louis whines, and he doesn't even know what he's asking for, can't even form proper sentences, his voice having gotten lost somewhere between Harry's mouth’s journey down his body.

Harry’s hot breath warms Louis’ skin, and Louis bucks up at the feeling, responsive and so incredibly *weak* for Harry, and Harry’s hands shift to Louis’ hips and rest there heavily, tightly. Louis’ eyes squeeze shut in an attempt to try and control himself.

“How can I suck you, Lou?” Harry says then against Louis stomach, as if he even has to bloody *ask*, and the return of that begging tone of voice makes the fire inside of Louis blazer even brighter.

“Fuck, yes!” Louis almost shouts, desperation clear in his tone. He takes a breath, lowers his voice, “For fuck’s sake, yes, Jesus Christ, please,” Louis whimpers out, finding it within himself to form proper words as he lifts his head up to meet Harry’s gaze.

Harry’s hooded eyes are almost black, pupils blown out, full of want and everything else that Louis is feeling. Louis feels more than he sees Harry’s fingers slipping under the elastic of Louis’ briefs, having to direct his gaze back up at the ceiling for the time being to try to relax himself. Harry’s short nails graze the sensitive skin beneath the material and it forces Louis to bite his lip to stop himself from gasping at the sensation.
“Oh,” Harry breathes, and Louis’ eyes dart back down, can’t help himself, and sees that Harry’s hands have stilled; he’s just gazing at Louis in awe. “You’re so pretty, Lou,” Harry continues, and Louis feels self-conscious all of a sudden, can’t remember the last time he felt so incredibly bare and vulnerable while he was naked with another person, but it’s fine, it’s alright, he reminds himself, because it’s Harry, and it’s good.

Harry takes Louis in his hand then, and Louis’ mind goes blank, the only thought left is the one telling him to not come right then and there just from Harry’s touch, no matter how much he feels like he’s about to. Louis watches on as Harry’s hand loosely circles Louis’ dick for a moment, before tightening his grip on it without warning, and Louis lets out a hiss through his teeth.

It’s so much, and not enough, never enough, all at once, and Louis needs more, craves it.

Louis’ about to start begging again, any pride already out the window now, but then he sees Harry lean down, finally, feels wet warmth on the head of his cock, and Harry’s tongue is on him, tasting him, licking into his slit, which only makes Louis shiver with pleasure. He lets out a moan, unable to contain it, and then Harry wraps his smirking lips around Louis, those perfect rose petals sucking ever so gently at his tip, and Harry’s hand is tightening on Louis’ shaft, squeezing while his tongue swirls around the head of Louis’ cock, teasing and playful and so fucking hot.

“Harry, please,” Louis begs, needing more than what Harry’s giving him, because he can feel the arousal spreading throughout him, seeping into every part of his insides, but he doesn’t want to come yet, he can’t come yet, not when they’ve barely even started.

Harry chuckles then, mouth full, and Louis feels the vibration on his cock, bites his lip again in order to prevent any kind of embarrassing noise escaping. Harry’s mouth comes off of Louis with a smacking noise, and Louis whimpers at the loss of contact, but then the tip of Harry’s hard tongue is at the bottom of Louis’ shaft, tracing a line up the thick vein that starts there, all the way, stopping at the underside of the head, where Louis’ most sensitive, and he feels himself filling up even more with each second that passes, as if he wasn’t rock hard already.

Harry takes Louis into his mouth again then, his swollen lips all wet with saliva and Louis, and now Louis’ breathing is all rough and uneven, he’s not even trying to relax anymore, all hope of that gone. Harry sucks at Louis’ tip, kissing it, before taking Louis further into his mouth, cheeks hollowing, and his lips sucking tightly down, down, down, painfully slowly, encompassing Louis, until his nose reaches the soft hair at the end of Louis’ cock and Louis just feels pure heat surrounding him, everywhere. It feels as though this white hot pleasure is seeping from his pores, pooling in his stomach, streaming relentlessly through his fucking veins.

He moves his hands to Harry’s hair, then, tangling his fingers through the cropped strands. He remembers that night in the taxi, before everything went to shit, remembers what Harry liked. As Harry’s ever so slowly sucking back up, Louis takes the opportunity to tug lightly at Harry’s hair, which elicits a small moan out of the boy, and seeing as he still has a mouth full of Louis, it only goes straight to the other man’s cock. Harry squeezes Louis’ hips, in retaliation, probably, and Louis whimpers again, needing Harry to pick up the pace; he can only handle the slow teasing for so long.

One of Harry’s hands comes to firmly grasp Louis’ cock in it again, and he thumbs Louis’ head, spreading a bit of precome down the shaft so it’s slicker for him. Harry starts giving him short but tight tugs while his mouth concentrates on the swollen tip, doing that thing with his tongue again that makes Louis go all dizzy, and he feels like he’s sweating, like he won’t be able to last much longer under Harry’s burning touch.

Harry bobs his head as he goes, faster and faster, focusing on the top half while his hand matches the pace, pumping up and down at the same speed as his mouth sucking Louis down, and Louis can feel
the orgasm that's been building up for a while suddenly, inflate within him, un-ignoreable anymore. As much as Louis wants this to last forever, he thinks he’s literally about to explode with pleasure.

“Harry,” Louis gasps out, warning him, “‘M about to–” he starts, looking down at Harry, who opens his eyes to meet Louis’ own, and instead of moving his mouth off Louis, he just goes faster, eyes locked on Louis’, and that alone impossibly turns Louis on even more.

Louis feels a flash of white hot heat, feels his balls tighten under Harry’s pumping fist, and then he’s coming, shooting right into Harry’s mouth, feels his dick softening immediately at the release of the intense build-up. He sighs, blissfully, and his eyes that had been all scrunch up in the moment, flutter open to see Harry, again, sucking the end of Louis cock, swallowing, licking him clean, his lips around the tip bearing the filthiest smirk Louis has ever seen.

Louis shudders at the over-stimulation, the tip of his sensitive dick still laying heavily on Harry’s tongue, and Harry finally, slowly, lets go of his shaft, and lets his lips slip off the end. Louis exhales, breathes heavily in and out, tries to get his thoughts in order while a smile creeps its way into his face.

“Fuck,” Louis announces, breathily, finding the strength the lean up on his elbows, so he can have a proper look at the heavenly creature between his legs. “I–” he doesn't know how to continue, just gazed down at Harry in wonder, disbelief. “Fuck.”

Harry smiles, sits back up on his haunches again, licks his lips, making sure to get every drop, and Louis’ eyes travel down to where the outline of Harry’s cock is, and even from this angle Louis can tell it's straining against the material. They've got to sort that out rather sharpish, then. Louis already feels his own cock twitch at the sight before him, even now, just seconds after possibly the best orgasm of his life.

“You liked it then?” Harry asks, innocently, but his tiny smirk betrays him, and he's fiddling with his hands in his lap, but he isn't nervous for the reply; Louis can tell by the glint in his eye that he knows exactly how much Louis just enjoyed that.

“You do?” Louis tries to choke out, tries not to sound too eager. “Well, you're fucking brilliant at it, Jesus, Harry.” Louis can't quite believe that this boy is real.

Harry blushes again, but meets Louis’ eyes this time. “Yeah, ‘m glad you enjoyed yourself. Plan on giving you a lot more in the future,” he says, quietly, as he looms over Louis once again, and Louis drops his elbows to let his head rest back on the pillows.

“You do?” Louis teases, their lips a hair-widths apart, “Someone's optimistic." 

Harry huffs, poorly concealing a smile. “Do you want me to fuck you or not?” he asks then, fixing Louis with a hardened stare that knocks the breath out of him.

“Yeah, fuck, yes, please,” Louis whispers back, joking demeanour disappearing, only one thing on his
mind. He may have just come to within an inch of his life, but he's not stopping now, not when
Harry’s hovering above him, so big and broad and magnetic.

Harry leans down to kiss him, hotly, firmly, pressing his warm body and hard erection back against
Louis, and Louis’ slowly thickening cock.

Harry’s lips come off Louis’ with a smack. “Where’s your stuff, Lou?” he asks Louis then, so
tenderly, and softly, and in such contrast to the intense kiss they just shared.

“Left hand side table, second drawer,” Louis responds, and it’s probably the quickest he’s ever said
anything in his life.

Harry leans across him, for a moment, and Louis hears a fumble, a drawer being yanked open and
roughly shut. “Careful with the bedside table, Harold,” Louis teasingly admonishes, “It’s Ikea’s
finest, y’know!”

“Shh,” Harry grumbles, at the same time leaning back down, swallowing any kind of retort Louis
had prepared with a sealing kiss and Louis forgets what he was going to say, anyway.

Harry breaks off then, drops something by Louis’ head and reaches above Louis to grab something -
a pillow Louis realises. Wordlessly, he slips his hand under Louis’ waist to reach the centre of his
back, which he lifts up effortlessly with one arm, the other placing the pillow under Louis’ hips.
Louis shudders in the moment, the realisation hitting him at what they’re about to do, how real it is,
how it's happening, right now, he can barely contain his anticipation.

Harry may have mistaken Louis’ gesture for nerves, because a look of concern flashes over his face.
“Hey, you alright?” he asks, quietly, worry clouding his tone.

Louis breathes out, lets the tension leave him in an attempt to show Harry how incredibly alright he
is. “Perfect, really,” he reassures, voice heavy with conviction. “Just… nervous. But excited.”

Harry stays hovering, eyebrows still furrowed. “Are you sure? We don’t have to, not if you–”

“Harry, I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life.” Louis says this so earnestly, and looks
Harry straight in his gorgeous green eyes, hoping to convey to him how much he desperately wants
this, craves it, has been craving it.

This seems to placate Harry, who leans down to kiss Louis again, and Louis’ lost count of how
many they've shared now, and the utter joy that that fact alone brings to Louis is indescribable. He
continues to kiss Louis softly, with varying pressure, while his hands are above Louis’ head, elbows
by Louis’ ears, and Louis hears the distinct click of a bottle opening, before Harry detaches his lips
again, and lifts himself up a bit. He studies Louis, eyes soft and tender, and blows air through his
nose quietly while they share a moment.

Harry’s wet lips go to his neck as his hand travels down to Louis’ raised hips, and Louis waits with
baited breath for Harry to touch him.

Louis feels a cool, wet whisper of fingertip graze his hole, and he takes a sharp breath in at the
feeling. It's been a while, and he's so wound up, and it's Harry, so perhaps he's a tad overwhelmed.

“This okay?” Harry whispers against Louis’ neck, body suddenly stiff.

“Yes, yes, amazing,” Louis breathes, immediately needing more and hoping the quicker he gets his
words out, the quicker he can get it.
Harry moves his head up and breathes silently, warmly, against Louis’ cheek, watching for Louis’ reaction while he lets the tip of his finger breach Louis. Immediately, Louis feels his ring of muscle tighten around Harry’s fingertip, clenching in anticipation, and his eyes squeeze shut at the flicker of heat building up within him again.

“Just relax, baby,” Harry whispers, voice like honey, and Louis finds the pet name alone extremely arousing. He never usually likes them, but hearing it come from Harry’s lips is like music to Louis’ ears, and he feels his whole body slacken at the words.

Harry takes the opportunity to slide the rest of his slick finger into Louis, slowly, ever so slowly. Louis already feels full, and already needs more.

Harry pumps it up and down, breath hotly hitting Louis’ jaw as he does, Harry seemingly getting just as worked up as Louis at the movement. Louis feels his walls loosening every so slightly as he writhes about, unable to contain his pleasure. He needs more, though, wants to be all opened up for Harry to completely fill him.

“’Nother one, H,” Louis says, breath shallow, savouring the slight friction he’s feeling as Harry’s finger glides in and out.

“Sure?” Harry asks, voice rough and dry, because of course he does, and Louis just nods emphatically, and hopes Harry can somehow decipher it.

Wordlessly, Harry brings his middle finger to join his index at Louis’ hole, and then both of them are inside him, and Louis feels a wave of pleasure pulse through his body at the sensation. Harry pumps slow at first, and then after a few whimpers from Louis he speeds up, and starts to slightly hook his fingers to the side.

Louis feels himself opening, and loosening up, and then the tip of Harry’s finger grazes his prostate, and Louis sees white. He jerks immediately at the touch, crying out, “Agh! Th– There! There, Harry!”

Harry pumps his fingers in a few more times, reaching Louis’ prostate maybe once more, and it’s all Louis can take before he’s asking for another finger.

“Please, H, need you to open me up, get me ready for you. Need you now, please,” Louis begs, and he feels desperate to have Harry's cock in him immediately, before it all gets too much.

Harry grunts, and slowly adds another finger, and Louis takes it easily, almost ready now. Louis’ faintly aware of Harry’s hardened cock pressing against his thigh, still unfairly tucked away under some material, and Louis realises they have to remedy that situation as quickly as possible.

Harry pumps his fingers up and down, glides them in and out, repeatedly, scissoring them inside Louis’ walls to get him fully opened up, and it's almost too much for Louis; Harry’s fingers are all long and reach parts of him that Louis can never get to himself, and it causes the pool of arousal within Louis to flood, cascades against every inch of him until he's shrouded in it.

“Harry, please, ‘m ready, now,” Louis gasps, and he can feel Harry’s quickening breaths against him, knows Harry won't last much longer either unless he gets inside him right this second.

“Okay,” Harry chokes out, like he's unable to say anything else, and slowly, so as not to hurt Louis, he pulls his fingers out. It only leaves Louis feeling empty and so incredibly eager for Harry’s cock.

Harry wipes his hand blindly on the sheets, and reaches next to Louis’ head to retrieve the condom and lube he’d grabbed before. Harry kneels up then, between Louis’ legs, and Louis feels so on edge
at that moment, but blissful, too, as he watches Harry finally strip his own briefs off.

Louis holds in a gasp at the sight, but it's almost impossible, because Harry’s dick is fucking massive, and Louis finds himself with his mouth hung open, watching as Harry hisses whilst rolling the condom on and lubing himself up.

Harry glances up at Louis when he's done, and chuckles when he takes in his expression. “You'll catch flies, love,” he says, fondly, leaning down to hover over Louis once again, arms bracketing Louis’ face, and plants a small kiss on Louis’ now-shut lips.

“Fuck me, right the fuck now, Styles,” Louis demands, almost petulantly, because he can't believe Harry had kept his extremely gifted manhood tucked away this entire time.

Harry lifts up again, on his knees, and lines himself up with Louis, dragging Louis’ hips slightly towards him where they had come off the pillow. Louis holds his breath, waits for the sweet feeling of Harry’s cock beginning to fill him up. He hears Harry take a breath, feels the brush of cool against his widened hole, and then pure heat.

Harry slips into Louis, sinking in painfully slowly, grunting lowly with each movement, fingers digging into Louis’ hips, using them to pull Louis towards him at the same time. Louis feels light headed as he goes, and with every inch of Harry filling him he feels closer and closer to heaven, feels his own neglected cock filling up at just the hint of Harry inside him.

Then, after what seems like a million years, Harry bottoms out, and he fits so snugly, and it's like Louis feels complete all of a sudden, like Harry’s a missing piece that he didn't even know he needed. Louis hears Harry whimper above him, and can't help but echo the sound, because fuck. Harry's so fucking big, and Louis had been prepped well, but he still feels the stretch of his thick skin and muscles around Harry’s pulsing cock, and it’s painful, but in a good way. He knows he's going to feel it tomorrow.

Louis becomes aware of himself then, aware of the fact that Harry is frozen above him, and inside him, for whatever reason, because this must be more torture for him than Louis, surely.

“Fucking move,” Louis grits out, needing some friction to ease the building tension within him at just the feeling of all of Harry inside him.

Harry doesn't need to be told twice, it seems, because as soon as the words leave Louis’ mouth, Louis hears a held breath release from above him. Harry pulls out slightly and then pounds his hips forward against Louis’ own, which causes Louis to splutter in shock and then sigh in pleasure, as Harry sets a slow but steady pace and buries himself deeply within Louis, over and over again.

Louis lets out a gasp each time he feels Harry slam into him, adoring how much he can feel Harry, and how much of him he can feel, but needing more speed before he actually goes insane. Harry picks up the pace, then, before Louis has to say a thing, and his slow, deep thrusts turn into quick, shallow ones, matching Louis’ breath as he feels Harry rhythmically slip in and out of him, faster and faster.

Harry leans down then and Louis clutches onto his shoulders, digging his fingers so hard that he reckons it’ll probably bruise. The pressure within him is building, rapidly, and Harry’s mouthing sloppily at his neck now, hot breath coming out in ragged pants against Louis’ even hotter skin.

Harry shifts his angle, and Louis thinks he sees God.

“FUCK, HARRY! Yes, oh god, yes, there, you got it again, fuck!” Louis’ words come out all in a
jumble, stringing together sloppily, much like his current stream of thoughts. The white hot pleasure he felt before comes back in waves, as Harry hits his prostate hard, over and over again with the tip of his cock, and Louis can't feel his face, or his legs, or anything really, apart from Harry.

Harry just grunts against Louis’ neck more in response, and then Louis realises that Harry hasn’t even come yet, how selfish he’s being, how Harry must be so incredibly tightly wound up, and how he might actually be trying to wait for Louis.

Louis takes one hand from Harry’s shoulder, and lets it travel down Harry’s back, to a pert bum cheek, squeezing slightly as it follows the movement in and out of Louis. He hears Harry’s sharp intake of breath at just that, and it just confirms Louis suspicions.

Harry’s rhythm slowly gets lost as they go on, after this, movements becoming jerky and unsteady, and it gives Louis the push to let his finger trail slowly towards Harry’s hole, being careful to keep his touch feather light as Harry continues to pound into Louis. Louis tries to ignore his second growing blinding orgasm of the day, and instead focuses on grazing his dry fingertip ever so slightly across Harry’s tight ring of muscles.

As soon as his finger makes contact, Harry gasps Louis’ name, and then his movements halt completely, body heavy and hot on top of the other man, as he buries himself inside Louis suddenly and so very deeply, coming quickly with a broken shout. The sound alone is enough to have Louis following him swiftly over the edge, both immediately dissolving into pleasure, and then into each other.

It's as if time slows, then, and Louis is lost in the moment, vaguely aware of warm puffs of air tickling his ear and hot, heavy limbs on top of him; a welcome weight.

His eyes open, slowly, and he doesn't even remember them closing, just remembers splintering white light, and then pure encompassing pleasure. He stills for a moment, and it's so quiet all of a sudden, only the sound of his breathing and Harry’s breathing filling up the stuffy room.

Harry's breathing… Harry.

Louis looks down quickly and then green meets blue, and Louis let's out a relieved breath. He almost thought it was a dream. Can't quite believe that him and Harry just… They just slept together. They just *fucked*, and Louis feels thoroughly undone, and now Harry’s looking at him with that *look* again, the one that Louis hadn't been able to place before, but now he knows it means love.

“Hi,” Harry says softly, rough, shallow breaths intertwining with his worlds. His eyes are bright and dazed, and he’s still on top of Louis, still *inside* him, and Louis can barely breathe.

“Hi,” Louis exhales, blissfully, so utterly happy in that moment, so in awe of his life, feeling so extremely lucky to have this boy in his arms.

Harry stares up at Louis for a beat, eyes flickering over his entire face, and then he slowly, gently, pulls out of him, and rolls off, so he's laying by Louis on his side.

Harry fumbles under the duvet for a moment, and then chucks something across the room - in the general direction of a bin, Louis realises - before sloppily wiping his hand on the covers. Louis snorts as he realises, not bothering to care.

Instead, Louis copies Harry’s position, feeling a dull ache already begin to appear in his arse, but it doesn't matter, because now they're lying curled up on the bed, facing one another, soft eyes and even softer smiles only for each other.
Harry wordlessly takes Louis’ hand that’s lying slack between them, and links their fingers together. Without moving his eyes away from Louis’, he covers their linked hands with his other one, and then slowly brings Louis’ up to his soft, reddened lips, taking his time to tenderly kiss each and every one of Louis’ knuckles. It’s so intimate and simple, but such a sweet gesture that Louis feels his heart clench every so slightly at it, a fond smile creeping its way on to Louis’ face at this boy before him.

Harry smiles back at him, lazily, and content, and holds Louis’ cocooned hand against his heart, and Louis thinks he can feel the soft thumping of a beat, knows his own heart is matching Harry’s pace exactly.

“God,” Louis whispers, eyes wide in awe, “I'm so, incredibly in love with you,” and he's close enough to Harry to kiss him if he wanted, but for right now he just wants to look at him, study him, commit every part of him to memory. Every freckle, and laugh line, and wisp of hair. His heart has never felt so full.

Harry kisses him again, keeps their lips pressed together for a beat. “Sweet, sweet Lou, you’re heaven sent,” Harry whispers, as they move apart, and Louis’ never felt so loved. “I’m so in love with you too, Lou. Hey, that rhymed,” Harry laughs, wetly; there are traces of tears forming at the edges of his eyes. Louis feels his own vision begin to blur at the sight. It's odd, and surprising, because Louis never usually cries so easily and yet here they are.

“Come on, lovely Harry, let's go to sleep. You've tired me out, now,” Louis teases, as he moves to wipe his eyes. He's on an emotional high right now, it seems. Also, Harry seems to bring parts of him out that he thought he'd locked away forever.

“Anything for you, sweet Lou,” Harry jokes back, obviously proud of his ability to rhyme so easily. Louis just fondly rolls his eyes at him, and lifts the duvet from where they'd shoved it towards the end of the bed, pulling it over them.

They're sweaty and sticky, and the sheets are all dirty, but Louis is holding Harry in his arms, feeling every single emotion there is at once and, right now, he's never felt more at home.

—
Louis’ eyes flutter open to see slivers of sunlight streaming through the slits of his curtains, a tell-tale sign that he’s probably slept in. He feels warm and cosy under the duvet, and it’s clear that the beginning of Autumn has definitely arrived, if the slight nippy chill he can feel on his nose is anything to go by.

He yawns, and glances over at the bare space next to him. Definitely slept in, then.

Just as he’s about to check for the actual time on his phone, Louis’ ears prick up at the sound of pans clanging together, and then a hissed curse coming from another part of the flat. He chuckles lowly.

Louis stretches his tight muscles as he gets up, and out of bed, fully awake now, and searches through the discarded items of clothing on the floor to find something to wear. He chucks on something that’ll keep him warm, and then slips out the bedroom door, following the sound of music playing quietly and a lovely, soft voice singing along.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Louis hears, as he slowly wanders his way into his kitchen, drawn in by the delicious smell wafting from it. The words drip out of Harry’s smiling lips like sweet honey; Louis can almost taste them. He feels himself melting, is so affected by the endearment, even now, that he almost forgets to respond.

"Morning, H," he breathes, rubbing his eyes to get rid of any sleep left in them, and the gesture seems to please Harry, makes his dimples appear almost immediately. Louis speaks through a lazy, slow smile, one that that seems to have been a permanent fixture on his face since the other night.

Harry’s standing at Louis’ stove, in a rumpled old, soft-looking t-shirt, and just his underwear, tight briefs hugging his thighs very nicely, and he’s cooking them breakfast (for the fifth day in a row; Louis’ been spoiled). He’s been at Louis’ flat with him for almost a week, leaving only briefly to go back to his to get some clothes for himself a few times. Not that Louis’ complaining, however; he’d love Harry to stay forever if it were possible. Ever since the night of the concert, a weight has lifted from Louis’ shoulders. Everything feels lighter, and his heart feels fuller, and he’s just… happier.

"Tea?" Harry asks, as the kettle’s already boiling, knowing that Louis’ going to say yes. Harry seems to have converted him, now. Every day this week they’ve had lazy mornings in bed together, accompanied by warm mugs of tea that are a necessity, Louis, according to Harry. Louis doesn’t disagree, although he does think it’s slightly a waste, because he seems to only ever consume half of his warm, sweet drink before he gets distracted by Harry’s much more enticing, warm, sweet lips.

"Mm, thanks love," Louis replies, eyes on Harry’s, and it feels so good not having to worry about any little endearments slipping out, feels so good being able to call Harry whatever sickly sweet little pet name he could possibly come up with.

"Here you go, Lou," Harry says, handing Louis a steaming mug that Louis cradles gently between his hands, blowing softly on it and letting the warmth spread through him from the cup. “I love you
in my clothes, by the way. I mean, I love you all the time, but especially when you’re wearing something that belongs to me,” Harry gushes, his nose scrunching up sweetly, and it makes Louis blush, because he hadn’t even realised that he was wearing Harry’s lilac jumper, already so used to them sharing in these past few days that he didn’t notice.

Louis hums for a moment, letting the words sink in. “Well, good.” He attempts a casual tone, but his reddening cheeks that he’s not-so-subtly trying to hide behind his mug of tea betray him. “You should get used to it, H.”

And at that, Harry positively glows, eyes all lit-up at the silent promise of longevity between them, between their relationship. Louis adores the sight, adores the feeling of making Harry so visibly happy.

“So, what you do want to do today?” Louis asks him, glancing out the window to check on the weather. It’s sunny today, but slightly windy - Louis’ favourite weather. He can see the tree on the street outside his kitchen window swaying in the breeze, burnt amber leaves floating down signalling that Autumn has officially begun.

Harry finishes preparing whatever food he was cooking up, Louis hadn’t really seen, hadn’t really looked away from Harry since the moment he walked in. He leans on the counter and sighs, all relaxed and content. Like he’s at home. Louis sips his tea to hide his absurd smile at something so mundane.

“Could go for a walk in the park? I love it when the weather’s like this,” Harry offers, voice all sleep heavy and smooth, and Louis’ ears perk up.

“Sounds lovely, H. Primrose Hill is only about a quarter of an hours walk away, too,” Louis replies, smiling a lot more than is really necessary. He is just a little in love with the idea of them going for a romantic autumnal walk, and he’s allowed to be, thank you very much.

“Perfect,” Harry smiles back, gaze flickering with something while his tongue slips out to wet his lips, and Louis’ eyes catch on the movement.

Harry rounds the kitchen island slowly, eyes never leaving Louis’, left dimple growing as he gets closer. Wordlessly, he stops in front of where Louis’ sitting, green eyes gazing down at him with such adoration, as he slowly places himself so he’s standing right between Louis’ knees, fitting snugly. Harry gently removes the cup from Louis’ hold, setting it down on the counter next to them, before bringing his warm hands to come and rest lightly on the sides of Louis’ neck.

“Oi, I was drinking that,” Louis jokes, slightly breathlessly, because having Harry this close always seems to garner that type of reaction out of him.

“Shush, you,” Harry smiles softly, pillowy lips coming down to meet Louis’ as he says it, any kind of protest from Louis swallowed up with a tender kiss, and Louis can’t say he really minds that, to be honest.

Harry kisses him so delicately, like Louis is something precious, and it makes Louis’ heart swell, because it’s like the love Harry has for him is radiating out, tangible, almost. But at the same time, the effect Harry has on Louis this early in the day tells him he’s also in the mood for something a little more.

Louis brings his hands up to grasp Harry’s waist and he tugs roughly, bringing him closer, causing Harry to stumble until the front of his legs hit the stool that Louis’ sitting on. Harry’s mouth opens in a gasp at that, and Louis takes full advantage of it, slipping his tongue into Harry’s mouth and hotly
licking into him and deepening the kiss, fingers digging into his sides as he stands up, not letting their lips part, and getting impossibly closer so that they’re chest to heaving chest. Louis melts into the embrace, warming up due to their close proximity, already addicted to the feeling of burning in Harry’s heat.

After a moment, Louis lets his hands travel down to cup Harry’s pert arse, squeezing lightly and tugging their hips together, receiving a low moan from the back of Harry’s throat in return. Louis’ cock twitches with interest at the pretty sound, and he whimpers at the feeling of Harry’s crotch pressed against his own.

Harry moves his lips from Louis’ mouth to his neck in one fluid motion; it’s like second nature to them now, and he knows just where Louis’ most sensitive, zeroing in on that exact spot, right under his jaw, still slightly bitten and bruised from the night before. Louis’ whimpers progress into little whines at that, and he silently curses Harry for already knowing exactly where to kiss him in order to make him go completely pliant.

Louis’ eyes flutter shut at the feeling of Harry giving his neck tiny little sucks here and there, totally overcome by arousal, heat pooling in his stomach and spreading throughout him by the second. At that point Harry’s lips come back up to meet his, and Louis feels Harry smirk against his mouth at the noises Louis’ been making, no doubt, and that just makes him more determined to salvage any sense of control he once had.

Louis breaks the kiss with a pant, unable to continue without taking a breath. “Harry,” he rasps, blinking up at him, “I want…” His thoughts are all muddled, mind hazy from the feeling of Harry and the sight of his boy looking down at him with those sparkling eyes and that soft smile.


Louis thinks, for a moment, lets himself breathe, for fuck’s sake, and then wordlessly links Harry’s fingers with his own. Harry gives Louis a questioning look as Louis leads them both the short distance to the sofa, which disappears as soon as Louis drags them both down in a tumble of limbs onto the soft cushions so that Harry’s hovering above him, surrounding him, and he’s smirking yet again.

Louis wraps his arms firmly around Harry’s neck and pulls him down, quickly, so that their lips meet in a sloppy kiss. He’s acutely aware of the hot hardness he feels against his thigh as Harry lays on top of him, legs slotting perfectly between Louis’, that continues to become more and more distracting.

Harry’s touch soon slips under the hem of Louis’ jumper, warm hands not helping the overwhelming heat that Louis is feeling at the moment, and he lifts his arms up for Harry to strip the garment off of him. Harry gets the hint, and in a second it’s off, Harry’s top following soon after, discarded blindly to some area of the room. Louis’ hands come back to rest on Harry’s waist, gripping tightly, and it’s then, when their bare chests and limbs and lips are molding together, that Louis remembers what he wants, why he changed their location in the first place.

“H,” Louis mumbles, against wet, plump lips, hands slightly pushing against Harry so that he lifts up a bit, giving Louis a better look at his face, and he sees that Harry’s once glowing green eyes are almost all black, pupils wide and dilated. Louis exhales, easily, “Want to try something.”

Harry’s eyebrows raise minutely, breath coming out in small pants. “What do you want to try?” he asks, voice all hoarse and low, and the sound alone makes Louis shudder, neglected dick now straining against his tight pants.
Louis slips out from underneath Harry, eyes locked on the pair above his own, and Harry moves to follow him, but Louis places a soft hand on Harry’s broad, muscled back, keeping him facing down on the sofa. Harry’s brow furrows, as he watches Louis over his shoulder, who then straddles Harry’s hips, sitting down so his bum rests lightly against the backs of Harry’s thighs and his knees press every so slightly into Harry’s soft sides.

“Lou, what are you—” Harry begins, but then Louis leans down, and tenderly kisses the back of Harry’s hot neck, starting from the nape and then placing a few more below until he gets to the top of Harry’s backbone, and Harry shivers, sighs softly, turns his head back so it’s facing down and Louis has better access, and he seems to lose his train of thought.

“Want to lick you out,” Louis tells him, and underneath Louis’ lips, Harry’s body goes rigid with tension, back straightening and shoulders taught. Louis immediately sits up, worried he’s crossed some sort of line he wasn’t aware of, and lets comfort lace his tone. “Hey, I don’t have to, baby. Not if you don’t want me to, I—”

Harry’s head whips round, eyes ablaze and cheeks pink, words coming out in a desperate rush, “No, Lou, I do want you to, it’s not that, I just…” he trails off, averting his gaze and biting his bottom lip, a nervous habit Louis’ come to recognise.

“What is it, love?” Louis asks, voice patient and quiet, hand coming to rest gently on Harry’s warming cheek.

“I’ve never… No one’s ever done that to me, before,” Harry explains, cheeks reddening even more, but eyes coming up to meet Louis’, and Louis feels himself relax a bit, but a small part of him is slightly shocked Harry’s never experienced this. “It was just a surprise, hearing you ask, I guess.” Harry brings his own hand to come and rest upon Louis’, and he squeezes slightly, his lips curving into a small smirk as they form the next words, “But I still want you to. Definitely want you to.”

Louis chuckles at that, at Harry’s request, and he lets his lips come back down to mouth along Harry’s back, as Harry turns his face back into the sofa.

“If you don’t like it,” Louis whispers against the goosebumps forming on Harry’s skin, trailing his lips down Harry’s spine, kissing every knot and dip with the utmost tenderness and care, “Just tell me, yeah?” Louis asks, as he finally reaches the waistband of Harry’s pants, and he looks up to see Harry nodding emphatically against the pillow. Louis laughs softly at that, “Need you to say the word, love.”

Harry lifts his head, slightly. “Yeah,” he chokes out, voice high and filled with anticipation. “Just do it, please,” he manages, a sense of urgency in his tone, and it makes Louis even more excited to get his tongue inside of Harry, more excited to pleasure him and make him come like he never has before.

With one last kiss to the curve of Harry’s back, right at the bottom, just before the swell of his arse, Louis tugs Harry’s briefs down, stripping them off him until he’s bare underneath Louis. He lifts Harry’s hips up so that he’s on his hands and knees, and leans back on his haunches so his face is level with Harry.

Louis sighs, softly, at the perfect peachiness of Harry’s bum, and lets his hands roam, gently trailing his fingertips over Harry’s curves to elicit the kind of shivers from him that only come from being hypersensitive to an unfamiliar touch. Louis can’t quite believe he’s in the position to make Harry feel this, to give him this type of pleasure, let alone be the first person to do so.

Louis leans forward, then, face as close as possible, and he slowly spreads Harry’s cheeks, both
thumbs stroking softly at Harry’s skin. “God,” Louis whispers, the word slipping out of his mouth against his boy’s sensitive skin, at the sight of Harry’s perfect pink hole, “You’re so beautiful, H.” Louis trails kisses at the top of Harry’s arse, hands still firmly holding him in place, and Harry shudders beneath him, again, already unsteady on his knees.

Louis’ decidedly ignores his own cock, which is starting to fill up at the sight in front of him, and instead places soft kisses down, down, down until he reaches Harry’s hole, and pauses. He exhales, softly, breath hitting Harry’s sensitive spot, causing Harry to shudder underneath his hands.

Louis breathes in, then, and goes lightheaded for a moment; the smell of Harry a mix of musky richness that completely intoxicates him. Louis’ heart beats rapidly against his chest, and he leans forward, placing a soft, barely there kiss against Harry’s tight ring of muscle, almost shuddering himself at the taste he gets from that alone. It’s sweet, and bitter, and intensely addictive, Louis goes straight in for another. He lets his tongue catch on Harry’s hole this time, and Harry whimpers at that, and so Louis does it again, swirling the end of his tongue around the ridges of the outside of Harry’s muscle, while at the same time squeezing Harry’s cheeks under his grip, which only seems to have a greater effect on Harry.

“Louis, pl– please,” Louis hears Harry stutter, his begging voice coming out all raspy and pleading, muffled against the sofa, and going straight to Louis’ cock. “More,” Harry adds, and Louis lets out a soft, warm exhale against Harry, which only serves to get Harry more worked up.

Louis doesn’t need to be told twice though, especially when it comes to doing something he loves, like eating arse (especially Harry’s, he’s quickly realising), and so he dives back in, spreading Harry’s cheeks even further, so he’s all stretched and still utterly stunning.

Louis dips his head down slightly, licks a long, thick stripe from the back of Harry’s balls, then over his perineum, tasting all of Harry’s rich, musky flavour, and finally back onto Harry’s hole again, all tense and hot under Louis’ tongue. Louis laps at the rough edges of Harry with small, barely there, teasing licks that drive Louis almost as crazy as they do Harry. Louis is painfully aware of his erection now, but this is about Harry, and he’s just going to have to wait.

Louis continues circling Harry with his tongue before finally dipping the tip of it into his hole, breaching it ever so slightly, letting it catch again a few times as he trails it back and forth. Louis’ lips completely surround Harry, sucking and nipping gently on the area, with soft, hot kisses that make Harry’s body heave beneath Louis’ hands. Louis dips in again and finally, finally licks deeper this time, breaching Harry’s ring of muscles fully. Harry’s tight, hot walls squeeze around Louis’ tongue, a sensation that makes Louis breathless and that makes Harry cry out in pleasure.

“Fuck, Lou!” Harry bursts out, jerking beneath Louis, elbows giving way suddenly so only his bum is in the air, and Louis loves it, loves this. He’s holding Harry up by the hips now, Harry having lost all capacity to do so himself, tight grip forming fingertip shaped bruises where he’s holding him. Louis lets his thumbs stroke Harry softly where his hands are placed, hoping to calm the shaking boy underneath him, knowing he’s overwhelmed but wanting to make it so good for him, too.

Louis relentlessly continues to lick into him as Harry takes gasping breaths, switching between tonguing small circles around Harry’s hole and diving right back in, fully, desperate to taste Harry’s deep richness that’s overtaking all of Louis’ senses. He leans back a moment, watching Harry’s taught muscle pulsing at the empty space where Louis’ tongue was a minute ago.

He kisses the soft, sweet, sweat sheened skin of Harry’s arse, before slipping his eyes shut and his tongue easily back into Harry, who’s noticeably much looser than before. He goes in and out at a steady pace, moaning softly against Harry as his jaw starts to ache at his ministrations, and he feels himself becoming almost unable to ignore the ever-growing ball of heat and arousal at the pit of his
stomach.

Louis slides his hands down over Harry’s stomach, and he lets his fingers stroke through the downy hair there while he feels the muscles contract erratically underneath Harry’s skin, and *that*, in combination with Harry’s soft whimpers on every breath, tell Louis Harry’s *definitely* enjoying the feeling of Louis inside him.

Louis continues his furtive licks, one hand retreating back to cup one of Harry’s soft, velvety hips, the other travelling slowly down from Harry’s stomach to his groin, light touch grazing gently over slick skin, until he feels the swell of Harry’s cock beneath his fingertips, and he grips onto it, tightly, causing an already shuddering Harry to cry out once again.

“Lou,” Harry gasps, as Louis starts to sloppily thumb Harry’s head, before spreading Harry’s precome down his shaft in one fluid motion. “Can’t last, much longer…” he says, between panting breaths, and Louis just deepens his tongue’s exploration, pressing his face further into Harry’s smooth arse, eyes blurring and senses completely overcome by Harry’s musky smell, and soft touch, and sweet *taste*.

Louis continues to lazily stroke and twist his hand up and down and around Harry’s hard cock at the same time, all slick and hot, slightly increasing the pace, and Louis’ not gripping so hard as to overstimulate Harry, but just enough to maintain Harry’s pliancy beneath him, something that Louis is fully enjoying. Harry’s body jerks beneath Louis’ hold, and he whimpers, which Louis takes as a hint to lick even deeper into Harry, like his life depended on it, knowing Harry’s close to coming, and wanting him to come while Louis’ tongue is still inside of him.

It’s not long before Louis hears Harry cry out again, an absolutely *obscene* sound, and his heavy cock pulsates under Louis’ hold. The stomach muscles under Louis’ hands contract and then relax, Harry *finally* coming, dripping hotly all over Louis’ fingers that are still gripping onto him. The overwhelming feeling of it all proves too much for Louis, neglected cock painfully hard until Louis comes himself, untouched, at just the sight of Harry’s still heaving breaths beneath him. Louis releases his hold, then, on all of Harry, which allows the other boy to exhaustedly drop his body to lie face down on the sofa again, his breathing heavy and laboured.

“Fuck,” Harry’s voice is muffled, and comes out between deep breaths. “Fuck, Lou,” he laughs. His sweaty skin is glinting in the dim light of the room, and Louis admires the view for a moment, before getting up off the sofa onto unsteady feet to let Harry sit up.

Louis lightly grazes his hand up Harry’s warm back, threads his fingers into the soft, slick hair at the nape of Harry’s neck. “You alright, love?” he asks, chuckling at Harry’s reaction.

Harry sits up, finally, and Louis sees his face for the first time in what seems like a long while. It’s beautiful, as always, all flushed hot, lips curling up into a sweet little smile. His eyes are glazed and shining, the image of pure pleasure, and Louis can’t help but smile to himself at the sight.

*God, he loves him.*

“Good… I’m… I’m great,” Harry responds, stumbling over his words, eyes blinking languidly at Louis. “That was… that was so great, Lou. *Fuck*. I definitely enjoyed that,” he giggles, cheeks a lovely pink, and Louis joins him.

Louis blushes. “Well, I’ll definitely keep that in mind, then.” He gazes at Harry for another minute before Harry slowly gets to his feet, dimpling down at Louis while he stands there, still stark naked, and utterly gorgeous. If this is the way all their mornings begin, Louis could really get used to it.
Harry holds his hand out to Louis, who takes it without hesitation. “Shower?” he asks, tilting his head in the direction of what’s basically become their shared bathroom at this point. Harry should just move in, quite frankly, it’s the logical thing to do if Louis’ being totally honest.

“Then go to the park?” Louis adds and, God, they already sound so domestic. Louis bloody adores it.

“Yeah, shower then a walk,” Harry announces, linking his soft hand with Louis’, leading him off the sofa and towards the hallway leading to the bathroom. Harry leans in closer to Louis as they walk, hot breath hitting his ear smoothly, “I’m gonna give you an incredible blowjob in return for your life-changing arse-eating skills.”

Louis shivers, at the heat of the feeling and of the words, and if he ends up dragging Harry the remaining distance to the bathroom in record time, practically stumbling into the shower out of impatience and pure want, well, no one can prove anything.

—

Harry and Louis are all wrapped up in jumpers and coats as they stroll, hand in hand, into the entrance of the park. It’s slightly chilly out, and maybe Harry didn’t really need to wear Louis’ scarf, but since they’re sharing clothes now it just made sense. (He also looks very sweet in it, in Louis opinion, the red shade bringing out the green and gold in his eyes wonderfully).

Louis starts walking towards the path that leads right up to the hill, but Harry’s hand tugs him back, making Louis glance at him, sharp blue eyes clouded in confusion.

“You know, getting up there does actually require some walking, H,” Louis teases, at his smiling boyfriend, “I don’t know about you, but I haven’t really mastered the art of levitating yet, so…”

Harry laughs at that, and rolls his eyes; he’s very used to Louis’ teasing by now, and he just tugs Louis closer to him. “Oi, cheeky,” he says, softly, encompassing Louis in the cage of his arms, hands anchored on Louis’ waist, chests now flush against each other in a warm hug. “I was going to take you to my special place here, but by all means, if you want to go up to the top where there’s always a million tourists and no privacy, then let’s—”

“Oh fine, fine!” Louis laughs, shaking his head at Harry’s silliness. “Didn’t even know you had a special place here, Styles. I’m supposed to be the one who lives the closest, anyway.” They step apart, slightly, and Louis gazes up at the same gorgeous green eyes that captured his attention the very first time they met, and his voice lowers slightly for his next question. “How often do you come up here, then?”

Harry hums for a moment, suddenly deep in thought. Instead of answering straight away, Harry just starts leading them up a different path, one that goes up alongside the hill instead of right on top of it. They walk for a moment, in silence, and Louis lets Harry take his time to answer.

Louis’ assuming that this is possibly a place Harry comes to get away, think for a bit; that’s what Louis has used it for before as well. It’s beautiful here, especially today, all bright green grass for miles and golden sunlight caressing every single blade, a little paradise, almost. Louis glances around, and there’s not many people around them, just a few dog walkers and a cluster of colours at the top of the hill, blurry dots from where he’s standing, that are probably tourists, like Harry had said. Louis’ interested to see where Harry takes him, then.

They begin to crest the hill, and the view is wonderful; they’re only halfway up but still, Louis already loves it. Whether that’s because it’s truly beautiful or because it’s Harry who is showing it to
him, showing Louis his special place, well, that’s debatable. Either way, Harry leads them over to a patch of grass lined with large primrose trees, and they sit beneath one, still with their hands linked, still in complete silence, as Harry seems to order his thoughts.

Harry leans back against the dark trunk of the tree, eyes surveying the green expanse in front of them, and Louis just sits there next to him, patiently, bodies side by side, watching him and waiting. The mood between them has changed somewhat, moving from lighthearted to something more serious.

After a moment, Harry speaks up, voice soft and barely there, and Louis just listens. “I came here a lot, after… after she died.” Harry takes a shaky breath, and at that Louis’ fingers tighten around Harry’s own. “It was one of her favourite places, actually. She took me here a couple of times, I remember.

Louis’ chest constricts at Harry’s voice breaking slightly, and also at the memory of their last conversation about Edie. Harry was so fucking sad, still is, really, and it had made Louis ache; still makes him ache now. Louis knows there are some things he can’t fix, though, no matter how much he might want to. He resorts to squeezing Harry’s warm hand in his once again.

“Reminds you of her, then?” Louis asks, voice careful and soft. Understanding.

Harry sighs, eyes flickering shut and body relaxing against the tree, and Louis feels his own shoulders ease with tension at the sight. They always seem to be in sync like that, Louis notices. Louis can hear the rustling of the leaves above them as they fall, and the distant chatter of the other people in the park, but all Louis is focusing on is Harry’s deep, measured breaths, his chest rising something mesmerising, and his tiny curls tucked behind his ears fluttering slightly in the breeze, his ruddy cheeks and his strong jaw and he’s just beautiful, God, he’s beautiful.

“Yeah, it does. It’s good. Kind of.” Harry’s response comes delayed, and Louis has to remind himself of what they were talking about for a moment. It must be overwhelming for him to come here, be surrounded by reminders of someone you’ve lost. Harry’s eyes are still shut, but they’re slightly crumpled, a veil of sadness over his face, and it’s not the first time Louis has wished he had the power to change the past just in order to take Harry’s pain away.

“I need help, Lou,” Harry says then, voice thick, shining eyes opening to land on Louis’ waiting ones, and Louis feels his heart leap in his chest at Harry’s words; wasn’t expecting it at all, was thinking this particular conversation could have happened in a thousand other ways before Harry brought it up like this, “I want help. And I know we have to talk about this, we said we’d talk about it, and I’m ready to talk about it now.”

Louis’ speechless, mouth slightly wide, and he wants to hug him, wants to say something, but he just nods, encouraging Harry, ready to listen to what he has to say.

Harry leans forward, eyes travelling down to their linked hands, concentrating; Louis can still see the furrow in his brow. “I’ve been doing some thinking, these past few days, and– I know… I know I have these problems with drinking and drugs, and I know I’m not healthy, mentally, really, and… And I can be self-destructive, and I’ve sort of just… spiralled these last few years, I– I think, and I just– I didn’t want to admit it to myself, didn’t want to admit that I was on my way to ending up like that, like her, because… I think I was slightly in denial, and I also just think that I didn’t care, you know? After her.

“But I care now, I do, I’ve realised I do, and I want to get better. And I really do trust you, Lou.” Harry takes a deep breath after, and Louis leans closer. “And I would love your help, if you’re still willing,” Harry finishes, determined, glistening eyes still on Louis, a slight rosy tinge to his cheeks,
and he’s just so lovely, every bit of him. Louis can feel his face breaking out in a small smile, is so proud to hear these words come from Harry’s mouth that he could probably burst with pride.

Due to his own, personal need, more than anything, that's when Louis takes that moment to practically leap forward and into Harry, depositing himself in the vee of his legs, arms coming up to wrap around Harry’s neck. Harry’s hands follow quickly after, wrapping firmly around Louis’ waist, comforting them both. Harry sighs into it, as Louis’ head fits perfectly in that place between Harry’s shoulder and neck, nose nuzzling in that warm spot that he loves. Harry slowly brings his chin up to hook over Louis’ shoulder, both holding onto each other tight, and it’s like Louis can feel their love, right then and there.

Louis lets out a slow breath, causing Harry to shiver slightly beneath him as the warmth of it grazes his neck. It just makes Louis tighten his hold, squeeze his eyes shut to try and remember everything about this. He can’t find any words to describe the sensation of that moment, how his heart physically feels as though it’s swelling more and more, as every second passes, with love for Harry, his lovely Harry. So they just stay like that, for a moment, unspoken words drifting between them, and tiny pecks placed softly underneath Harry’s jaw that say I love you, and I’m so proud of you, and you’re so incredibly brave.

“Of course,” Louis utters, mouth pressed against Harry’s warm skin, “Of course I’m still willing to help you, my darling. I’d love nothing more than to help.” Louis leans back, then, starts threading his fingers through Harry’s hair in a gesture to soothe them both. He looks at his boy and Harry’s face is soft. He looks so relieved, as relieved as Louis himself feels, and he’s crying and Louis is too, but they’re both smiling at each other so it’s sort of okay.

“Okay… Okay. I think–” Harry sniffs, face inches from Louis’, eyes gazing up at him in reverence and wonder, and pure, pure determination. “I think to start I should probably… I should probably see someone, about it. About all of it. Talk to them. I think I’ve avoided doing that for so long but– but it’ll be good, I think. I think it’ll help,” he finishes, and Louis feels a tiny smile breach his lips, he can’t help it.

“Harry, I’m–” Louis says, voice tender, and he leans back further, cradles Harry’s jaw in his hands, and it feels like they’re the only two people for miles in this moment. “I’m so, so proud of you. It takes courage to admit what you just did, and I know… I know I probably pushed you, when you weren’t ready, and I–”

“Hey,” Harry says, wetly, a slightly teasing tone that brightens the mood ever so slightly, and his hands come to rest atop Louis’. “None of that. You helped, if anything. And as far as I remember, we’ve already apologised to each other, Lou.” There’s a slight lift to his voice, and Louis thinks he hears a little laugh, and that, that little spark of happiness, that’s when he realises that it might actually all be okay, eventually.

Louis lets out an airy half-chuckle, throat catching on it, “Yeah, you’re right I suppose. Silly me, wanting to be noble or something. What was I thinking?” his voice teasing. Despite the tears on his cheeks, and the pain in his chest, Louis feels somewhat hopeful. Feels like everything is going to be alright, somehow.

“Oh, shush,” Harry says, leaning up to give Louis a sweet little kiss, and Louis forgets any other sarcastic comment he had ready to wield, too distracted by Harry’s precious lips on his own.

“We’re can sort this out together though love, alright? I need you to know that,” Louis says, sensitively, after finally finding the inner strength to pull apart from Harry. “We can go home right now, and we can call some people, and it’ll all be fine, I promise. We’ll help you get better.” Louis knows he can’t really promise things like this, but at the same time, he also knows that it will be fine,
he’s just sure of it.

Harry nods, whispers a tiny *thank you*, and lazily blinks up at Louis, a shadow of a smile on his face, and Louis thinks he might be able to spy a small dimple, too. It makes him happier than it should.

“Home, then?” Harry asks, as if it’s even a question, and as if it’s not exactly the word that Louis would use to describe them, to describe *Harry*.

Louis smiles, belatedly, soft eyes and even softer smile directed right at Harry, *his* Harry, and he gets the sudden feeling of contentment, of warmth, of pure adoration. This, this current feeling, is what love is, he realises.

“Yes, love. Home.”
5 months later

Louis sits at his desk in the spare room of their flat, a room that he and Harry have turned into an office of sorts. There’s light creeping through the window, signifying the beginning of the early, almost-spring morning.

He’s wrapped up warmly in a dressing gown, sipping his third cup of tea of the day, which, given the fact that he woke up only an hour ago, is quite a lot, even for him. He glances at the infinite mountain of notes in front of him, all potential songs that he’d started and then left as he’d gotten inspiration for something else.

He’s decided today, as he’s alone, still, and it’s one of his last few days off before Harry comes back from his promo tour for the album next week, that now is as a good time as ever to try and get some of his work done.

Louis knows as soon as Harry finally arrives home, after all their time spent apart, he’ll not even want to look in the general direction of a songsheet; he’ll want to give Harry his full attention instead.

Louis doesn’t want to complain, but after being promoted to Studio Manager after Tom retired a few months back, and having even more freelance songwriting ventures on the side after the success of The Cahoots’ album, Louis’ workload has increased exponentially. To be quite honest, that’s been a bit shit when all he really finds himself wanting to do is speak to his boyfriend, who currently is on another continent, promoting and performing almost every night with barely any free time.

Okay, so perhaps he does want complain just a bit.

What Louis can’t complain about, however, is how little he gets to speak to Harry. Obviously he wishes he could talk to his boy more, especially because they’re a little obsessed with each other and being apart for this long is not exactly doing wonders for his self-control, if the flight ticket website that stays constantly open on his laptop is anything to go by, just in case, he tells himself.

Regardless, Louis can’t be upset about it, because the reason Harry doesn’t have as much time as he would do is because he has his therapist on tour with him. She’s the same one that he’d started to see in London while he was still here before jetting off, and she’s someone who he has chats with a few times a week, a fact which makes Louis feel extremely proud and grateful.

It seems to be helping too - the two of them seem to be working through everything, all of Harry’s problems, slowly but surely. Louis only knows as much as Harry tells him, of course, never asks unless Harry brings it up himself, and maybe sometimes when he gets positive updates from Liam or Zayn.

And Niall, actually, now that Louis thinks about it. Harry and Niall have become quite the friendly pair, as it turns out, holding weekly skype sessions that Louis isn’t privy to. Louis pretends it irritates
him but really, it makes him happier than he’d like to admit that his best mate and his boyfriend get on so well.

Harry’s also trying to do this all while entirely sober, too, which is what makes Louis the most proud out of everything. It happened about a week into the tour. Harry had called Louis up and told him that after thinking over some stuff, going through his other sessions, he’d realised that he needed to stop drinking as well as taking drugs. Obviously, drugs were his main issue, but after Louis had tentatively tried to explain to Harry one day before he’d gone on tour that he doesn’t need them to write his best songs, that he can access his feelings a number of other, different ways, Harry had agreed, said he wanted to stop, too, and he hadn’t touched any since.

Of course, Louis knows that there are days when Harry tells him that he doesn’t feel as strong, feels his self-control slipping, and that’s okay; it’s normal. He knows Harry’s trying, though, trying his bloody hardest, to be entirely sober, now, to be better, and that’s the most important thing.

Harry’s happier now, so much happier. He tells Louis all the time, and Louis can hear it whenever they speak that there’s something in Harry’s voice that wasn’t there before. Every single day Louis tells Harry how proud of him he is, whether it’s through a text or a call or even an email, and every single day he feels his love for Harry grow.

Louis glances at the clock, 9:20am it reads, and he realises he’s zoned out into one of his Harry hazes, as he likes to call them, and that he’s just spent about ten minutes thinking about him. (Not surprising, sometimes they last much longer). It’s not Louis’ fault, though, he just misses him, misses being at home with him, can hardly wait to see him.

Louis decides then that instead of actually getting to work, he’ll go and make another cup of tea as his current one has gone cold, and if he doesn’t procrastinate at least twice before actually starting his paperwork then it just won’t get done - it’s a proven Louis Tomlinson fact.

He makes his way to the kitchen, tiled floor slightly chilly under his feet, but the rays of the sun shining through the window above the sink warm his face and slightly placate him. He washes out his mug, and fills up the kettle, already having used all the other water for his earlier cups of tea this morning. Another reason why not having Harry here is just terrible; Louis has to make all his tea himself, doesn’t even have Harry here to make it perfectly for him, with the best tea to milk ratio and temperature every time. Louis knows he’s being pathetic, but at the same time, he doesn’t really care.

He clicks on the radio while he waits for the kettle to boil, some old, nineties song coming on which Louis definitely does not sing along and dance around his kitchen to, but really, who could blame him, he’s always had the utmost appreciation for music. It’s a long one, this song, and Louis turns it up, as he starts to finally prepare his cuppa.

It’s just when Louis’ chucking the tea-bag in the bin and the song ends, almost perfectly in sync, that he hears a slight rapping at the door.

Confused, he looks up at the kitchen clock, and it’s only 9:37am, now, surely the postman wouldn’t be here this early? Harry and him usually get lots of parcels on the weekend, instrument accessories that Harry’s ordered or some type of equipment Louis’ ordered, accidentally to his home address instead of the studio’s.

He can’t really think of who it can be, then, but he strides over anyway, tightening the dressing gown around him where the belt has come loose during his not-dancing.

Louis yawns as he opens the door, but the yawn soon turns into a gasp, as he quickly realises which beautiful, dimpling, cheeky face he’s looking at.
Harry’s standing there, all radiant, grinning at Louis with those glinting eyes that hold the same level of sheer delight that Louis feels, and Jesus, he’s gorgeous. Louis vaguely notices his guitar strapped over his shoulder, brown leather bag clutched in one hand and a bloody bouquet of red roses in the other, and Louis thinks his cheeks are going to split from his smile.

“Harry!” Louis shouts, for once not caring about their grumpy neighbours complaining because his boy is here! He’s here and he’s early and Louis has never felt so happy and excited at once. “You bugger! What are you doing here? You’re a week early!” and then Louis jumps onto Harry, quite literally, wraps his hands around his waist, wondering why on earth he hadn’t done this sooner, and he hears the dull thud of Harry’s bag hitting the floor before

Harry’s arm comes to wrap around Louis’ back; a feeling that Louis had missed quite terribly. Louis buries his nose in Harry’s hair, breathes in the familiar deep, sweet smell of his boy, of Harry, of home, and at that, Louis feels a kind of blazing heat, licking its flames up inside of him, and he melts into it, at just the feeling of being in Harry’s arms once again.

“Wanted to surprise you, baby. May have told you a tiny white lie about when the tour ended,” Harry says, laughing voice right next to Louis’ ear, and it reminds Louis again that Harry is here, in his arms, and he never wants to let go, to be honest.

“Well I am bloody surprised, you twat. Can’t believe you,” Louis says, the tenderness in his tone betraying his words, and he gives Harry a final squeeze before leaning back ever so slightly, just enough to get a proper look at him.

Harry’s hair has grown out a bit, tiny curls grazing the nape of his neck and falling over his forehead in little ringlets that Louis already adores. He reaches up and wraps one around his finger without thinking, the need to just touch overwhelming him, and Harry leans into it, soft cheek nuzzling against the back of Louis' hand.

Harry had stopped dying his hair black, a couple months ago, had let the chestnut colour of his natural hair come through, and seeing it now, almost fully brown, Louis thinks it’s lovely. (Although, Louis thinks Harry is always lovely, so perhaps his judgement isn’t that reliable).

Louis casts his gaze to Harry’s green, glowing eyes again, and they’re just as beautiful as ever but Louis’ so used to seeing them through a screen that the sight of them this close after so long almost takes his breath away, no level of video chatting ever being able to do them justice.

He moves his hands from Harry’s hips, slides them up Harry’s soft hoodie, a grey one that Louis’ almost positive used to be his own. He cradles Harry’s strong jaw finally, smiling as their eyes lock, embracing the moment of them being face to face, chest to chest, in person.

“Hi, love,” Louis whispers, through a small smile, eyes no doubt crinkling at the sides, an automatic reaction to seeing Harry, it seems.

“Hi,” Harry replies, voice like velvet, and he brings his own hands up in between Louis’ arms, placing his fingertips lightly on the sides of Louis’ face, thumbs gently grazing the tips of his cheekbones.

“God, I missed you,” Louis breathes out, body totally releasing tension in this sort of way that only seems to happen when he’s with Harry, “So happy you’re home.”

“Missed you more, my sweet Lou,” and Louis melts, always does whenever Harry calls him that, the words his second favourite thing for Harry to say to him, right after I love you. Sometimes Louis still can’t believe he got this lucky.
Louis blushes at that, and decides he’s going to kiss Harry as a distraction tactic, and also because it’s been far too long since their lips have touched. Harry’s soft, plump lips are inviting and tempting, and Louis can’t help himself, has to taste them immediately, taste the distinct Harry sweetness that he’s been missing so much.

He leans closer, and finally slots his lips between Harry’s, and it’s like coming up for air, kissing Harry after all this time, which doesn’t really make sense seeing as Louis’ almost losing his breath at the feeling.

After a moment, they pull apart, Harry’s eyes fluttering open like he’s just woken from a dream, and Louis feels exactly the same. Louis realised that they’re still stood in the middle of the hallway though, and not in their flat wrapped up in each other on their very comfortable sofa, and he needs to remedy this situation at once.

He moves his hand to fit over Harry’s, slotting their fingers together and letting them drop to their side. “Come on, H,” Louis says, before leaning down to pick up Harry’s bag. “Gotta go in at some point, don’t we?” he teases, they’ve done this before, and there’s a moment of realisation on Harry’s face too, before he chuckles, and lets himself be led into the flat.

Louis shuts the door once they’re both in, still grinning like an idiot, and he turns to face Harry, who holds the exact same expression. They smile at each other for a moment before Harry slowly lifts his arm up, forgotten flowers held in his hand.

“These are for you, Lou,” Harry beams, as Louis takes the gift and finally studies it - a bouquet of dark, deep red roses that smell divine. Louis smiles, softly, and glances back up at Harry, whose eyes light up as he quickly adds his next sentence, “Hey, that rhymed,” and it’s stupid, but Louis laughs anyway, because Harry’s rhyming skills, or rather, lack thereof, has sort of become a thing between them.

Louis giggles at him, shakes his head at his silly, wonderful boy. “I love them, sweetheart. Thank you. They’re beautiful.” Louis’ smile grows, because he knows the next thing he says will make Harry blush, it always does, “Almost as beautiful as you.”

Harry scoffs good-naturedly, his nose wrinkling up in the way that makes Louis’ heart swell; it’s an attempt to conceal a smile, which fails massively, as it always does.

“Stop it,” Harry replies, as his cheeks do, indeed, turn a sweet shade of pink at Louis’ words, and he fiddles with his fingers, casts his eyes down to the floor bashfully while he smiles, dimples on full display. It’s possibly Harry’s loveliest smile, in Louis’ opinion, and he adores getting that particular expression to form on Harry’s face as often as possible.

Louis just bites his lip to try and stop his own face-splitting smile, but it’s no use, of course, it’s never any use when it comes to Harry, but Louis can’t say he really minds.

“I’ve got something else for you, too,” Harry tells Louis, then, cheeks turned a more natural shade now as he looks back up at him, a level of shyness coming over his features before he turns towards where he’d placed his luggage a moment ago. “Go and sit on the sofa and I’ll bring it over to you.”

Louis’ puzzled, but sets down the flowers, and goes and sits anyway. “You didn’t need to buy me anything, H, honestly, I’m just happy you’re back here with me, at home,” he says, quietly, as he watches Harry fiddle with something obscured from his view.

“I didn’t buy it, actually,” Harry chatters, still turned away from Louis, until he turns around and walks over to him, and instead of a small parcel in his hands, like Louis was expecting, it’s his guitar,
“I wrote it.”

Louis gapes, was not expecting this at all, and briefly remembers that the last time Harry wrote him something it was because they were both being idiots, who didn’t communicate properly, and although it was a beautiful song, he sincerely hopes that this one is nothing like it. Considering how far they’ve come since then, though, Louis doesn’t think he needs to worry.

“You wrote me a song? Harry, I can’t believe you,” Louis blurts, finally, laughing at the absurdity. “I’m here in my pajamas, not even showered yet, and you’re about to bloody serenade me? Is this real? Is this my life?”

Harry laughs then, that great, honking one that sets Louis off almost every time he hears it, but this time Louis just stares up at him in wonder and surprise. He can’t believe that Harry’s gone on this tour and between meetings and mini concerts and interviews, he’s found time to write Louis a song.

“I wrote you a song,” Harry nods to himself. “Because people write songs about boys like you, Louis Tomlinson, so that’s exactly what I did. Again,” Harry adds, a light chuckle after he says it, and Louis blushes at his words.

Harry straps the guitar over his chest. Louis notices that it’s an acoustic one he’s familiar with, with delicate little silhouettes of swallows carved up the fretboard, a present that Louis had sent to Harry to wherever he was in the world for his birthday a couple weeks back. Louis already loves this, loves the fact that it seems like Harry wrote the song for him on the guitar that Louis gave him.

Harry grins down at Louis, before glancing down at his fingers, and he begins to pluck out a sweet little catchy tune, melodic and light and twinkly and a gift to Louis’ ears.

_Sweet creature_

_Had another talk about where it's going wrong_

_We don't know where we're going_

_But we know where we belong_

_Sweet creature, Louis repeats in his mind, and it’s so pretty, and it reminds Louis of how Harry calls him sweet Lou, and he tries not to burst with happiness and pride at Harry’s immense talents and the fact that he’s written him this romantic song, but it’s proving to be quite difficult._

_No, we started_

_Two hearts in one home_

_It's hard when we argue_

_We're both stubborn_

_I know but, oh_

_Sweet creature, sweet creature_
Wherever I go, you bring me home
Sweet creature, sweet creature
When I run out of road, you bring me home

Harry’s dimples appear as he sings, and it’s all so beautiful, and so lovely. Perhaps it’s the two hearts in one home lyric that gets to Louis, or maybe he’s just finally letting himself react to everything, of Harry coming home early and surprising him, and then surprising him again with this song, but either way, Louis soon realises that happy tears are flowing freely down his cheeks, and he makes no attempt to wipe them away.

And ohhh, when we started
Just two hearts in one home
It gets harder when we argue
We’re both stubborn, I know

But oh
Sweet creature, sweet creature
Wherever I go, you bring me home
Sweet creature, sweet creature
When I run out of road, you bring me home
You bring me home

Harry’s voice is all soft and gentle as he ends the song, breath heaving out of effort to deliver some of the notes that he did, and Louis’ sure now that they’ve probably disturbed the neighbours, but he doesn’t care, because Harry’s just written him this wonderful, beautiful song, and Louis is quite literally crying out because he feels so overwhelmed with pure, unfiltered emotion. Besides, nothing matters more to Louis in this moment apart from the fact that they’re together, and they’re in love, and they’re at home.

“Harry, that was…” Louis wipes his eyes, finally, chuckling at himself, as he sees a blurry Harry dimpling down at him once again, looking all proud and fond and happy. “I loved it, so much.”

Harry removes his guitar, placing it down on the rug before sliding next to Louis, and he brings his thumbs up to wipe Louis’ eyes because evidently Louis has been doing a shoddy job of it himself. He smiles at the feeling of Harry’s touch and continues to laugh at himself, at them.

“Can’t believe you’re crying, baby. Didn’t think you’d hate it that much,” Harry teases, eyes twinkling with mirth, and Louis tries to pout at the comment but he can’t stop his lips from curling
into a smile, so it ends up being a half-hearted frown, one that Harry just giggles at.

“Thank you, H,” Louis simpers, electing to ignore Harry’s quip, voice full of conviction as he blinks across at Harry, whose face has turned into something kind, smile forming into something more private than bold, this time.

“Of course, Lou,” Harry replies, "Thank you, too. For everything." His voice is low and serious, and Louis is so in love with him, the boy who writes him love songs, and tells him bad jokes, and surprises him with flowers, and, most importantly, loves him back, so tenderly, and so tangibly.

Louis smiles, then, which quickly turns into a yawn, and that’s probably not the best response to Harry’s return. Then again, he did wake up rather early this morning and was interrupted from his third cup of tea by an unexpected visitor, so it’s no surprise he’s still a little bit tired. There were also some tears and kisses and performances; it’s been a long morning.

“Tired?” Harry asks, chuckling at him. “I’m actually quite jetlagged, too. A nap’s a good idea, isn’t it?” Harry stands up from the sofa, already leading them to their bedroom before Louis can respond properly. All he’s able to give is a tiny, pleased nod when Harry looks back at him once they get to the room.

They shuffle out of their clothes, Louis just stripping his dressing gown off before shutting the blinds, and sliding back under the duvet that he had left at such an unreasonable time earlier on this morning. Really, what was he thinking?

He watches as Harry methodically folds each item of his clothing that he takes off, a habit that Louis has come to find endearing more than anything, before slipping in right next to Louis. They lay there, getting comfortable on the pillows, before facing each other and smiling softly.

Harry’s eyelids are drooping, breaths evening out, and he reaches over, blindly, to get a grasp of Louis, hold him gently against his chest the way that Louis loves. Harry’s hands are hooked around Louis’ shoulder and back, spread across, rubbing small, comforting circles that make Louis go all pliant and relaxed. Louis smiles to himself, at the way they’ve managed to already slide right back into their special way of living, mainly in the sense that they’re always in such close proximity at all times, and they love it. He smiles at the way they fit so well, in every way really, two puzzle pieces slotting together so easily, so perfectly.

Louis’ reminded, then, as he lays there, of how Harry is the sun. So bold, so bright, so beautiful. How Louis had been afraid, before, about getting burnt by him, of getting hurt in some way. Afraid of the intense affect that Harry has on him, how unguarded that made him feel.

Louis thinks about it differently now, though.

He thinks about the overwhelming feeling of being in love with Harry, being able to have and to hold their love, how precious and powerful it is. And then, Louis thinks about how, yes, perhaps Harry is the sun, but perhaps Louis has been burnt in a way that isn't all that disastrous after all.

He's been burnt by Harry, in the sense that his heart is now forever branded with Harry’s name, some sort of permanent etching that Louis can feel. Burnt, in the sense that he feels a rush of white hot heat flow through his bloodstream whenever he so much as glimpses at his boy, and it's a constant reminder of how utterly in love with him he is.

Burnt, but in a way that Louis’ love for Harry, and Harry’s love for Louis, together, reminds him of an all-consuming fire, one that Louis never wishes to stray from.
"It would be a privilege to be burnt by you forever," Louis whispers to Harry, who's lashes are fluttering so very prettily, like dark little butterflies lazing on his lids. Louis leans forward minutely and kisses both eyes softly, reverently. Harry's head is resting gently on the pillow, and Louis can tell sleep is ever so slowly beginning to claim him.

"What are you... talking 'bout?" Harry breathes out in parts, low, sleep-heavy voice getting quieter with each word. Louis can feel Harry's heated breath on his nose; every part of him radiates warmth, it seems.

"Nothing," Louis chuckles, smiling to himself, and at the half asleep boy facing him. "Go to sleep, love."

He sees a dim smile then, on Harry's face, lips lazily curling up, and perhaps he wasn't as close to sleep as Louis had thought. Louis can't say he really minds much at all, though.

"Goodnight, sweet Lou," Harry replies, softly, even though it's probably about 10am, and he hums as he smiles. "I love you," he whispers, tenderly, "So much."

Louis’ heart leaps in his chest at Harry’s words, even now, after this much time, and he’s so incredibly in love, can feel it encompassing his entire being, overwhelming him, and this, this is the best type of burn.

"I love you more," Louis says quietly back, and Harry tightens his hold on Louis and brings him closer to his strong, steady chest, and Louis can feel the warmth coming from him, can feel it radiating off him like the sun’s own rays through their window.

And just as Louis’ falling asleep, his breaths gone even and quiet, he hears a small, soft, “Not possible,” slip out of Harry’s lips, and the warmth within Louis spreads impossibly further.

Louis doesn’t think he replies to Harry, blissful sleep has almost fully overcome him at this point, but he does take a moment to think about something, as he finally drifts off. He thinks that, if he had the choice, or the power to do so, he would absolutely, and without a single doubt, choose to burn in Harry’s heat infinitely.

THE END

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