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<td>American AU, Drug Addiction, Alcohol Abuse, Alcoholism, drug overdose, Coma, Rehab, Recovery, Intervention, Therapy, Therapist James, Alcoholics Anonymous, Most of the Drug Use is past tense. It only happens once in the present, Hurt/Comfort, Angst, So much angst, But there is fluff too I promise, Louis Tomlinson/Harry Styles - Freeform, Louis Tomlinson/Nick Grimshaw - Freeform, larry is end game, please, So don't let the Tomlinshaw scare you off. It's evident from CHAPTER ONE, Friends to Lovers, Childhood Friends, Slow Burn, like the slowest burn, i'm not even sorry, you're gonna suffer, but you'll be happy about it, Happy Ending, Only Child Louis, glasses harry, Shy Harry, Rich Boy Nick, Hair Stylist Zayn, Punk Zayn, Niall is sunshine, Liam is a Good Friend, zouis friendship, nouis friendship, Is there an acronym for Louis/Zayn/Niall, there should be, Cause those three are TIIGHT, lirry friendship, Lilo friendship, Eventual OT5, So many pop culture references, Louis loves Chris Evans because that should be a thing, Lots of Larry Easter Eggs, Everyone drinks a lot of coffee, so much coffee, Coffee is practically a character TBH, Eventual Smut, They earn it, Anal Sex, Don't ask who tops cause they share that, Anal Fingering, Blow Jobs, Hand Jobs, Emotional Sex, Morning Sex, I'll put more warnings in the notes for particular chapters, but I don't want to give away the farm with tag spoilers, anyway, This fic is intense right from the start, so buckle up, and gird your loins</td>
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**Own the Scars**

by crinkle-eyed-boo (KimmieRocks)

**Summary**

“But I don’t belong here,” Louis insists.

“Why do you say that?” James asks.

“These people are all drug addicts and alcoholics,” Louis shrugs.

Something sparks in James’ eyes.

“And you’re not?”
Louis has never felt like he was good enough: for his stepdad, for his life-long best friend, for the life he's supposed to want. After an accident that nearly costs him his life, Louis' parents send him to rehab where he’s forced to face his demons. On the long and difficult road to recovery, Louis must confront the truths he’s been avoiding about his future, his relationships, and his sense of self-worth. Because before he can love anyone else, he’s got to learn how to love himself first.

Notes

Okay, this is it. My first fic. A cannonball into the deep end, so to speak. This note is gonna be long, but then again, so is this fic.

I started this story in a playwriting class my senior year of college. I finished the script two years later and then it lived under my bed for fifteen years. I never forgot it though. And I always wondered if I could do something more with it. Last March, I gave it to my friend Maggie and asked her what she thought. As we read it, it immediately identified itself as a Larry fic. Cut to a year later and here I am. I've poured my blood, sweat, and tears into this and I'm ready to give it over to you guys. If a story is in your heart, never let it go. It's there for a reason and should be told, no matter how long it takes you to do it.

I'm not an addict, but I grew up with one. My father was in and out of treatment for most of my teen years, so I pull some of what happens in this story from personal family experiences. Recovery is a different journey for everyone. I've done extensive research on the topic, so while I've taken some creative license for storytelling purposes, I truly feel that I've done right by the recovery process. At least, that is my hope.

To my fic clique, who have been there reading every chapter as soon as I finished, thank you. Your cheers, your flails, and the amount of times you've collectively told me to fuck off has kept me going. You guys are the fucking best.

To my beta, the amazing disgruntledkittenface, this simply wouldn't exist without you. I don't think either of us quite knew what we were getting into when I started this last year. It has been a JOURNEY and I couldn't have had a better partner at my side the whole time. Thank you for the hours (days and weeks in total) that you have given to me and my story. Thank you for understanding and loving my characters right from the start. Thank you for always knowing where I wanted to go and holding my hand as I figured out how to get there. Thank you for pushing me all the time; I know I am a better writer because of you. Thank you for all the inappropriate conversations over gchat at work and for telling me I could write smut when I was afraid I couldn't. Thank you for your wit and your banter and for your one-liners. Thank you for being an absolute task master when it comes to all things coffee. Thank you for being the Harry to my Louis. I will never be able to fully say what it's all meant to me.

This is for you, Marshmallow.

A Spotify Playlist for the fic can be found here.

Title is from Niall's "Paper Houses"
An Italian translation can be found here.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

This isn’t happening.

Harry takes a shuddery breath and looks down at his hands, still tarnished a faint rust brown around his cuticles, no matter how hard or how many times he’s scrubbed them. He takes in his formerly pristine white t-shirt, now stained dark red across the middle from where he’d cradled an unconscious and bleeding Louis in his arms. He takes another deep breath as bile and acrid hospital coffee threaten to rise up his throat once more.

No. This is definitely happening.

Harry’s phone buzzes in his pocket. He fishes it out and unlocks it to find a text from Liam.

Don’t think I’ve ever taken a test that fast in my life. On my way, Haz. Any news?

“No,” he taps out. “Nothing.”

How long has it been?

Harry shifts in the uncomfortable plastic chair, his back aching. He twists his spine, exhaling in relief as he feels it pop.

Seriously, shouldn’t these chairs be comfortable? The people sitting in them are in enough pain already. Jesus.

He tries to focus his bleary eyes on the clock display on his phone. He watches as the clock clicks over to 11 A.M.

More than five hours and no word.

Logically, he knows that no news is good news. It means Louis is still fighting. He knows that. But he can’t stop himself from wondering if Louis is dead and the doctors just don’t know how to tell him. Or can’t tell him because he isn’t family. He’s Louis’ emergency contact, that should count for something, goddammit. Even if it hadn’t counted for literally riding in the ambulance with him. Every time he closes his eyes he sees those ambulance doors slamming in his face as he screamed for Louis.

Jesus. How did I get here? I don’t even remember driving here.

Fresh tears spring to his eyes as his panic surges to the surface once more.

Oh God. He’s dead, isn’t he? How long had Louis been out before I found him? That was a lot of fucking blood and Louis was so cold. I was too late. I didn’t do enough. What am I going to tell Jay when she gets here? I failed him and now he’s dead, he’s dead, he’s dead.

Harry lets out a strangled sob as he pulls his long legs up into his chair and curls into a ball, hiding his face as he weeps. He’s causing a scene. He doesn’t care. Isn’t that what emergency room waiting areas are for?

“Harry?”

Fucking finally.
He hears rather than sees Nick sit down next to him.

“I came as soon as I heard.”

Harry breathes deeply into his knees, tension radiating off his tightly curled body as he fights to stop his sobs. He really doesn’t want to cry in front of Nick fucking Grimshaw.

“I called you five hours ago, Nick,” he says, accusation dripping from his voice. “Five hours.”

“My phone was on silent.”

Harry huffs, swiping the tears from his cheeks. From the way Nick reeks of stale cigarettes and whiskey, he assumes by “silent” he actually means “too hungover to be assed to pick up the phone.”

They sit in awkward silence as Harry breathes in and out, tears still streaming down his face. He hears Nick squirming next to him, clearly at a loss as to how to offer any gesture of comfort.

Finally, Nick clears his throat.

“Erm...how is he?”

“I don’t know,” Harry replies, keeping his head buried.

“What the hell happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“Jesus, Harry, a little help here, please?”

Harry takes a deep breath. It’s easier not looking at Nick, so he just rests his chin on his knees, staring straight ahead. He tries to keep his voice even, just relaying the facts.

“I went to Lou’s around 5:30 this morning. We had that chemistry midterm today and he’s been struggling in the class, so I had offered to drill him beforehand. He didn’t answer when I knocked and he didn’t pick up his phone, so I assumed he was still asleep. I used my key. All the lights were on. The apartment was a wreck. Everything just felt...wrong. It did as soon as I opened the door. I went back to his bedroom and…”

Harry gulps, feeling the tears take control again.

“And?” Nick urges.

“Louis...he...he was on the floor. The curtains had been pulled down. His desk chair was flipped over. The window was shattered. Blood everywhere. So much blood. I’d never seen so much blood…”

“Shit,” Nick breathes.

Harry plows on, unable to stop the words from tumbling out now that he’s started.

“He was barely breathing. Hardly had a pulse. I called 911. I tried to stop the bleeding.” Harry squeezes his eyes shut as the images float into his mind’s eye. “I wasn’t even sure where it was coming from at first but I tried.”

Harry pauses, his emotions overwhelming him. He's been going over it in his mind for hours but it...
sounds so much worse out loud. He clenches his fists as he continues.

“I tried but he stopped breathing. His lips…they turned almost blue? I lost his pulse. I did CPR until the paramedics came. I did everything I knew how to do to save him. I did. The paramedics shocked his heart…twice…and when they got it going again, he started seizing and…foaming at the mouth? I thought he was going to die right there in front of me, I swear to God.”

Harry finally turns to look at Nick and sees that he’s gone completely white. He’s clearly in last night’s clothes, his platinum blond hair flopping limply in his face.

*So they definitely partied last night then. Great.*

“No now how about you tell me what the hell happened last night?” Harry says icily.

Nick at least has the decency to look moderately guilty.

“Louis had a bad day. He’d had another fight with Mark about his grades, which just upped his stress about midterms. He needed to blow off some steam so I–”

“Told him out to get drunk, what a fucking surprise,” Harry growls.

“What was I supposed to do? I don’t know shit about bionic chemistry or whatever the fuck it is you’re taking, so it’s not like I could help him study. He needed to get out of his apartment.”

Harry blatantly rolls his eyes, a gesture clearly not lost on Nick.

“Give me a break, Boy Scout. It was no big deal.”

Suddenly, Harry is glad they are in a hospital because he is going to physically maim this asshole.

“Oh sure, Nick. Louis’ failing the class, so you took him out to get wasted instead of studying. Gee, why didn’t I think of that?”

“Lay off,” Nick says through clenched teeth. “He didn’t get that wasted.”

Harry snorts because going by Nick’s current condition and the fact that he has at least 20 pounds on Louis, he’d love to know what Nick’s actual definition of “wasted” is.

“Around three, I took him home and put him to bed, like I always do when he’s partied too much. He kept yammering on about how he had to be up in a couple hours to meet you, which is the only reason I didn’t stay over. Maybe going out wasn’t the smartest thing to do, but then again, I’m not bound by Scout’s Law.”

Harry silently gives him the finger.

“Anyway,” Nick continues, choosing not comment on the gesture. “He was fine when I left. Sleeping like a baby.”

They sit in tense silence. Harry starts counting the tiles on the floor, trying to calm the rage building inside him.

“Did you call his parents?” Nick asks.

“They’re on the road now.”

“Should I call anyone else?”
“I’ve taken care of all that. I’ve been here for five hours after all, thanks so much for all your help,” Harry spits.

“Goddammit, Harry. I didn’t know what was going on. I’m here now and I am asking how I can help, so cut me a little slack.”

Hysterical laughter bubbles in his chest. “No, I don’t think I will, Nick.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“How drunk was he really?”

“I already told you everything I know, Boy Scout. Christ. I’ve seen him much worse, believe me.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Listen, you little shit…”

“Haz!”

Liam. Thank God.

Harry feels some of the tightness in his chest loosen, as he focuses on his friend striding across the waiting room, arms already reaching for him. Harry stands and subsequently collapses into Liam’s waiting embrace, burying his face in his neck as tears start anew. He’s just...so fucking glad to see him.

“Hey,” Liam whispers into his hair, scratching his scalp comfortingly. “Hey, I’m here.” Harry tightens his arms around Liam’s middle, soaking up every ounce of the warmth and comfort he desperately needs. “I should have been here, Haz. You’ve been here all alone. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I never should have taken that test.”

“It was half your grade,” Harry mumbles into his neck. “You had to. I told you to go.”

“Yeah, well. I probably failed it anyway.” Harry makes a mewl of discontent and Liam chuckles softly. “It’s all good, H. This is more important. Louis is more important.”

“I’m so scared, Li,” Harry whispers. “I can’t lose him.”

Behind him, Nick coughs, reminding them of his presence. Liam looks up and peers over Harry’s shoulder. “How are you doing, Nick?” he says kindly.

“Well, I’m a little terrified my boyfriend is going to die, Liam. So...not great.”

Harry flinches and Liam squeezes his shoulder. He tugs Harry along as he sits down next to Nick, clapping him on the shoulder. “None of that talk, okay? Nobody’s dying today.”

“Harry Styles?”

Oh God, oh God, oh God .

The boys leap to their feet, Harry clutching Liam’s hand in a death grip.

“Here!” He croaks.

Harry holds his breath as the young woman approaches him, her scrubs a crisp blue and her long
black hair falling in a braid down her back under her brightly colored scrub cap. He desperately searches her face for any sort of clue as to what kind of news she is bringing. Her face is schooled into a pleasantly neutral expression.

*Do they teach them how to do that in med school? They totally teach them how to do that in med school.*

*Please don’t ruin my life.*

“Hi, Harry,” she says, extending her hand. He shakes it, numbly. “I’m Dr. Turner. I was on the team that worked on Mr. Tomlinson when he was brought in. Now, I understand that you’re not family, but you are listed here as Mr. Tomlinson’s emergency contact?”

Harry nods dumbly.

Nick elbows in next to him, thrusting his hand out towards Dr. Turner.

“Nick Grimshaw. I’m Louis’ boyfriend.”

Harry barely suppresses an eyeroll as Turner regards Nick coolly, arching an eyebrow as she shakes his hand.

*Always fucking asserting himself.*

“How is he?” Harry blurts out, finally finding his words. “Is he going to be okay?”

“Mr. Tomlinson–”


Turner’s eyes soften and she offers Harry a small smile. “Louis is in critical, but stable condition.”

Relief floods through Harry’s veins and he feels his knees buckle, completely giving out on him. He collapses into his chair, fresh tears springing to his eyes.

*He’s alive . Oh my God, he’s alive . He’s alive, he’s alive, he’s alive .*

Turner sits down next to him, squeezing his knee comfortably. “Yes, Harry. He’s alive.”

*Oh. Didn’t realize I said that out loud .*

“Louis is alive. Thanks to you. Another few minutes and he would have bled out. He partially severed his brachial artery in his fall–” She glances at the puzzled expressions on Nick and Liam’s faces and clarifies, “that’s the major artery in his upper arm. We’ve managed to repair it though. He has multiple contusions and lacerations from it as well–”

“So why’s he still critical?” Harry hears Nick ask over the buzzing in his brain. “If you’ve fixed everything?”

“What about the seizures?” Harry chokes out.

Turner straightens in her seat, taking a deep breath.

“They were indicative of alcohol poisoning.”

“Not that drunk my ass,” Harry grits, glaring at Nick.
“We pumped his stomach and he’s in a medically induced coma right now. We’ve got to do some tests on his brain and his heart to make sure there is no permanent damage. It’s still early, but Louis is a fighter. He gave us a real scare, but I feel very confident that he’s going to make a full recovery.”

Liam grips Harry’s shoulder and Nick lets out a small whoop of joy. “So he’s fine!”

“I wouldn’t say that, Mr. Grimshaw.”

Harry’s heart drops into his stomach.

“What’s wrong?” he whispers.

Turner sighs. “Like I said, everything about the way Louis’ body was reacting indicated alcohol poisoning, so we ran a toxicology screen so we could fully determine what we were dealing with. His blood alcohol content was 0.3%, which is alarming on its own, when you consider his size. But his tox screen also came back positive for amphetamines...a severely high amount of them. Combining speed and alcohol is incredibly dangerous because they cancel out the highs, thus making it easier to overdose. Which is what happened tonight.”

Harry’s insides turn to ice. Liam’s grip on his shoulder tightens. It should hurt...but Harry can’t feel a single thing in this moment.

Oh, Louis. No.

“Were you aware of his drug use?” Turner asks gently.

“No,” Harry and Liam answer simultaneously. Harry turns to look at Nick, who is looking at the floor, suddenly very interested in the scuffs on his boots. “Nick?”

Nick swallows and looks at Harry, guilt etched all over his face. “Yeah. I knew.”

The room is spinning.

“You knew? And you didn’t do anything?” Harry asks accusingly.

“He doesn’t use them that often,” Nick explains, turning to Dr. Turner. “He’s got it under control, honest.”

“Contrary to what you may think, amphetamines are highly addictive. Louis was lucky. This time. He might not be next time. He needs to go to rehab.”

Harry feels the ice start to melt into molten rage.

“Louis doesn’t need any of that. He doesn’t have a problem,” Nick insists.

Shut up, shut up, shut up.

Turner fixes an cold stare on him. “I don’t know what you define a ‘problem’ as, Mr. Grimshaw, but the events of this morning indicate, in my professional opinion, a ‘problem,’ whether you want to admit it or not.” Her pager beeps and she checks it quickly. “Excuse me, gentlemen. I’ve got to check on one of my other patients.”

“Wait!” Harry yelps, leaping to his feet. “When can I...we...see him?”

Her face softens. “He’s in recovery right now. I’ll send someone to update you as to when he’s
moved to a room. He won’t be awake, but you’ll be able to see him at least.” She squeezes his knee and then she’s off.

Harry is vibrating. Literally.

“Let me get this straight, Nick,” he says, dangerously quiet. “You’ve known about this for how long?”

Nick hesitates before finally admitting, “A few months.”

“And you didn’t do anything because…?”

“Wow, Harry, maybe you should go into law instead of medicine because this is an excellent cross examination.”

“Fuck you,” Harry spits, clenching his hands into fists.

“Please, guys,” Liam pleads, as if he can sense that Harry is about to completely lose his shit. “Please don’t fight. Not now. It’s not going to help Louis.”

“I didn’t think it was that big of a problem,” Nick insists, ignoring Liam’s pleas. “Hell, I’ve done my fair share of drugs and I’ve been fine–”

Harry lunges at him, his fists flying wildly. Nick recoils in shock, Harry’s fist missing his face by mere inches. Liam jumps in between them, pinning Harry’s arms against his chest before he can take another swing at Nick.

“I can’t believe how stupid you are!” Harry screams, wrestling against Liam. “This is all your fault!”

“My fault?” Nick screeches, regaining his bearings. “My fault?!”

“He could have died, you bastard! He still could!”

“Harry,” Liam urges. “Calm down. This is not the time or place to kill him.”

“Oh, I think it’s the perfect place,” Harry bellows, rage not abating as he continues to struggle in Liam’s firm grip. “We’re in a fucking hospital, after all. Let me go, Liam! Jesus!”

“Harry,” Liam says desperately, looking over at the nurse at the check-in desk, who is watching with concern, her hand on a telephone. “Harry, you have to stop, okay? Do you want to get thrown out of here? Before you can see Louis? Cause that’s what’s going to happen if you don’t calm down.”

“Hey, Harry, if you’re his best friend, like you claim to be, then why didn’t you notice he had a problem? If this is anyone’s fault, it’s yours.” Nick sneers, landing a verbal punch in the stomach. Harry completely deflates, slumping in Liam’s arms.

“Hey.” Liam snarls, supporting Harry’s dead weight. “Stop it. This is no one’s fault. Got it?”

“He’s right,” Harry whimpers, curling in on himself. “I should have seen it. Why didn’t I see it?”

“Harry, no,” Liam says firmly, easing him into a chair. “Don’t do this.”

“Besides,” Nick says, winding up his proverbial knockout punch. “I’m the one Louis should come
to when he needs help. *I’m* his boyfriend. *Not* you.”

“Go to hell,” Harry mutters.

“What’s that, Boy Scout?”

All the fight has left Harry’s body, an aching sense of exhaustion and bone-deep sadness taking over. “Nothing,” he mumbles, curling his long body into the a ball.

After a few agonizing minutes, Nick finally breaks the silence surrounding them. “I’m going to get some coffee. Does anyone else want anything?”

Harry shakes his head, holding his knees tighter. He needs to be as small as possible. Because otherwise he is going to shatter into a million tiny pieces.

“Harry?” Liam says gently, kneeling in front of him. “Look at me.” He looks up at Liam, whose warm brown eyes are filled with concern. “This is not your fault.”

Harry just shakes his head miserably, chewing on his lip.

“Harry,” Liam repeats firmly. “This is not your fault. Do you hear me?”

Harry exhales shakily, nodding as a lone tear streams down his cheek.

“Have you eaten anything?”

“M’not hungry,” he rasps, resting his chin on his knees.

“All the same, you need to eat something, okay? You’re exhausted. A banana maybe? Can I go get you a banana, Haz?”

He nods dumbly.

“I’ll be right back, okay?”

Harry nods again as Liam squeezes his shoulder. He watches in a daze as Liam follows Nick in the direction of the hospital cafeteria. His body relaxes as soon as they leave and he lets go of his knees and slumps back in the chair. Harry sighs as he flexes his hands, his fingers tingling from having been clenched in fists for too long. He catches sight of his blood-stained cuticles and his stomach lurches. The events of the morning overwhelm him, images flashing through his mind at a rapid-fire pace.

Harry breaks out into a cold sweat, his heart pounding hard in his chest. He sprints to the nearest bathroom, barely making it into a stall before his body gives itself over to wave after wave of heaves, his abs clenching painfully as the minimal contents of his stomach empty. He rests his head against the cool porcelain of the bowl, not even caring that it is definitely disgusting. He doesn’t have it in him to stand right now. He lets it all out right there on the bathroom floor, the fear, the anger, and the fucking heartbreak pouring from him in agonizing sobs.

*This isn’t happening.*
Chapter 2

Everything hurts.

Louis feels heavy, like he’s submerged in water, struggling to rise to the surface.

God, everything really fucking hurts. What the fuck is going on?

Even his eyelids feel like 10-ton weights as he tries to open them. They aren’t working.

What kind of hangover is this? C’mon, dammit. Open your fucking eyes.

Finally, he feels his body start to cooperate with him and his eyes slowly flutter open. He blinks several times, trying to get his eyes to focus. Once they do, he feels nothing but confusion.

That is...that is not my ceiling.

Where am I?

Louis feels his heart start to race as a sense of panic builds. He hears machines beeping, the sound increasing as his heart rate does. He takes several deep breaths to calm himself, his chest aching as he does so. Looking down, he sees the telltale blue and white gown, and realizes that he must be in a hospital. He sees mottled purple bruises as well as several wires peeking out from where the gown had slipped beneath his collarbones.

Did someone pound on my chest? No wonder it hurts so much.

His left arm is throbbing as he takes in the fresh white bandages and the IV needles at his wrist.

What the hell did I do last night? Think, you idiot.

Louis tries to get his sluggish brain to focus. Bits and pieces flash before his eyes. Mark coming down hard on him. A horrible drowning feeling. Pre-gaming at home before going out with Nick. Shots, shots, and more shots. Popping some pills while Nick was in the bathroom. More shots. Nick carrying him out of the bar like a baby koala and getting in an Uber. Waking up alone, still drunk. Swallowing a handful of pills.

I fucked up. I fucked up. I fucked up. I fucked up.

A snuffle interrupts his mounting panic. Louis turns his head to the right and the tightness in his chest starts to loosen immediately.

Harry. Harry’s here.

Harry’s sound asleep in a chair by his bed. His neck is twisted at what has to be an uncomfortable angle, causing his chin-length chocolate curls to hang in a curtain across half his face. His reading glasses have slipped down the bridge of his nose, where they now dangle precariously on the tip; his mouth is slightly agape, his bottom lip pouting. An open textbook rests on his lap. Louis smiles in spite of himself.

Here we have a Harry Styles in his natural state.

Louis tries to say his name but all that comes out is a pained moan. His throat feels like he swallowed razor blades. Harry startles, limbs flailing everywhere and the textbook falling to the
floor with a clatter.

“Lou!” he yelps, shoving his glasses up into his mop of hair. “Lou, oh my God, hi!”

Louis moans again pitifully.

*Why can’t I get my voice to work?*

“Don’t panic, Louis,” Harry says, his calm voice belying the emotions written all over his face. He pours a glass of water from the pitcher by his bed, sticking a straw in it. “They just took the breathing tube out yesterday. Your throat has got to be killing you.” Harry holds the straw to Louis’ lips and he accepts it. “Drink up.”

Louis drinks, the cold water a balm on his shredded throat. As he sucks the water down, his mind races.

*Breathing tube? Yesterday?*

He reaches the bottom of the glass and looks up at Harry. “You want more?” Harry asks, his dimple popping slightly as he smiles. Louis nods, his eyes sliding shut as he feels Harry brush his hair off his forehead. Harry refills the glass. “Do you want to try sitting up more and holding it yourself?”

“Please,” Louis croaks, his voice feeling foreign.

“Lemme get you elevated first, okay?”

Louis nods as Harry starts to fiddle with the controls by his bed. He feels the bed slowly shift upright.

“S’good,” he says when it reaches a comfortable position.

Harry’s smile is blinding. He wraps Louis’ right hand around the glass, waiting until he feels Louis make a firm grip around it before removing his own hand.

“Go slow, yeah?”

Louis grips the glass and slowly brings the straw to his mouth (just like Harry said to) and sips.

*Well, at least my body remembers how to function.*

Harry shifts the tray table within his reach and Louis smiles gratefully at him. Harry affectionately taps the tip of his nose before settling back down in his chair, scooting it closer to the bed. They sit in silence as Louis sips his water, Harry studying him intently.

*He’s waiting for me to talk.*

Louis takes shaky breath and puts the glass down. “What…” he starts, still testing his voice out. “What day is it?”

“It’s Sunday night,” Harry replies placidly, an inscrutable expression on his face.

“Sunday?” Louis squeaks, his heart racing. “But it was just…”

“You’ve been here since Tuesday morning,” Harry continues calmly, his green eyes never leaving Louis’ face. “You lost a lot of blood. There was some swelling in your brain after your surgery, so
the doctors kept you sedated and on a ventilator for a few days. You took a turn for the better Friday night, so they took you off the ventilator yesterday morning because you were strong enough to breathe on your own. They dialed back the drugs that were keeping you under, saying it was up to you to wake up now. Which, you have, so.” He offers Louis a small smile.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

“Shit.”

“Yeah,” Harry huffs.

“Is...is Nick here?”

Something flashes in Harry’s eyes for the briefest of moments before he schools his face back into a neutral expression. “Yeah, he’s here. He’s with your parents in the cafeteria, they should be back soon.”

“Okay. Good.”

*Oh shit, my parents are here?*

Harry’s gaze is unnerving.

“Louis, what happened?”

“I don’t remember much,” Louis lies.

Harry arches an eyebrow.

“Honestly, I don’t. The last thing I remember is waking up around 4:45. I was still pretty drunk.”

“Is that all?”


Harry visibly flinches, the color draining from his face. Louis immediately feels a flash of guilt but tilts his chin defiantly, almost daring Harry to continue. They sit in silence for a few moments before Harry straightens his spine, his eyes laser-focused.

“What were you doing climbing up in your desk chair?” He asks, his voice tight.

“My sconces needed cleaning.”

“Louis, please,” Harry says, irritation creeping into his voice.

“I don’t know, okay?” Louis cries with exasperation. “I don’t know what I was doing. I was really fucked up and people do really stupid shit when they’re fucked up. I am a fuck-up. Are you satisfied?”

Harry recoils, looking at his hands. He picks at his thumbnail as he takes a deep breath.

“I...I’m the one who found you, Lou.”

Shame pools in Louis’ belly, overwhelming him.
“Really?” Louis whispers, tears filling his eyes. Harry looks up at him and his eyes are sad, shining with his own unshed tears. “Oh, Hazza…I...”

Harry wipes his eyes. “It’s fine. I mean...it’s not. It is what it is.” He pauses. “I just don’t know why you’re doing this to yourself...”

“Hey...hey,” he says, grappling for Harry’s hand and squeezing it once he manages to grab it. “I’m not doing anything to myself. I’m fine.” Harry makes a choked noise. “Really, I am. I just...messed up and did something really stupid, okay? That’s it. Nothing else.” Harry starts to object. “Can we talk about something else? Please?”

“If that’s what you want,” Harry sighs, plucking his glasses from his hair and sliding them into the front pocket of his bag.

“How was the test?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t take it.”

“What?” Harry’s never missed a test in his life. Not even when he had a raging case of pneumonia their senior year of high school.

Harry shrugs, tracing lines over Louis’ wrist with his free hand. “I was here,” he says simply. “I wasn’t going anywhere until I knew you were okay.”

Louis’ brain tries furiously to keep up with what he’s saying.

“Do you mean to tell me that you’ve been here for six days? You were going home for fall break! Anne’s going to kill me.”

Harry chuckles wetly, his small smile lopsided. “Yeah...I think not.” He blushes a rose-pink. “She knew I couldn’t leave you. Besides. These chairs here are much more comfortable than my bed at home. They’ve done wonders for my back.”

Louis doesn’t know what on earth he did to earn the loyalty of Harry Styles but he damn sure knows he doesn’t deserve it.

Louis looks at him a long time, awestruck. “You’re unbelievable.”

Harry’s blush deepens. “M’not, Lou.” He releases Louis’ hand.

“What are you going to do about the test?”

“I talked to Dr. Higgins Tuesday night,” Harry says, ruffling his hand through his hair. “Explained what was going on. He...he actually understood? I’m making it up tomorrow.”

“That’s great, Harry. I know how important it is to you,” Louis says earnestly.

“It’s amazing what you can get away with when you’re the top student in the class.”

“I guess I wouldn’t know,” Louis mumbles.

Harry frowns, a little crinkle forming between his brows as they knit together. They sit in silence for a few moments before Harry steels himself, taking a deep breath.
“Louis, you need help.”

He stiffens. “Harry, I told you I don’t want to talk about this.”

“What not?” Harry pushes stubbornly. “You almost—”

“Look, I’m not proud of what happened. I messed up. I messed up big time. I don’t need you to keep reminding me,” Louis says icily. “I’ll get plenty of that from Mark.”

“That’s not fair, Louis. I am nothing like him,” Harry bites. “I’m just—”

Louis is on the defensive now.

“You know what? I knew you would be this way.”

“What way? I’m not the one acting differently here,” Harry volleys back.

“I knew you would...you would just…”

“What? Tell you the truth? Somebody’s got to!”

Harry’s agitated, getting up out of his chair and pacing, furiously pulling at his hair.

“This past week has been hell for me, Louis. I never want to go through that again, do you hear me? Do you have any idea how scared I was?”

“I—”

“Do you know what it was like to walk into your bedroom and find you in a pool of your own blood?”

Louis blanches.

“Do you know that I sat in the emergency room for five hours covered in your blood? Alone?”

Tears start rolling down Louis’ face.

“Christ, Lou, I thought you were never going to wake up. You were...gone. And I just...all I could think about was how you would never—” Harry stops himself, his eyes wide. He scrubs his hands over his face, calming himself down. Quietly, he continues. “God, what if I had overslept that morning? Jesus, what if I had gotten there even five minutes later? You’d probably be—”

“I know,” Louis says through tears.

“I thought I lost you, Boo.”

It’s the childhood nickname that gets him. “Hazza—” he sobs, brokenly.

Harry stares at him for a split second before muttering, “Fuck it.”

He grabs the barrier on the right side of the bed and jiggles it until it finally releases. Harry hoists himself into the empty space and wraps his arms around Louis, gently pulling him into his embrace, cautious of all the bandages and tubes and wires on his left side. Louis scoots over the best he can, making room for Harry. He burrows into Harry’s warm and solid chest, sobbing. Harry’s arms are deceptively strong as they tighten around him and he rests his chin on the top of Louis’s head. They breathe together.
“Am I hurting you?” he whispers.

“Never,” Louis whispers back, pressing himself tighter against Harry’s chest, focusing on his strong heartbeat, trying to calm his sobs. “Fuck, Hazza, I’m sorry. I’m so, so, so sorry…”

Harry rubs comforting circles on his back. “Shhh...I know you are, Lou,” he soothes, pressing a kiss in his hair. “I know.”

“It won’t happen again, I promise,” Louis says, playing with the various trinkets dangling from the chains on Harry’s neck.

Harry doesn’t respond, he just continues to trace gentle circles on his back. Louis pulls at Harry’s t-shirt which is damp from his tears.

“You believe me, don’t you?”

“I believe you,” Harry rumbles, pressing another kiss to the top of his head. After a moment, he continues. “Getting some help will help you keep that promise.”

Louis pulls back so he can look up at him and starts to say something, but Harry stops him, pressing his fingers to his lips. “Just a suggestion, okay?”

Louis nods.

“No more tears,” Harry says tenderly, wiping the tears from under Louis’ eyes with his thumb.

He gently traces the contours of Louis’ cheekbone, his eyes roving all over his face. He goes to remove his hand but Louis inhales sharply, placing his smaller hand over Harry’s, holding him in place. Their eyes meet and the moment feels fragile and overwhelmingly taut all at the same time. Louis sees Harry’s eyes flit down to his mouth. He feels his own lips part slightly as Harry leans in tentatively, his breath ghosting over Louis’ lips.

The door opens with a jarring creak, three voices chattering. He hears his mother’s voice gasp, “Louis! You’re awake!”

Harry startles away from him, the tension between them snapping in two. He gingerly untangles himself from Louis, taking care not to jostle him as he eases off the bed. Louis misses his warmth immediately. He looks at Harry, eyes wide with confusion, but Harry averts his gaze, suddenly very interested in the floor.

What the fuck was that?

Harry stands slightly pigeon-toed, one hand shoved in his back pocket, the other tucking a wayward curl behind his ear.

“Erm...I think it’s my turn for the cafeteria,” he says awkwardly. He casts a furtive glance over at Louis, still not meeting his eyes. “Think about what I said. Um. For me,” he mumbles.

With a quick squeeze to Louis’ blanket covered ankle, Harry practically sprints towards the door, only to be stopped by Jay. She touches his arm and looks at him with motherly concern, murmuring something that Louis can’t hear. Harry replies, equally quiet, as he tries to ease his way out the door. Louis’ attention is torn away from them by a hand in his hair and he looks up at Nick. A pinched smile is on his perfectly handsome face.

“Babe,” Louis sighs, taking Nick’s hand in his and pressing a kiss to his palm. “I’m so happy
you’re here.”

“Not as happy as I am that you are,” Nick breathes, his tense expression giving way to something more genuine as he kisses Louis’ temple.

Jay fusses over Louis’ blankets, tucking them in tighter around him. She straightens his gown, smoothing the folds of fabric over his chest. She presses her hand over his heart and leaves it there, feeling his steady heartbeat. She looks at Louis with a watery gaze and they have an entire conversation with their eyes before she smiles.

“Hi, baby.”

Louis may be 20 years old but he still desperately wants to crawl into his mother’s lap and let her hold him and tell him that everything’s okay. He settles for a “Hi, Mom.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” Louis replies honestly.

“Louis. Language.”

Louis’ entire body tenses at the voice of his stepfather.

*Here we go.*

“Sorry, sir,” he says quietly.

Mark claps his hands together. “Louis, we need to discuss what’s going to happen now that you’re on the mend.”

Louis sighs. “Mark, I’m really tired. I’m not in the mood for a lecture right now.”

Mark levels him with a look. “Your doctors have briefed me on your situation and your mother and I think it is in your best interest for you to check into a rehab facility as soon as you are released.”

*Rehab? Oh, hell no.*

“Wait a minute,” Louis says shrilly. “My ‘situation?’ There is no ‘situation.’ Mark, it was just an accident. It won’t happen again. I’m fine.”

“You are throwing away your future, Louis,” Mark says, ignoring his protests. “I’m not going to allow it. Do you really think any medical school will accept you if they find out you have a drug problem?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not part of the application process.”

Jay cards her hand through his hair. “Baby, please listen. Mark’s right, you need–”

“Of course you side with him. Who cares what I want anyway?” Louis snaps. He ignores the wounded look on his mother’s face as she withdraws her hand.

“You’re already hurting your acceptance chances with your grades. Do you realize that this accident of yours just cost you an entire semester of work, Louis? Do you really want to throw away everything we’ve worked so hard for? All the money your mother and I have invested in you? Is this how you want to repay us?”
Nick grasps his hand in silent support. Louis had almost forgotten he was there. God, this is so humiliating being yelled at like this in front of his boyfriend. Louis listens to his mother crying softly next to him.

*I am an ungrateful little shit, aren’t I? Can’t I get a single thing right for once?*

He feels so...small. He feels small all the fucking time. He takes a sip of his water, desperately wishing it was vodka.

“No, sir, it’s not,” he says sullenly.

“We’ll get you into the best clinic possible. We want to nip this problem of yours in the bud, don’t we, son?”

“Yes, sir,” Louis says tightly.

“We’ll start making arrangements for your treatment tomorrow,” Mark clips, checking his watch. “Jay, it’s getting late. We should head back to the hotel.”

She nods and gets up, pressing a kiss to Louis’ forehead. “I’m so glad you’re going to be okay, baby.”

“I’m sorry I scared you, Mom.”

“No need to apologize,” Mark says, coming over to give him an awkward pat. “What’s done is done. Let’s just make sure it doesn’t happen again. You gave us quite a scare, son.” Mark looks at Nick. “Coming out with us, Nick? He needs his rest.”

“I’ll stay here with Louis a little longer, if you don’t mind, sir.” He offers Mark a dazzling smile as he shakes his hand and walks them to the door. “I’ll make sure he gets to sleep okay.”

Mark nods and then they’re gone. Louis’ shoulders slump as he takes a giant sigh of relief.

“Alone at last,” Nick says with a grin as he leans against the door.

Louis laughs ruefully. “My sentiments exactly.”

Nick crosses the room in two long strides and slots his mouth over Louis’ in an insistent kiss, tongue immediately demanding entrance, hands on his shoulders. Louis gasps in both surprise and pain. “Ah, Nick, my arm, be careful!”

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry, did I hurt you?” he says, immediately pulling back.

Louis winces. “It’s okay. Just...come over here to my other side. I need a cuddle.”

Nick goes to the right side of the bed and crawls into the space previously occupied by Harry.

*Where is Harry?*

Nick makes a great show of delicately putting his arms around Louis as he pulls him into his embrace. “This better?”

Louis giggles. “Okay, you idiot, I’m not made of glass. Fucking kiss me already.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” Nick kisses him slow and deep and Louis sighs into it.
Louis pulls back to rest his head against Nick’s shoulder.

“God, can you believe him?” Louis says softly. He deepens his voice in an imitation of Mark’s. “We wouldn’t want you to ruin your chances of getting into medical school.’ Jesus Christ, is that all he can think about? I’m in the fucking hospital.”

“He just wants the best for you,” Nick murmurs into his hair.

“Whatever,” Louis pouts. “Can you believe they want me to go to rehab? It’s such bullshit. He wouldn’t even listen to what I was saying. He’d already made up his mind that I’m a drug addict. I’m not...I...I just messed up.”

“Hey, hey. I know you’re not a drug addict. You know that. That’s all that matters.”

“Thanks, babe,” Louis says, sucking a kiss to the underside of Nick’s jaw.

“But maybe you should just go along with the whole rehab thing.”

Louis bites down on Nick’s neck not so gently. “Excuse me? Whose side are you on, Nicholas?” He nips again. And again.

“Yours, yours, I’m on yours!” he yelps.

Louis harrumphs.

“Just hear me out, you menace,” Nick says, gently pulling Louis off his assault on his neck. “I’ve seen the brochures for the clinic they are looking at. It looks like a fucking spa, Louis. I’m serious. Just look at it as a chance to get away. Take a break from life for a while.”

“A vacation does sound nice right about now,” Louis says thoughtfully.

“Exactly,” Nick says, tightening his arms around him. “This way everyone is happy. You satisfy Harry and your parents by letting them think you’re conquering your ‘drug problem’ and you get a few weeks rest.”

Louis peers at him, puzzled. “Satisfy Harry?”

Nick rolls his eyes. “Please. I know that’s what Boy Scout was talking about when he left. The ‘for me’ thing was not subtle, you know.”

Louis frowns. “Don’t call him that. He hates when you call him that.”

“I know.”

Louis pokes him in the side. “So don’t do it. Please.”

In lieu of acknowledging Louis’ request, Nick affectionately nibbles his earlobe.

“Hey wait a minute,” Louis says, pulling back. “What about you? You neglected to say what you get out of this whole rehab thing.”

“Well,” Nick says, pecking Louis’ lips. “I get rid of you for a while. You’re a right pain in my ass, you know?” Louis twists his nipple, prompting an indignant squawk. “You’re such a shit.”
“You love me.”

“I do,” he grins. “I just want you to be okay, Louis. You’ve been so stressed out and I don’t know how to fix it.”

Louis sighs, giving in. “If I hate it there, I’m blaming you.”

“Duly noted,” Nick says, sealing his lips over Louis’ and kissing him hard. “I’m sure I can find a way to make it up to you,” he mutters, moving to suck a love bite where Louis’ neck meets his shoulder.

The door opens.

“Oh...erm...sorry,” Harry mumbles, a blush coloring his cheeks. “The...um...the nurse...um...she said this would help your throat feel better.” He’s got two ice cream cones clutched in his large hand, proffering them towards Louis. They are dripping slightly, running in rivulets down his long fingers.

“Ice cream!” Nick cries, hopping off the bed and plucking the cones out of Harry’s hand before Harry has any time to react. He settles back in next to Louis, handing him one of the cones.

“Thanks, Harry,” he says saccharinely.

Harry makes a frog face. “No problem.” He sighs, averting his eyes from the fresh hickey on Louis’ neck as he wipes his hand on his jeans. “M’gonna go.” He starts stuffing textbooks into his messenger bag. “I’ve gotta...study.”

“Do you have to go?” Louis says plaintively. “You know that stuff cold, Haz. You can stay for a little while longer, yeah?” Harry shuffles his feet awkwardly. “Please?”

Harry sighs and places his bag at his feet, gingerly perching on the foot of the bed. “If I fail this test tomorrow, it’s your fault. I don’t think the ‘Louis excuse’ will fly with Dr. Higgins twice.”

“Ha, ha, very funny. Have you ever failed a test in your life?”

Harry scratches his head, clearly pretending to be deep in thought. “Nope,” he replies with a sly grin.

“My point exactly.” Louis takes a bite of his chocolate chip ice cream and mint flavor blooms on his tongue. “Hey!” He grins at Harry, nudging his thigh with his foot. “Mint chocolate chip! My favorite!”

Harry shrugs bashfully. He scrunches his nose, his dimple carving a crater in his cheek.

“Ugh, Rocky Road,” Nick says after taking a bite of his own cone. “Gross.” He tosses the cone in the garbage can, Harry flinching as he does so. “I’d much rather have yours, babe. Gimme.” Louis angles the cone towards his boyfriend, who takes a nibble.

“Rocky Road is Harry’s favorite though.”

Louis frowns at Harry, who is staring at the garbage can, a pained expression on his face. “Do you want some, Haz?” Louis says apologetically, extending the cone towards him. “I can share.”

“I got it for you,” he says quietly.

Louis takes another lick of the ice cream before pointing the cone back in Nick’s direction. “You
sure? It’s delicious. You’re missing out.”

“Sure am,” Harry mutters. He picks at the blanket, not meeting Louis’ eyes.

Louis feels horrible. “Haz,” he mutters back, nudging his thigh again. Harry still refuses to look at him. “Hazaaaaaaarrraaaaaaa–” Louis whines softly, digging his toe into Harry’s solid muscle. Finally, Harry looks up at him and the intensity burning in his eyes knocks the breath right out of Louis’ chest. Still, he says nothing, only stares.

“Hey, Boy Scout, don’t you have a test to study for?”

The moment breaks. Harry and Louis speak simultaneously.

“Right. Yeah. I’m going.” Harry stands, grabbing his bag and heading for the door.

“Goddammit, Nick, I told you not to call him that,” Louis snaps.


Harry opens the door to go, and a grandmotherly looking nurse steps through it, her arms bearing blankets and pillows.

“Harry, dear! I was just coming to make up your bed for the night.” She observes the bag in his hand and frowns. “Are you not staying?”

“No, but thank you, Maggie,” Harry says kindly, face softening. “Big test tomorrow.”

Her eyes light up. “Oh, yes! I remember! You’ve been studying so hard, good luck!”

*Of course Harry befriended the nurses.*

Affection swells in Louis’ chest.

“Thanks, Maggie. I’ll let you know how it goes.” Harry squeezes her shoulder as he scoots around her and out the door. Harry casts a quick glance at Louis, his eyes unreadable. “Night, Lou,” he calls over his shoulder, not waiting for a response.

*Right. Harry’s pissed. I’m going to have to do some groveling tomorrow.*

Maggie shuts the door and then narrows her eyes at Nick. “You. Visiting hours are over. He needs his rest.”

Nick starts to protest but the firm set in Maggie’s jaw shows that she is not a woman to be trifled with. “See you in the morning, babe. Love you,” he says, kissing Louis quickly before he scurries out of the room under Maggie’s watchful eye.

Louis polishes off the rest of his ice cream as Maggie adjusts his IV, checks his vitals, and lowers his bed back into a good sleeping position.

Louis clears his throat. “Did he...um...did he sleep here every night?”

Maggie studies him. “Harry? He sure did, poor lamb. He refused to leave your side, insisting he had to be here when you woke up. Your mother made arrangements with the hospital to let him stay. She even brought him clothes every morning.”

Louis’ heart actually hurts.
“Such a sweet boy,” Maggie muses. “He’s charmed this entire floor. He ordered all the nurses cupcakes on Saturday after we removed the ventilator.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t make them himself,” Louis chuckles. “He used to be a baker, you know. Worked at a bakery all through high school.”

“That would have required him leaving,” Maggie says with a smile, tucking the blankets around him. “And like I said before, he refused to do that.”

“I don’t deserve him,” Louis admits quietly.

“Get some sleep, hon,” Maggie says, brushing his hair out of his eyes. “Next shift will be in to check on you in few hours.”

Louis suddenly realizes just how fucking tired he is. He feels like he could sleep for the next decade. He burrows deeper in his blankets as Maggie turns off his light.

“Maggie?” he yawns as she opens the door. She raises her eyebrows. “Thanks for taking care of him,” he mutters, his eyes drooping shut.

“My pleasure,” she says quietly, chuckling. Louis swears he hears her mutter “These boys…” as he slides into unconsciousness.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Drug Use in the present tense, Drug Withdrawl

Louis stands shirtless in front of his closet, deep in thought. 

What the fuck does one pack when going to rehab?

Louis grabs an armful of his favorite soft sweaters and tees and tosses them into his already overflowing suitcase, not bothering to properly fold them. He plucks a black and white colorblocked sweater from the top of the pile. 

Might as well look nice today. 

He pauses to observe his reflection in the mirror. His eyes are immediately drawn to the jagged scar on his left arm, standing out pink and puckered against his pale skin. He gingerly runs his finger across it, the delicate new skin still tender from having the stitches taken out yesterday. He scrubs his hands over his face, his cheeks feeling soft and smooth without his normal hint of scruff. He pulls the sweater over his head, pausing to sweep his hair into some sort of a style before pulling the sweater down over his stomach. His light brown hair is shaggy, caught in that awkward place between short and long. The scraggly ends are curling up against the back of his neck. 

Jesus, I need a haircut. I look terrible.

His whole body starts to itch. 

Louis shuffles over to his dresser and pulls out a vial of pills. He goes to the kitchen and taps out three, noting that this bottle is almost empty. Checking his phone, he sighs. His parents and Nick will be here soon.

Not much time then. 

He grabs a glass, grinding the pills to a fine powder with the heel of it. He carefully arranges the powder into two lines. He gives himself a little shake; he hates this particular part. Plugging one nostril, he leans over the powder and snorts one line. His eyes water and he coughs, adrenaline coursing through his body with a whoosh. He repeats the whole process for the second line, scrubbing his hands over his face when he’s done. 

There. That’s much better. Much better. 

He plops on his couch and pulls out his phone, thumbing to his favorites. Harry is in class all day today, so his voicemail picks up immediately.

“Hey, Haz,” he says warmly. “I’m sitting here waiting for everyone to pick me up and you aren’t coming ’cause you’re in class. Is that why you’re so smart? ’Cause you go to class?” Louis laughs softly. “Anyway, I just wanted to say goodbye. I mean...not goodbye...that’s pretty fucking morbid, I’m not going anywhere. So I’ll say...see you soon. I don’t want you to worry about me. I know you will, but don’t. I’ll be fine. I’ll be the most popular boy in rehab, you’ll see.”
He’s rambling.

“I’m rambling. I...be good, yeah? Or not good. You could stand to be not good. That’s an order.” His brain is buzzing, the pills kicking in. “I should go. For real. Actually hang up. I...I’ll miss you. You’re my favorite person in the whole world, Haz. Shhhh...don’t tell anyone else. I love you. A lot. A lot a lot. Bye.”

Louis nestles into the couch, enjoying the floating feeling coursing through his veins. It makes him feel invincible, like he can do anything he sets his mind to.

He is startled out of his reverie by a knock at the door.

“Louis?” Nick calls. “We’re here.”

He looks over and sees the open bottle of pills and a fine dusting of powder on the counter.

_Fuck._

“Just a minute!” he shouts, hurriedly stashing the bottle and wiping the counter with his palm. He licks his palm, the powder bitter on his tongue, and then wipes it on his jeans. He throws open the door, smiling brightly at Nick and his parents. “Hi!” He cries, smacking a kiss on Nick’s cheek. He notices Mark looking around disapprovingly. “Sorry the apartment’s a mess! You know me, waiting until the last minute to pack!”

*Slow your roll, asshole.*

Nick brushes a kiss on his lips. “Suitcase in the bedroom, babe?” Louis nods. “I’ll go get it.”

Louis presses a kiss to Nick’s shoulder as he heads back to the bedroom. “Best boyfriend ever.” He looks at his mother, grinning. “Isn’t he the best?”

Jay smiles tightly. “He is.” She frowns, taking Louis’ face in her soft hands. “Are you feeling okay, Boo?”

Be cool.

“I’m great, Mom.” Her thumbs brush the apples of his cheeks as she studies his face. “Never better,” he adds confidently.

Nick joins them, lugging Louis’ suitcase behind him. “Jesus, Louis, did you pack every single thing you own?”

Louis giggles. “One can never be overpacked, Nicholas,” he says solemnly.

“Are we ready to go?” Mark says from the doorway. Had he been sober, Louis surely would have had a smart remark in regards to how Mark had yet to fully step inside the apartment, but instead he concentrates on the buzzing in his veins. That’s what it’s there for in the first place.

“Ready? I was born ready,” Louis chirps. He gives a little hoot of excitement. “Let the healing begin!”

********

_Nick is right. This place does look like a spa._

Cedar Springs Recovery Center is nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains about 30 minutes outside of
Charlottesville. Louis takes in the main building, which is a large colonial style house, the immaculate landscaping, and the extensive grounds as they make their way towards the reception area for check-in. Everything radiates peacefulness, from the babbling fountain in front of the main house to the brilliant fall foliage to the way the ivy winds itself around the columns of all the buildings. Yeah, he can spend a month here. No sweat.

A plump man with sandy hair meets them at the entrance. He’s young, with a boyish face and sparkling blue eyes, but he carries himself in a way that instantly projects authority and commands respect.

“Louis Tomlinson?” he says, grasping Louis’s hand in a firm handshake. “I’m James Corden, Director of Cedar Springs. We’re so happy to have you here.”

“Erm, thanks,” Louis says, withdrawing his hand and clenching it into a fist to stop it from shaking. “This is my mom, Johannah, my stepfather Mark, and my boyfriend Nick.”

James greets them all warmly. “Well,” James says, clapping his hands together. “Let’s get you checked in, shall we?”

James leads them to the reception area, chattering the whole way. “We’re a small facility; we only have 30 clients at a time to ensure that everyone gets a lot of individual attention, while still fostering a true sense of community. Everyone has chores around the center, we have art and yoga classes as well as your more traditional group and individual sessions. You couldn’t have chosen a better place to start your recovery journey.”

Oh, so it is going to be all new-age bullshit. Fantastic.

“Great,” Louis replies nonchalantly.

James hands Louis a clipboard of paperwork, which Mark promptly plucks out of his hands.

“I’ll handle this. I am paying for all of this after all.”

Louis starts to protest, but Nick squeezes his hand and presses a quick kiss to his temple. “Let it go, Lou,” he says quietly.

James looks at Mark with an even expression. “You can fill it out, but Louis has to sign on the dotted line. He is a legal adult and coming here of his own volition after all.”

Louis laughs bitterly. “Yeah, okay.”

James sizes him up, but says nothing to contradict Louis’ statement. Instead he takes Louis’ suitcase from Nick and hoists it up on the counter.

“I just have to go through this to make sure you aren’t bringing any banned substances into the facility,” James states.

“Okay?” Louis croaks.

James makes no comment about the rumpled and unfolded clothes filling Louis’ suitcase; he just calmly takes everything out, patting everything down. He opens Louis’ toiletry bag and pulls out his aftershave and styling gel. “No alcohol based products, sorry,” he says placidly, setting them on the counter. He reaches back into the bag, withdrawing two bottles of pills. He raises his eyebrows, looking at Louis.
“They’re just painkillers,” Louis says, floundering for an explanation that can twist the truth. “I’m still dealing with a lot of pain in my arm from the–”

“I’ll take those, thank you,” Mark says, snatching the pill bottles from James’ hand. He rounds on Louis. “What are you trying to pull here?”

“I–” Louis stammers.

“Are you not going to take this seriously, Louis?” Mark says impatiently. “Or is this more money I’m going to throw away on your behalf?”

Louis cowers. “I...I forgot I had them.” He draws a shaky breath, his head spinning. “Of...of course I’m taking this seriously, sir.”

“It’s a common mistake, Mr. Tomlinson,” James intercedes. “We have nurses on staff who can distribute Tylenol or Advil if you need it, Louis. Nothing stronger than that though.” He finishes his search. He zips up the bag, satisfied that there is no more contraband hidden away in its depths. “Okay, Louis, just sign the paperwork and we’ll go ahead and get you settled in.”

Mark slides the clipboard over to him and Louis scrawls his name at the bottom, not even caring what he just signed himself up for.

“Congratulations, you just took the first step,” James says, handing Louis his suitcase. James then turns to look at his parents and Nick, smiling kindly. “You’ll need to say your goodbyes here, I’m afraid. It’s important that Louis gets settled all on his own.”

Louis turns and looks at them, eyes wide, his heart suddenly pounding. Jay gathers Louis in a fierce hug, kissing the top of his head.

“Be good, baby. I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Mom,” Louis replies, fighting back tears as he breathes in her comforting scent.

Mark claps him on the shoulder. “Just do what these people tell you and you’ll be out of here in no time. Make me proud.”

Louis straightens his spine. He’s not going to cry in front of Mark. “I’ll do my best, sir.”

Mark turns to Nick. “We’ll give you two a moment to say goodbye. Meet us at the car.”

Nick nods. “Yes, sir. I’ll be right there.”

Mark puts his arm around Jay, who is wiping tears from her eyes. “Don’t be too long,” he calls over his shoulder.

Nick turns to Louis and takes his face in his hands, pressing a firm kiss to Louis’ lips. “Spa vacation,” he says quietly against Louis’ mouth, stroking his thumbs over his cheekbones.

Louis huffs a small laugh, his hands clasping around Nick’s wrists. “Yoga classes and everything.”

“Call me tonight, okay?” Nick asks, pecking his lips once more.

“Actually, there are no phone calls for the first five days,” James interrupts.
Louis curls into Nick’s side and feels Nick slide an arm over his shoulders protectively.

“What do you mean by ‘no phone calls?’” Nick challenges. “He can call me if he wants to! Unless this is some sort of prison?”

James smiles serenely. “He’ll be in detox for the first five days. After that, Louis is free to make phone calls. But we discourage too much outside contact as it distracts clients from truly immersing themselves in the recovery process.”

*Some spa vacation. What the fuck have I gotten myself into?*

Louis clings to Nick. “I don’t know if I can do this, Nick,” he says fearfully.

Nick squeezes him tightly. “You can do this. You will. It’s only five days, Lou.”

Louis takes a steadying breath, concentrating on the buzzy feeling in his brain. Suddenly everything about this feels very, very real. “I love you,” he says, nuzzling Nick’s neck.

“I love you too. Talk to you soon.” With a final kiss, Nick extracts himself from Louis’ grip and strides to the door. He blows one more final kiss at Louis as he crosses the threshold, leaving Louis alone with James.

“I know you’re high right now.”

Louis looks at him, eyes wide, before tilting his chin defiantly.

“Buzzin.’”

James barks out a laugh, eyes sparkling with amusement. “I also know you’re about to crash, so we should get you to your room.” He pushes open the double doors, gesturing for Louis to follow. “After you.”

Louis follows James down the hall and up a staircase, dragging his suitcase behind him.

“Like I said, you’ll be in detox for five days. It gets...intense, so we like to keep new clients isolated while they are detoxing so as not to trigger other members of the community. So you’re going to be in a single room for now, but you’ll be getting a roommate for the rest of your stay. Sound good?”

“Peachy,” Louis mumbles.

“I can have someone give you a tour of the grounds tomorrow, if you’re feeling up to it. There’s a nurse’s station right here,” James says, gesturing to his right. Several nurses wave at him. “They’ll be there for anything you might need over the next few days.” He stops in front of a door, pushing it open. “Here we are, home sweet home.”

The room is small, sparsely furnished with a twin bed and a nightstand. A desk and chair are nestled in the corner next to a small dresser and a woven rug is on the floor. “We have a communal TV room that you’ll be able to use once you’re out of detox. We have a library too…”


“Naturally,” James banters back. “I’ll let you get settled then. You know where the nurses are. One of them will bring your dinner up for you this evening.”

“Goody.”
James pats him on the shoulder and leaves, closing the door behind him.

Louis sighs, scrubbing his hands over his face. James is right, the crash is coming soon and he knows from experience that the tumble back down to earth won’t be pretty. The buzzing energy is already starting to fade and Louis realizes just how tired he is. He can feel it in the marrow of his bones; it seems like he’s been tired for years. He toes off his Vans and peels off his skinnies, tossing them both in the corner. He falls face first into the surprisingly comfortable bed. Sleep. Sleep is good.

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Day three and Louis is coming out of his fucking skin.

He slept through most of the first day; a deep yet restless sleep that somehow left him more tired than he had been before. The nightmares kicked in on the second day; faceless horrors that Louis can’t quite label except for the fact that they all scare the everloving shit out of him, jerking him awake with screams. His body feels at war with itself, desperate for sleep yet absolutely fucking terrified to allow it. He’s constantly hungry, devouring his meals as soon they are delivered, only to have his stomach cramp painfully afterwards, forcing him to run to the toilet to vomit it all up.

And the constant itch.

The itch that consumes him until there’s nothing else that he can think about. The itch that demands that he scratch. Except there’s nothing he can fucking do to scratch it. There’s no relief for him. He can’t shut his fucking brain off, the same refrain repeating itself over and over again.

If only I could only get my hands on one fucking pill. What is the big deal? It’s just a pill. Why does everyone think I can’t handle it?

Louis curls into a ball on his bed as another wave of tremors rack his body. He hugs his knees tight, trying to control the shaking. He breaks out into a cold sweat, drenching his body almost immediately. He rips off his sweater and tosses it to the floor; his soaked t-shirt clings to his trembling body and it’s so fucking uncomfortable. His heart is racing and his chest feels tight. He’s dying. He’s actually fucking dying. He has to be. He’s never felt like this before. Something is wrong, this can’t be normal.

Harry. I fucking need Harry. Harry’s smart. He’ll know what’s going on.

He runs his hand through his hair, damp and matted to his skull. He uncurls his body and plants his feet on the floor, pushing himself up with all the strength that his trembling arms allow. His knees buckle at first and he braces himself on the bed to keep himself from falling. He takes a few deep breaths and tries again. He’s unsteady on his feet but he’s fucking standing.


The distance between the bed and the door feels like a mile. Louis stops to wipe the sweat from his brow, supporting himself on the door. With another deep breath, he summons the willpower to keep going. He pulls the door open and hobbles across the hall to the nurse’s station. He sees that Perrie is on duty. She’s always been nice to him. She’ll understand that he needs Harry.

She blinks at him, taking in his appearance. “Louis?”

“I need to make a phone call,” he gasps.
She frowns. “You know I can’t let you do that, Louis.”

“Please?” he says desperately.

“You know the rules, Louis,” Perrie says firmly. “No calls.”

“I’m fucking dying, let me use the phone,” he demands.


Something about the pity in Perrie’s eyes sets him off. He feels a surge of adrenaline.

“How do you fucking know I’m not,” he screams, sweeping the array of folders Perrie had been filing off the counter. “This is bullshit! This is not what I signed up for.”

He storms back into his room, slamming the door hard. He paces furiously around the room, pulling at his hair and muttering “This is such bullshit!” over and over again.

He hears a knock, immediately followed by the sound of the door opening.

“Louis? It’s James. Perrie said you were having a problem?”


“No...no problem. I don’t have any fucking problems. Do you think I have a problem?”

James crosses his arms and leans against the closed door. “Depends.”

“I just want to make a phone call,” Louis pleads, wringing his hands. “Just one phone call—that’s all. Just one phone call to my best friend Harry. If you wanted to make one fucking phone call, would you call that a problem?”

“No.”

Louis claps his hands together. “Problem solved.” He moves to open the door, but James blocks his path.

“But you see,” James says calmly, putting his hands on Louis’ shoulders. “I’m not the one in the middle of a five-day detox.”

Louis shoves his hands off. “Fuck off.”

“You’ll be able to call him in two days.”

“No, now,” Louis shrieks. “I want to call him now, goddammit! Don’t you understand fucking anything? I want to call him now!” He picks up his desk chair and throws it at the wall. James barely bats an eyelash. His reserve of energy spent, Louis collapses to the floor like a rag doll. “I need to call him now,” he whimpers, tears streaming down his face. “Don’t you understand? Please...please let me call him. You don’t understand how much I need...”

“What about what Harry needs, Louis?” James asks quietly. “Do you really think he should have to hear this?” James sighs and sits next to him on the rug. “There’s a reason we don’t allow phone calls during detox, Louis,” he explains. “And surprisingly enough, it’s not to torture you. We have to protect your loved ones too. Harry already had to find you after your overdose. Harry literally saw you dying, you don’t get to call him and tell him this is dying. This is not dying, Louis. This is fucking detox.”
“But I need him,” Louis whines.

“What you need to do is take responsibility for the choices you’ve made, Louis. What you need to do is stop being so selfish. Are you ever going to think about what’s best for Harry instead of what’s best for yourself?”

“You don’t know anything about us,” Louis whimpers.

“I know enough,” James replies. They sit in silence for a few moments. “Two more days, Louis. You can do this.” James rubs Louis’ back comfortingly and Louis recoils from his touch.

“Fuck you. I don’t need your sympathy.” He pushes himself to his knees, crawling away from James. “I can’t do this. Just...let me out of here. I’m begging.”

“Not a chance.”

Louis pulls on the corner of the desk, hoisting himself up into a standing position. “At least...at least give me something then, James. You...you can’t make me quit cold turkey like this!”

“That’s the whole point, Louis.”

Another wave of tremors hits him and he perches on the edge of the desk. “Look at me! I can’t take this anymore!”

James simply stares at him.

“Goddammit, James, help me. Give me something to make this stop!”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Help me!!” Louis yells.

“I am.”

James is so fucking calm and Louis actually wants to punch him in his serene fucking face.

“Like hell you are. You’re not doing anything,” Louis accuses.

“I’m listening to you,” James replies placidly. “That’s the best help I can give you right now.”

“Don’t give me any of that therapy bullshit, James. I fucking hate you,” Louis spits.

“Go on then! Hate me all you want! If that’s what you need to do to get through this, bring it on,” James exclaims. “Go ahead! Tell me how much you hate me. I can take it. Believe me.”

“I hate you,” Louis howls. “I fucking hate you. You and all your little nurses that pretend like they care about me. I see how they look at me. They think I’m a pathetic piece of shit. And you know what? Maybe I am. But that doesn’t give them the right to fucking judge me. Besides. I don’t even need to be here. This is all a mistake and I want to go home.”

He starts to sob in earnest. He’s so fucking exhausted. He plops onto his bed, wrapping the duvet tightly around him.

“Just let me go home. I don’t belong here. I don’t belong. I don’t…”

He feels James take his hand and the part of him that is desperate for some form of human comfort
finally allows him to do so. He clings to James’ hand as he cries himself to sleep.

********

Two days later, James comes to Louis’ room bright and early. The tremors have abated, for the most part, and while the itch in his brain is still there, it’s less all-consuming. He can just...let it itch without the overwhelming need to do something about it. He’s made it through detox and lived to tell the tale. Not that he feels like talking about it anytime soon. Not to anyone here anyway.

“Time to meet your roommate, Louis. Let’s go,” James chirps.

How is he always so fucking cheerful?

Louis silently grabs his suitcase and trudges down the hall behind him. James leads him to a new wing of the facility, talking the whole time. Louis doesn’t listen to any of it.

“Giving me the silent treatment today, eh?” James finally says.

Louis shrugs.

“I think you and Zayn will get along just fine,” James continues. “He’s been here a month, I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to show you the ropes here.”

Louis grunts non-committedly.

They arrive at a room that is not unlike the dorm room Louis shared with Liam during their freshman year. A boy close to his age sits on one of the beds reading a book. He’s beautiful in a truly terrifying sort of way, with high cheekbones and a dark stubble dusting his strong jaw. His black hair is closely cropped on the sides of his head, but long on top, the ends dyed a bright pink. His ears are pierced multiple times, a bar going through the cartilage at the top of his left ear. A small silver hoop adorns his full bottom lip and his arms are littered with tattoos. When he looks up at them, Louis sees that his eyes are rimmed with charcoal liner, the black making the amber of his irises seem even brighter. Of fucking course this is who James decides to put him with.

“Zayn, this is your new roommate, Louis,” James says.

Zayn gives him a small smile, dog-earring his book and placing it on the shared nightstand. “Nice to meet you.”

Louis says nothing. He sees Zayn shoot James a questioning look.

James claps Louis on the shoulder. “He just got out of detox this morning. Louis had a real rough time with it and he’s not too happy with me at the moment.”

“Ohhhh. I see,” Zayn says, understanding in his eyes.

“I’m standing right here, you know,” Louis says sullenly.

“He speaks!” James cries. “I’ll let you two get settled then. I’ll come by later to see how you are doing, okay?”


Before James leaves, Louis sees him share a look with Zayn that he can’t be bothered to try and interpret. He’s so fucking tired. Still.
Once James is gone, Zayn hops off his bed and cracks the window. He pulls out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter and then turns to Louis.

“Do you want one?”

“Um...sure. Thanks,” he replies, taking the proffered cigarette. They smoke in silence.

“Lap of luxury, isn’t it?” Zayn says, indicating their room.

Louis chuckles in spite of himself. “Totally.”

Zayn takes a long drag, blowing a smoke ring on the exhale. “Detox is a bitch. I had a really hard time with it too. I thought I was dying. Thought it would have been better to just die.”

Louis says nothing. He just focuses on the calming sensation of breathing smoke in and out of his lungs.

“You name it, I’ve done it,” Zayn continues. “But coke was my biggest vice.”

“Well, it sure seems like you’ve come to the right place then,” Louis says sarcastically.

“You’re right,” Zayn says solemnly. “I have. I’ve been in and out of rehab for the last four years. Two different clinics before this one. The other ones were bullshit. James really knows what he’s doing here. You’ll see. It’s really hard work, but we all help each other. For the first time in my life, I feel like I can really beat this. You can too.”

So Zayn has drunk the Kool-Aid then. And now he’s practically shoving it in my face.

“Thanks for the advice,” Louis says drily. “But I don’t have that big of a problem. I could have quit anytime I wanted. I’m really only here because my stepfather basically forced me. So you can save all your little stories about how this place has changed your life. I’m not interested.”

Zayn studies him as he takes another drag. “So you’re one of those then.”

“What?”

Zayn’s eyebrows knit together as he takes a final drag, stubbing his cigarette butt out in a tin can that’s perched on the windowsill. “Denial issues. There are always people with denial issues.”

“I’m not denying anything,” Louis counters.

“Sure you’re not,” Zayn says easily. “Believe me, you’ll get over that real fast.”

“Listen,” Louis snaps, stubbing out his cigarette in the can. “My reasons for being here are none of your business. I’m fucking exhausted. All I want to do is sleep. So that’s what I’m gonna do.” He pulls his suitcase over to the foot of his bed and then yanks up the duvet and crawls under it, closing his eyes. “Thanks for the cigarette.”

“You’re welcome, man.” He hears Zayn huff a gentle laugh as he pulls the window shut. The bed squeaks as Zayn crawls back on top of it. Louis hears the gentle shuffling of his book as Zayn thumbs back to the place he had left off. “Enjoy your nap. Problems will still be here waiting for you when you get up.”

“Whatever,” Louis says, half asleep already.

He could just sleep through the next twenty-three days, right?
Chapter 4

Harry stands on the curb outside his apartment building, pulling his coat around him tightly with one hand, his other gripping his large travel mug of coffee. It’s the first truly crisp evening of the fall and he probably should have brought a scarf; the back of his neck is freezing, the few loose tendrils of hair escaping from his bun doing nothing to warm it. He buttons his top button, his hand smoothing down the fine black wool of his YSL coat, one of his most prized possessions. They’d found it in a consignment shop last year and Harry had fallen in love with it immediately but hesitated when he saw the price tag. Louis had shoved the coat into his hands, blue eyes sparkling, demanding that Harry splurge on himself for once. “If you don’t get this, I’ll never speak to you again.”

Harry’s heart clenches at the memory.

Harry hasn’t heard from Louis since the rambling voicemail he left the morning he went to rehab. Five days. It’s the longest they’ve ever gone without speaking to each other, at least since they were kids. His phone’s silence taunts him; every time it pings, he expects it to be Louis texting him a random string of emojis. (“We are in CLASS, Lou.” “Appreciate my emoji game, Harold.”)

So if he listens to that voicemail whenever he feels a particular ache for Louis, that’s no one’s business but his own.

Right on time, Liam’s forest green Explorer pulls up to the curb. Harry pulls open the door with his free hand and hops in.

“I can’t believe you’re making me do this,” he grumbles before he’s even fully settled into the seat.

“Excuse me, Harry, no hello?”

“Excuse me, Liam. Hello. I can’t believe you’re making me do this.”

Liam frowns at Harry’s coffee mug as he pulls out of the complex. “I’ll never understand how you drink coffee at night, H.”

“Just living up to the old pre-med student cliche, I guess.”

“I’m sure you could have gotten coffee at Nick’s.”

Harry scrunches his nose in disgust. “And drink that blonde roast shit he likes so much?” Harry takes a sip of his dark French roast, the rich flavor heavy on his tongue. “No, thank you.”

“Are you going to be this difficult all night?” Liam asks disapprovingly.

“Maybe,” Harry says stubbornly. He sighs heavily. “I just...this care package for Louis was my idea, yeah? It was just supposed to be you and me. I don’t understand why you had to go and invite Nick to be a part of it. Much less create a whole boys’ night at his apartment to do it.”

Liam looks like a wounded puppy and Harry instantly feels horrible.

“I...I just thought that it would mean a lot to Louis if the three of us did it together,” Liam explains, hurt evident in his voice. “I thought it could be a way for us to show him that we are all behind him. He needs us to be a united support system, you know? Harry, you know how stressed out he gets when you and Nick are at each other’s throats.” Liam shrugs helplessly. “I mean...we can turn
around and go home right now but I just...I was just thinking of what would make Louis happy.”

Jesus. I. Am. A. Dick.

“You’re a good friend, Liam,” Harry says quietly. “And I’m a dick.”

“You’re not a dick, H,” Liam replies. “I should have checked with you before I came up with this whole ‘everybody be best friends’ plan. I’m sorry.”

“And I’m sorry I didn’t stop to think about your intentions. You just know how I get with him, Liam. He makes me fucking nuts.”

“He’s still Louis’ boyfriend, Harry. I know your feelings are a lot more complicated than mine, but he’s really not a bad guy, Haz,” Liam says earnestly. “No matter what we think about them being together——”

“It’s not about that, I swear,” Harry insists.

Liam levels him with a look.

“Okay, it’s not just about that.”

“Thank you,” Liam says smugly.

Harry takes another sip of coffee and then rests the mug in the cupholder. They sit in companionable silence, Liam humming along with the latest Drake song playing on radio. Harry picks at his nails, trying to gather his thoughts.

“Aside from the fact that I don’t think he’s right for Louis, he...he’s never been nice to me,” Harry says honestly, studying his hands. “Not ever, really. It’s been a year and a half, Liam. He’s never respected my friendship with Louis. He always finds a way to make me feel small or unimportant. Somehow he just knows how to get under my skin.”

“You let him do it, Haz,” Liam says gently, turning the radio down.

“I know.” Tears spring to Harry’s eyes, unbidden. He grinds the heels of his hands into his eye sockets, trying to make them stop. “Fuck,” he exhales on a ragged breath. “Fuck, I know that I do. I let him bait me all the time. I hate who I am when I’m around him, Liam. He brings out the worst in me. I’m not a petty or aggressive person. Or at least I like to think I’m not? But how can I not defend myself when he picks and picks and picks at me? Christ, I know Louis hates it when we snip at each other. I know he has to pick his battles when it comes to me and Nick, but fuck, if it doesn’t hurt whenever he chooses him over me.”

Harry closes his eyes and leans his head back against the headrest, unsure as to when this became a therapy session. He feels Liam put the car in park. They’re here. When did they get here?

Fuck and now I have to face him after I’ve been fucking crying.

He furiously rubs his hands over his face. He looks over at Liam, who is now turned in the driver’s seat, leaning against the door so he can properly look at Harry.

“Fuck boys’ night.”

Harry barks a wet laugh. “What?”

Liam’s put on his mama bear face. “You heard me. I mean, he just buzzed us past the gate, so
there’s no turning back now, we have to go inside. But we’re staying an hour max. Then I’m taking you to dinner. My treat.”

Harry really loves Liam.

“Can we go somewhere super cheesy with lots of disgusting and delicious fried food?”

Liam hands him a tissue. “Applebee’s?”

“Oh, fuck, yes. Applebee’s, please.” Harry blows his nose. “Ugh, do I look like I’ve been crying?”

Liam smiles kindly. “You look fine. Blame your allergies if he says anything.” He hops out of the car, opening the back passenger door to grab the half-full care package. He slams that door and then comes around to Harry’s side, opening the door for him. “You ready?”

Harry takes a breath and gets out of the car, rolling his shoulders to loosen the tension. He peers at Liam. “For every time he calls me ‘Boy Scout,’” Harry says drily, grabbing his coffee. “You owe me an appetizer. And then desserts when I get tired of the appetizers.”

Liam laughs, his eyes crinkling. “You have yourself a deal, Haz.”

Nick lives in the nicest apartment complex in Charlottesville. Everything about the place screams luxury, from the gleaming light fixtures to the plush carpet lining the entryway. Harry's been here before, of course, what with Nick's propensity for throwing outlandish theme parties every few months. But no matter how many times he's been here, he still feels like he's going to trip some sort of secret alarm that will eject him from the building based on the balance in his bank account.

“Don’t let him get to you,” Liam says softly as he knocks on the door. Harry nods.

Nick swings open the door. He looks effortlessly put together in his ripped skinnees, faded band tee, and black converse. An unbuttoned white blouse with a black ink blot pattern completes the look and his blond hair is sculpted into a sky high pompadour. Immaculate as he looks, however, Harry takes great pleasure in noticing that his roots are starting to show.

“Liam! C’mon in.” He nods at Harry. “Scout.”

“Grimshaw,” Harry grits through his teeth. He cocks an eyebrow at Liam as they enter the apartment.

Spinach artichoke dip.

“How’ve you been, Nick,” Liam asks a little too brightly.

“Oh, fine,” Nick replies breezily. “Things have been super busy at the campus radio station, so I’ve just thrown myself into that I guess. Can I get you two a drink? Beer? Something harder?”

Harry lifts his coffee mug. “M’fine, thanks.”

“I’m driving,” Liam says. “But water would be great.”

Nick shrugs. “Suit yourselves.” He heads off into the kitchen.

Harry surveys the living room. Nick’s aesthetic is sleek and modern. The white suede couch and loveseat look comfortable but Harry knows from experience that they are both hard and unyielding. The walls are painted a slate gray, all the better to accent the splashes of color from the quirky paintings and strategically placed artsy knick-knacks. (“Excuse me,” Harry corrects himself
sarcastically in Nick’s pretentious voice. “Objet d'art.”) A ridiculous red coffee table sits in the middle and a neon sign that says “Relax” casts a red glow about the room.

Harry can’t help but chuckle at the irony because the last thing this room makes him want to do is relax.

An episode of The Voice is paused on the massive television. The entire room looks ready for a photoshoot for some independent interior design magazine.

Harry clears his throat. “Have you...have you heard from Louis?”

Nick emerges, clutching a bottle of water and a tumbler of ice. “No,” he says, tossing Liam the water bottle. He heads to the liquor cart by the entertainment center and pours himself a healthy glass of whiskey. Harry tries not to roll his eyes, but really, who does Nick think he is? Don Draper?

“They had some sort of bullshit rule about no phone calls for the first five days,” Nick explains, taking a sip of his drink. “Something about needing to focus on detox? Seemed pretty ridiculous to me.”

“Oh,” Harry says.

Nick looks at Harry appraisingly. “Nice coat, by the way. YSL?”

“Yeah,” Harry replies, a hint of pride creeping into his voice. “It’s great, isn’t it?”

See, Liam, I can play nice.

Nick peers at him over the rim of his glass. “Bit rich for your blood, isn’t it, Boy Scout?”

Harry flinches.

Chicken fingers.

“Um...well...I found it at a consignment shop last year? Seemed like a good investment.” He shrugs out of the coat and holds it tightly to his chest, almost as if he is protecting it. “Louis thought it was, anyway,” he adds pointedly.

“I just got the double breasted one from their new collection last week. But yours is in pretty good condition. For being secondhand.”

“Yeah, well, not everyone has access to Daddy’s bank account,” Harry snaps.

Liam claps his hands together. “Okay,” he says loudly, shoving his way in between Nick and Harry on his way to the couch. He deposits the care package on the coffee table and turns around to look at them, his hands on his hips. “So I found a great article about putting together a care package for someone in rehab and we have a good start. What would you like to put in Nick?”

Nick plops down on the loveseat, placing his drink on a coaster; Harry sits on the couch opposite him awkwardly. “Well, what do you have in here so far?”

That’s none of your business.

He pulls the box towards him and starts riffling through its contents.

Too late, he’s already going through it.
“The article talked a lot about putting in things that stimulate the senses,” Liam says helpfully. “Things that are soothing, ya know? Things that remind him of home.”

Nick places the items from the box on the coffee table, one by one. A fuzzy red blanket. A soft oversized blue hoodie. He raises an eyebrow.

“You should have seen the amount of clothes he brought with him. Trust me, I carried his suitcase.”

“Yeah, but that’s Louis’ favorite hoodie,” Liam offers.

Harry chuckles because he knows that blue hoodie is *his* blue hoodie. Louis stole it from him last year and he just never bothered to steal it back.

“He left it at mine. Besides, I lived with him for a year. He’s always freezing, no matter what he’s wearing.”

“This is true,” Nick agrees. “His feet are always ice cold. Sometimes they wake me up in the middle of the night. And he absolutely fucking refuses to wear socks. Ever.”

Harry sighs and places his coffee mug on the table, sans coaster.

Several packs of gum. Two boxes of Twinkies, a bag of salt and vinegar chips. A framed photo of Liam, Harry, and Louis.

“Anything off limits?” Nick asks as he deliberately picks up Harry’s mug and slides a coaster underneath it. “They made a big show of going through Louis’ bag when they checked him in.”

“I called the center,” Liam replies. “It’s pretty much anything goes in regards to food. No dietary restrictions or anything. Nothing alcohol based, obviously.”

Nick gets up, stopping to top off his whiskey before popping into the kitchen. He returns clutching an unopened box of Cocoa Puffs, a carton of cigarettes, and a Bic lighter.

“I always stay stocked on his favorite cereal,” Nick says. “And I know he’ll need these,” he adds, placing the Marlboros on the growing pile.

Harry scoffs. “Cigarettes, Nick? Really?”

“They are allowed to have them, Haz,” Liam says softly. “I asked about those specifically.”

“I just think it kind of defeats the purpose,” Harry grumbles.

Nick turns his attention back to the box. There are two items left in it, the two items Harry wants Nick to see the least. He pulls out the Travel Scrabble box and reads the note taped to it out loud.

“‘Vibey isn’t a word. -H.’” He looks at Harry. “What does that even mean?”

Harry clenches his jaw. For a moment, he ponders telling Nick about the time that Louis tried to win a game by playing “vibey” on a triple word score, only to pitch a indignant fit when Harry informed him that it wasn’t in the Scrabble dictionary. But one look at Nick’s smug face makes him change his mind.

Harry shrugs. “He cheats.”

“Yup,” Harry pops. “That’s us.”

Harry meets Liam’s gaze. His brown eyes are sad, full of apologies. Harry knows he never meant for this to be so awkward. It just always turns out this way with Nick, no matter how hard he tries.

Finally, Nick plucks a rainbow printed teddy bear from the box. Rainbow Bear has seen better days; his fur is starting to wear thin in some places from being cuddled and loved so much. Harry wants to scream at Nick to takes his hands off him; how dare he touch something so precious to him and Louis? Instead he looks at Nick evenly.

“Really, Harry? He’s twenty, not two.”

He doesn’t get to take this from me.

“Louis will know,” Harry says simply. “He’ll know exactly why he’s getting him.”

Liam moves to the floor, crouching on his knees at the coffee table. He gathers all the package’s contents, carefully repacking them. “Anything else to add, Nick? Box is pretty full.”

Nick surveys the spread. “Yeah. Just one more thing.” He disappears into his bedroom.

“Harry, I–” Liam starts.


Nick returns, clutching a t-shirt with a faded Dr. Dre logo on it. “He always sleeps in this.” He folds it neatly and casually places it in the box. Harry realizes he’s placed it directly over Rainbow Bear, ensuring that the shirt will be the first thing Louis sees when he opens the box.

Did he do that on purpose?

“I’m sure he misses it,” he says, giving the shirt a little pat.

Yeah, he fucking did that on purpose.

“Great, thanks.” Liam says tightly, closing up the box before Harry can do anything.

Nick’s phone rings.

Fantastic, maybe we can make a quick exit.

Harry pulls his coat on, ready to get the fuck out of there.

“How is he,” Harry blurts out before he can stop himself.

Nick ignores him, swatting him away like a bothersome fly. “So do you think you can come home early? Time off for good behavior?”

Harry can just hear Louis’ tinny voice echoing from the phone. Loud enough to know he’s there; muffled enough to have no idea what he’s saying. His chest aches.

“Nick,” Harry says wearily. “Just tell me how he is and then we’ll go. Promise.”
“So I was thinking that—” Nick stops suddenly, Louis obviously interrupting him. He glances over at Harry and Liam. “Yeah, he’s here. Liam too. Errmmm...we’re watching The Voice. Yeah, I know.”

Well at least he didn’t run his big mouth off about the package.

“So anyway,” Nick continues. “The hard part’s over, right? It’s all yoga and art classes now, huh?”

There’s a long pause. Harry can’t quite tell if Louis is talking or not.

Nick sits on the couch, long legs splayed in front of him. “I miss you. I miss your beautiful face. I miss waking up with you...it feels so lonely without you here all the time.”

Right. I don’t have to listen to this. Steak fajitas. Steak fajitas and chicken fingers and probably crying into my spinach artichoke dip at Applebee’s. Typical Tuesday night.

“Liam? Can we go?” Harry says quietly.

He casts one more glance at Nick, who is frowning and picking at the knee of his skinnies. “Erm...can you help me out here? I can’t think of anything clever to say...it all sounds so stupid, so I– Oh.” He sighs heavily, his face hardening. “Okay.” Nick looks up at Harry, extending his phone. “He wants to talk to you, Boy Scout.”

Harry tries not to trip over his own two feet in his eagerness to get to the phone. He’s mostly successful. Nick gets up, pours himself a little more whiskey, and then goes into the kitchen.

“Lou? You there?”

“Hey, Hazza.” Louis’ voice crackles over the line and suddenly this whole awkward and awful night feels worth it. “I um...I tried calling you, actually.”

Harry’s heart leaps. “What? You did?”

“Forgotten about me already. I see how it is.” Louis teases gently. “Yeah, I called your cell and didn’t get an answer.”

Harry fishes his phone out of his coat pocket. It’s on silent...and sure enough there’s a missed call from an unfamiliar number.

“Aw, shit, Lou, my phone’s on silent. I’m sorry.” He saves the number to his contacts immediately.

“Good thing you’re at Nick’s then. Watching The Voice.”

“Louis, you know how I feel about Miley Cyrus,” Harry says seriously.

“Yes, I remember your Halloween costume. Vividly.”

Harry laughs. “So how are you, Lou? Nick said something about detox?”

“It...I...I just...” Louis takes a shaky breath and he starts to cry. Harry’s heart breaks as he hears Louis gasp shallow breaths between sobs. Harry wishes he could physically reach through the phone so he could hold him.

“Oh, Boo. Don’t cry. Please don’t cry.” Harry gestures to Liam that he’s going to take this to the balcony. He pulls open the door and shivers at the cold, sitting on one of Nick’s deck chairs.
“Or...do cry. I just. I wish I could be there to give you a hug right now.”

Louis sniffs. “Harry, it was awful. Like the worst I’ve felt ever in my entire life. I threw up for two days. I kept having these horrible nightmares every time I went to sleep. I would break out in these cold sweats and my body would just...start shaking? Like I didn’t have any control over it.”

Harry bites his lip, trying to hold back his own tears.

“And the worst thing was that I was all by myself, Haz. I mean, there were nurses and shit and my therapist came by a lot but otherwise I was just...alone. It felt like I was in a padded cell or something. And I couldn’t call anyone. I begged and begged for them to let me call you.”

Well, fuck.

Harry lets the tears fall.

“Hey...hey, it’s okay, Boo. I’m here now. Talk to me.”

Louis feels as if Harry’s voice is wrapping around him like a warm blanket. He slides down to the floor, pulling his knees up to his chin. He clings to the phone receiver as if it were a lifeline.

“Harry, I hate it here. I’m so miserable. It’s just so...not what I expected? I can’t do this.”

“Listen to me,” Harry says fervently. “You can do it. You are doing it, Lou. You’re not giving yourself enough credit here, okay? You’re so strong, Lou. You’re the strongest person I know.”

There are times when Harry’s faith in him knocks him flat on his ass. This is one of those times.

“You really believe that, huh?”

“I do,” Harry replies solemnly.

“Oh my God, Harry, you should see my roommate! Like...just picture a stereotypical drug addict. Tattoos, piercings, pink hair, the whole shebang. That’s Zayn.”

“Is he nice?”

Of course Harry would ask that question.

“He’s nice enough, I guess? He’s super zen about everything. He keeps talking about ‘working the process.’ Everybody says that. I start group therapy tomorrow; who knows the kind of people I’ll meet there. I’m just...I’m not like these people. I’m supposed to be ‘integrating myself into the community,’ James says. He does talk some shit, Harry, honestly.”

Harry chuckles softly but doesn’t say anything.

“I just want to come home.” Louis pulls his – Zayn’s. He is nice that way – pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He lights one, taking a deep pull. “I don’t need therapy,” he adds petulantly.

“Lou, everyone needs therapy,” Harry replies wryly.

Louis huffs. “I guess you’re right. You’re always right, Hazza. Why is that?”
“Well, you need at least one thing in your life to be constant, right?”

“You always are,” Louis replies immediately. “My constant.”

There’s a long silence. Louis wonders if he’s said too much but then he hears Harry sniffling quietly.

“That...ah...that means a lot,” Harry says, his voice thick. “Thank you, Lou.”

“You’re welcome, Haz,” Louis replies softly.

They sit in silence. Louis takes another drag of his cigarette listening to Harry’s breathing on the other end of the line, punctuated by the occasional sniffle. He doesn’t quite know why he finds it so comforting.

“Hey, can I talk to Liam?” Louis asks after a moment, breaking the spell.

“Yeah, of course. Let me get him.”

Louis hears a door sliding open and Harry calling for Liam.

“I saved this number on my phone,” Harry says. “You can call me anytime, yeah? Even if you just want me to sit and listen. I can do that.”

“I know you can. Thanks.”

“Of course. Always. Um...thanks for talking to me. I needed it today.”

“Me too, H. Me too. I love you a lot, yeah?”

“I love you too. Here’s Liam.”

“Lou!” Liam says warmly. “How are ya, buddy?”

“Better now that I’m talking to you guys.” Louis takes a final puff of his cigarette and reaches up and grinds it out in the ashtray on the counter. “So how about you tell me what you’re really doing there,” he says slyly.

“Better now that I’m talking to you guys.” Louis takes a final puff of his cigarette and reaches up and grinds it out in the ashtray on the counter. “So how about you tell me what you’re really doing there,” he says slyly.

“Why, The Voice is on, Louis! We never miss it,” Liam says innocently.

“Bullshit. Miley Cyrus aside, Harry hates that show.”

Liam barks a surprised laugh. “Okay, fine. It was supposed to be a surprise, but we’re putting together a care package for you. Any requests?”

“Oh my God, can you send me like every single tabloid you can find? The magazines here are so fucking old, Liam! They still have JoJo’s season of The Bachelorette on the covers, for God’s sake! And I already know how all of that ended, I watched the whole fucking season. I’m desperate to know what’s going on with Brad and Angelina’s divorce, you have to help me!”

“You and your tabloids,” Liam laughs fondly. “How could I have forgotten those?”

“I need my gossip, Liam!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ll go get them tomorrow and then put this in the mail, okay?”
“You’re the best, Li,” Louis says gratefully. He chews his lip as he continues cautiously. “So. How’s it been with them tonight?”

“Fine,” Liam answers immediately.

Louis sighs. “So...not fine then?”

“Lou, you know we don’t really hang out with him without you around. It’s just...difficult. But hey...there hasn’t been any blood shed. Yet.”

“That’s all you can ask for, right?” Louis taps the pack of cigarettes on his thigh. “Thanks for doing this. I appreciate it so much.”

“No problem. Hey, Lou, Nick wants the phone back, so I’m gonna go, okay? I’ll get your tabloids and then put this in the mail tomorrow, okay?”

“I can’t wait.”

Louis hears the door sliding open again and muffled voices as the phone changes hands once more.

“About time,” Nick says, a hint of irritation coloring his voice. “I was beginning to feel left out.”

Louis sighs. He doesn’t have the energy to reassure Nick that he’s his very favorite boy tonight. He fucking needs his friends and he refuses to feel bad about it. “I’m sorry, babe. Really, I am. I just...I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

The silence between them drags. Louis finds that he really doesn’t have anything to say to Nick right now. Part of him is incredibly irritated that Nick hasn’t bothered to ask how he is doing; choosing only to focus on Louis’ absence is affecting him. The other part of him just wants to crawl back in bed.

“So, um, someone else is in line for the phone,” Louis lies. “I should probably go.”

“Already? Louis, we’ve barely talked!”

“You’re telling me.”

“I’m sorry, babe. I’ll call again soon. Promise. And we can talk then, okay?”

“Next time, I’m not sharing. I don’t care who else is here.”

“I am so tired.”

“That’s fine. I really am sorry, Nick. I wasn’t...I wasn’t ignoring you or anything. I just...I gotta go okay? I’ve been hogging the phone. I love you.”

“I love you too, Louis. So much. I miss you.”

“Yeah, me too. Bye.”

Louis places the receiver in the cradle and offers Perrie a small smile. “Thanks for letting me use the phone, Perrie.”

She smiles. “You could have stayed on longer, Louis. I don’t mind.”
“I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks. I think I’ll go to bed now.”

She nods. “Sleep well. Remember you have group first thing in the morning.”

Louis lights up another cigarette.

“Can’t wait,” he says sarcastically.

He trudges down the hall, puffing away at his cigarette. He reaches his room, finding Zayn curled up on his bed reading. Always reading. He looks up and offers Louis a tiny smile.

Harry’s voice rings in his head.

_Is he nice?_

“Hey, man,” Louis says, flicking his cigarette butt into the can on the windowsill. “Thanks again for the cigarettes. It was...really nice of you to give them to me. I’ll pay you back.”

Zayn considers him, smile broadening a tiny bit. “Nah, don’t worry about it, Louis. I’m happy to share.”

Louis smiles at him and then exchanges his sweatpants for soft flannel pajama pants. He crawls into bed, pulling the blankets up around his shoulders.

“Is the light bothering you?”

“Nah, I’m so tired I could probably sleep in the middle of Times Square. You can read as long as you want.”

The corner of Zayn’s mouth quirks up in another smile, his eyes staying trained on the page.

“Night, Louis.”

“Night, Zayn.” Louis replies, eyes already drooping as he nestles his head in his pillow. He briefly wonders what fresh hell he has in store for him tomorrow, but he can’t focus on that now. For the first time in five days, he feels settled, like he’s finally going to get a peaceful night of sleep.

_Harry’s right._

_I can do this._
Chapter 5

The next morning, Louis skips breakfast in favor of sleeping in as late as possible. Sure, he’s a little hungry as he wanders the halls trying to find the group therapy room, but he’s fine with the trade-off. Sleep is essential. For the first time in a week, his sleep was actually peaceful with no nightmares haunting him and he wanted to savor that feeling for as long as he could, which meant staying in bed as long as possible.

At last, he finds his destination, only to discover that the room is completely empty. Everyone must still be at breakfast.

*Suckers. Now I get the best seat.*

He’s pretty pleased with himself. He’s never been the type to get to class first; he’s always sliding into the back of classrooms at the last minute, perpetually amusing himself by texting Harry in the front row.

*Harry would be so proud of me. Well, he wouldn’t be proud of the skipping breakfast thing, but I can only do so much.*

He looks around the room. It has the same cozy dorm-like feel as every other room he’s been in so far; this particular room has hardwood floors with a handwoven rug in the middle. The only places to sit are a bunch of brightly colored pillows, all arranged in a circle. Inspirational quotes decorate the butter yellow walls.

“Jesus Christ,” Louis says to the empty room. “What are we going to do? Sit around singing Kumbaya?”

Louis grabs an ashtray from a side table and then settles down on a blue pillow, glad to have a moment to himself. He lights a cigarette and takes a deep inhale, humming Kumbaya in spite of himself. He hears the door open. Rather than turning and looking at whoever has joined him, Louis suddenly takes great interest in studying the intricate pattern of the colorful rug.

A pair of scuffed black boots come into his line of vision, foot tapping impatiently. Louis’ eyes travel up, seeing thin legs clad in skin tight black denim, a loose plaid shirt with the top two buttons undone, and finally, the face of a boy who looks to be about his age. His bleached blond hair stands straight up, almost as if he stuck his finger into an electrical outlet. His bright blue eyes have a manic gleam and he’s biting his bottom lip. His stare is unnerving.

“Can I help you?” Louis asks coolly after a few moments.

“That’s my pillow,” the boy replies.

“What?”

“You are sitting on my pillow. I always sit there during group. On the blue pillow. The one that you are sitting on.”

“Oh,” Louis says casually. “I’m sorry.”

He takes a long drag off of his cigarette, cocking an eyebrow at the boy. He has no intention of getting up. The boy continues to stare at him, his body jittering with a nervous energy.
“Are you going to get up?”

“Was your name on this pillow?”

“No.”

“I was here first,” Louis shrugs. “Sit somewhere else.”

“But–”

“Sit on the green pillow. Why does it even matter?”

The boy is getting agitated, his voice climbing in pitch. “But it’s *my* pillow,” he insists. “I can’t sit on the green one because that’s where Gillian sits. If I sit on the green one, then Gillian won’t have a place to sit, so she’ll take someone else’s seat. And then *that* person will take someone else’s seat…”

“He’ll get up. We’ll all get up. It’ll be anarchy,” Louis says drily.

“Yes, exactly, Bender, you understand me.”

Louis is mildly impressed that the boy immediately picked up on *The Breakfast Club* reference.

“Then you would know,” Louis says, taking a final drag of the cigarette and stubbing it out. “That it’s out of my hands.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s just a fucking pillow,” Louis snaps. “The world’s not gonna end if you sit somewhere else for one stupid therapy session.”

The boy runs his hands through his bright hair, somehow managing to make it stand even higher. “Look, I know you’re new here, so I’ll cut you some slack. Please let me have my seat. I– I don’t deal with change very well.”

“Obviously.”

The boy paces around the circle of pillows, muttering to himself about seating arrangements. After a few moments, he claps his hands in delight. “You can sit on the purple pillow! No one sits on the purple pillow! Well, Michelle used to sit on the purple pillow, but she’s gone now. So you can have her seat! See? It all works out perfectly. Now give me back my pillow!”

“Jesus Christ, *fine,*” Louis cries. “If it will shut you the hell up, you can have your stupid fucking pillow.”

Louis gets up and crosses the circle to the purple pillow, sitting down in a huff.

The boy plops down on the blue pillow, grinning brightly. “My pillow,” he sighs contentedly, fluffing it under him. “My pillow.”

Louis rolls his eyes and lights another cigarette.

“I’m Niall by the way,” the boy says. “Alcoholic. And you are?”

“Louis.”
“What’s your poison, Louis? Besides chain smoking, that is.”

Louis glares at him. “What do you mean?”

“What are ya in for? What’s your drug of choice?”

“Oh. Um...speed and booze, I guess?”

“You guess?” Niall studies him intently.

“I mean...it’s all a big misunderstanding really. I’m not a drug addict.”

Niall bursts out with a cackle. He sounds like a hyena.

“What are you laughing at?” Louis says testily.

“So many people say that when they first get here. It’s hilarious.”

“But it’s true for me,” Louis insists.

“Oh, I’m sure,” Niall says patronizingly, mirth still glimmering in his eyes. “You’re the exception to the rule, right?”

“I’m only here because my family basically threatened me. See, I had this accident? It’s all being blown way out of proportion, honest.”

“Because drug problems always are,” Niall says seriously. “You were just having some fun, right, Bender?”

“Exactly,” Louis says, grinding his cigarette out triumphantly. “Thank you!”

Niall starts to respond but the rest of the group files into the room, all of them chattering away. Zayn sits down on a yellow pillow next to Louis, handing him a muffin.

“Thought you’d be hungry,” Zayn says calmly when Louis looks at him with surprise.

Louis breaks off a piece of the muffin and pops it in his mouth, suddenly starving. “Thanks, Zayn. I am hungry.”

“Skipping meals is frowned upon, FYI,” Zayn replies quietly. “Don’t make a habit of it.”

Louis shrugs and turns to the girl sitting next to him on the green pillow. “Are you Gillian?”

She looks confused. “No, I’m Beth.”

Louis grits his teeth and turns to Niall, who is watching the exchange with barely restrained glee.

“I thought Gillian always sat on the green pillow,” he says, glaring at Niall.

“Niall!” Beth whips her head around to look at him. “Stop fucking with the new guy, okay?”

Niall gasps dramatically, clutching his metaphorical pearls. “Elizabeth, you wound me! I would never!” There’s that cackle again. He’s clearly delighted with himself.

Louis will never admit it out loud, but he’s pretty impressed by Niall’s prank. It’s normally hard to pull one over on Louis but he definitely bought into Niall’s crazy act, hook, line, and sinker. If Louis didn’t have to hate him so much, he would probably adore him. He needs a partner in crime.
to wreak havoc with.

“Okay, everyone, settle down,” James says as he enters the room, clutching a giant binder. “Let’s get started. First off, as you can all see, we have a new member joining our group today. Everyone, this is Louis.”

“Hi, Louis,” the group says in unison.

*Is this a cult? Have I accidentally joined a cult?*

“Let’s see,” James says. “You know Zayn.” He goes around the circle introducing everyone else. “This is Beth, Gillian, Niall–” Niall waves sweetly at Louis, who rolls his eyes. James catches the interaction and laughs. “I see you’ve met our resident prankster already. And then we have Julian and Aiden.”

Louis gives a little half-wave. “Hey.”

They all stare at him, clearly expecting him to say more. He doesn’t.

“Is there anything else you’d like to say, Louis?” James prods.

Louis takes another bite of his muffin. “Nope,” he pops, tilting his chin up defiantly as he meets James’ eyes. James holds his gaze for several long moments before turning to the rest of the group.

“Okay, then. Is there anything anyone would like to share anything before we dive in to today’s topic?”

Several hands go up. Louis bites back a derisive chuckle.

“Beth?”

Beth speaks up from next to him. “I feel really in touch with my anger today.”

James looks at her kindly, his blue eyes full of warmth. “How so? I know your mother was here yesterday.”

“Yes,” she continues. “That’s it exactly. She’s still just so…”

Louis turns his brain off. The last thing he feels like listening to right now is self-indulgent whining.

********

A week later, Louis is summoned to James’ office. It’s been seven long days of feelings and more feelings and even more feelings. It’s garbage really; not a single spa treatment in sight, not unless you count Zayn changing his hair to a brilliant purple while giving Niall a pedicure in their bathroom. Louis does not count that, thank you very much.

Louis knocks on James’ door, feeling a bit like he’s been called into the principal’s office. Which, he supposes, he has.

“Come in,” James calls.

James’ office is exactly what Louis expected it to be. It’s neat, but cozy. His desk sits in the corner of the room, a plush navy couch sits in the other corner, with a cushy armchair catty-cornered to it. His diplomas are displayed prominently on the wall behind the desk, with framed articles about
Cedar Springs serving as other decorations. Plants line the windowsill and there’s a bookcase stocked with binders and self-help pamphlets. He’s got the overhead lights turned off, favoring a few lamps that cast a soft glow around the room instead.

“Louis,” James says with that same serene smile he’s always fucking sporting. “Right on time. Take a seat on the couch.”

Louis flops dramatically on the couch. “Oh, goody, is this where you start psychoanalyzing me? Gonna tell me that the reason I started to drink and do drugs is rooted in the fact that Michael Walker called me a queer in the fifth grade?”

“Not today,” James says easily. “We’ll save childhood traumas for next time. Today we’re just going to have a little chat.”

Louis sits up and looks at him. “A chat? Sounds like therapy to me.”

James gets up from behind his desk, clutching a pen and a legal pad. He settles down into the armchair and leans forward, resting his chin on his palm. “Why are you here, Louis?”

“What?”

“I asked what you were doing here,” he says patiently.

“Um.” Louis picks at the sleeves of his sweater, trying to come up with an answer. “My stepfather threatened to pull all financial support if I didn’t come here. So, that’s why, I guess. I don’t know.”

James sighs. “I don’t know either, quite frankly. You’ve been here thirteen days and I’m not seeing any progress. I’ve been pretty patient with you. So far anyway. I knew that coming here wasn’t your idea, but I’ve been hoping that you would see that we have so much to offer that could help you. But...you’re not responsive in group. You sit there and roll your eyes the whole time while everyone else is doing the work. You’re not really doing your chores, you antagonize the other patients...”

“So what,” Louis says meekly, feeling very, very small. “Are you kicking me out?”

James studies him carefully. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Louis says nothing, he just crosses his arms defensively and matches James’ stare.

“No,” James continues after a moment. “I’m not kicking you out, as much as you may want me to.”

“But I don’t belong here,” Louis insists.

“Why do you say that?” James asks patiently.

“These people are all drug addicts and alcoholics,” he says with a shrug.

Something sparks in James’ eyes.

“And you’re not?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“I mean...yes, I drink,” Louis says, waving his hand dismissively. “And yes, I take pills
occasionally, but I’m not addicted. I could have quit anytime I wanted to.”

“Did you ever want to quit?”

“No.”

James bites back a triumphant grin and writes something down on his legal pad. Louis realizes his mistake.

“Hey! Wait a minute, you tricked me! That’s not what I meant!”

James scribbles something else down. “So what about your overdose?”

“That was just an accident!”

When James looks back up at him, his eyes are sad. “They always are.” He goes back to writing down notes.

“What are you writing?” Louis asks impatiently. James ignores him, finishing his thought before capping his pen with a flourish.

“I’m going to try a different tactic with you, Louis.”

“What? Electroshock therapy?”

James gives him a withering look. “Do you have a smart comeback for everything?”

“I don’t know. Do I?” Louis says defiantly. “Look, I just want to wait out my twenty-eight day minimum and then I’m outta here, okay? We can stay out of each other’s way. Don’t try to fix me. I’m fine.” Louis stands, brushing his hands on his thighs. “Are we done here?”

“No, we are not.” James’ voice is chillingly firm, all semblance of his easy-going nature gone. “Sit down.”

Louis obeys. His entire body tenses as he sits stiffly on the couch.

“Louis, aside from your parents, who are the people closest to you?”

“Harry and Nick,” Louis replies immediately.

“Right. I’m going to arrange a meeting with the four of them and we’re all going to sit down and talk about this.”

“What?” Louis squeaks.

“You might actually realize how sick you are if you hear it from them.”

“Hear what? How I have to stay here?”

Louis’ chest feels tight, a sense of panic building.

“No,” James says calmly. “You need to hear about your addiction, Louis. It’s not just affecting your life, you know. Or are you so self-centered to think that your actions don’t affect others?”

Louis glares at him.

“Your job in this meeting will just be to listen. No contradicting. No witty comebacks. Just
“Anything else?”

He wants to get the fuck out of this office.

“Just prepare yourself, Louis,” James sighs. “This meeting is not going to be easy. You’re going to hear some very difficult things.” He pauses, searching Louis’ face for something. Louis clenches his jaw, not willing to give him anything. “You won’t want to leave this place afterwards.”

“Sure, I won’t,” Louis says, getting up. “I think you underestimate my loathing of this place, James.”

“And I think you underestimate how sick you are and how much pain your disease is causing,” James fires back.

They stare at each other intensely for a few moments.

“You can go now, Louis,” James says, dismissing him. “I’ll see you tonight in group.”

“I can’t wait,” Louis deadpans.

********

The next night, Louis is delighted to find the nurse’s station empty when he goes to use the phone. He grins as he dials Harry’s familiar digits.

“Hello?”

Louis drops his voice an octave, adding what he hopes is a sexy rasp. “Hello, this is Rambo from the Beefy Guys 4-U hotline calling for Harry Styles.”

“Rambo!” Harry cries. “God, I’ve missed you, baby. Where have you been? You haven’t called me in so long.”

“One of my other clients had me handcuffed to the bed for ages. But I thought about you the whole time ’cause you’re my favorite boy,” Louis says, biting back a grin.

“Mmmmm...I know I am,” Harry purrs. “What are you wearing, Rambo?”

Louis tries to think of what could possibly fluster Harry the most.

“Nothing but that pair of panties you bought me.”

“The little red lace ones? With the bow?”

Louis swallows, his mouth feeling a little dry.

“Yep. My ass looks so pretty in them. All for you, baby.”

“Are you all prepped for me then?” Harry asks lowly.

Louis flushes, his cock twitching in interest.

*Control yourself, this is Harry, for Christ’s sake. And he’s not going to win this time.*

“Yes,” he says breathily. “How do you want me?”
“Hands and knees,” Harry says authoritatively. “Last time, you fucked me so good that I felt you for days, so it’s only fair that I get to do the same with you.”

All sorts of images flash in Louis’ head and he sputters, dropping the character completely. He presses the heel of his hand to his crotch.

“Jesus Christ, Harry.”

*I’m going to have to go take a cold shower. Or jerk off. Possibly both.*

“Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?”

Harry laughs, a deep resounding belly laugh.

“You can always dish it out, Lou. But you can never take it.”

“I can too take it,” Louis pouts.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Harry chuckles fondly. “How are you, Lou?”

“Oh my God, I am so fucking sick of having to talk about myself. It’s all we do here. Can we talk about you first? Please?”

“Oh...um...sure.” Louis hears Harry rustling some papers. “I’m putting together my application for this summer internship for Boston Medical Center’s pediatric department…”

“Sounds wicked smaht, Haz.” Louis says, putting on a terrible Boston accent.

“Ha ha, very funny. Anyway, Dr. Higgins has some friends at Boston University…”

“Naht Hahvahd Yahd?”

“Louis,” Harry giggles. “This is serious!”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. I can’t help it. Continue.”

“So he’s helping me with my application and writing my recommendation letter. It’ll be a really great opportunity for me if I get it. It’ll look so good on my med school applications.”

“You’ll get it,” Louis says confidently.

“I don’t know. It’s very prestigious. Tons of people are applying for the program from all over the country. And they only take three people. Three, Lou.”

“And you’ll be one of them. You’re brilliant, Harry. You’re at the top of our class. You love kids and they love you right back. All you have to do is charm the fuck out of them in the interview, which I know you will because you’re the most charming person on the planet.”

“But I–”

“No buts, Haz. As your elder–”

“You’re two months older than me, Louis.”

“Exactly. Like I said, as your elder, you need to listen to me. Stop downplaying how amazing you are. I won’t have it.”
Louis can almost feel Harry’s blush coming through over the phone line. He’s such a paradox to Louis; he will never understand how Harry can manage to not break a sweat whenever Rambo calls, but he turns into a blushing flower the second Louis pays him a compliment.

“Besides,” Louis adds. “When have you ever not gotten something you wanted once you put your mind to it?”

“I mean—” Harry starts.

“Stop it, Harold. The answer is never. Because you deserve everything in the whole world, Harry. So repeat after me: I will get this internship.”

“I will get this internship,” Harry parrots.

“That’s more like it.”

“That’s more like it.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“You’re an idiot.”

Louis chuckles softly. He kicks his toe against the wall as he gears himself up for his next question.

“Hey...um...so James called you, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Harry says quietly. “He did.”

“So you’ll be there on Saturday, right? It wouldn’t be right without you there.”

“Of course I’ll be there, Louis,” Harry says, voice still soft. “Anything for you.”

“And um—”

Fuck, now I’m the one getting all bashful what the hell.

“Um...thanks for Rainbow Bear, Hazza,” Louis says, clearing his throat. “It...ah...it means a lot to me that you sent him.”

What Louis doesn’t say is that he fucking cried when he saw that bear. And that he’s snuggled him every night since.

“I’ll take good care of him, okay? Promise.”

“I know you will.”

“I should...I should probably go. We have like mandatory movie night tonight and I’ll be in deep shit with James if I skip. Besides. I don’t want to tie up the line in case Rambo calls.”

“Don’t be silly, Louis. That’s not how hotlines work. I call him. And I never call Rambo this early.”

“Right. How could I be so stupid? Anyway...I...I miss you, Haz. I can’t wait to see you.”

“I miss you too, Lou. Now, go on and go to your movie before all the popcorn’s gone.”
“God, I hope they fucking have popcorn,” Louis moans dramatically.

“Well, what kind of movie night is it without popcorn?”

“Exactly. This is why we’re best friends, Harry.”

“Hang up the phone, Lou.”

“No, you hang up, Harry. Don’t you have an application to finish? Why the fuck are you talking to me?”

“Louis, I swear to God–”

Louis hangs up with a cackle. He pulls his new pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and lights one. He checks his watch as he exhales. Fifteen minutes until movie night. An idea comes to his mind and he grins.

*I’m going to steal Niall’s blue pillow if it’s the last thing I do.*
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Very intense (but needed) chapter overall. Includes a graphic flashback to the morning of the overdose from Harry's perspective. (That section is in all italics if you need to skip it.) Zayn also talks in vivid detail about how he ended up in rehab.

Louis leans against the wall outside the dining room. James is due to pick him up any minute and Louis briefly wonders if he has time for a cigarette before chuckling to himself.

*Who am I kidding? There’s always time for a cigarette.*

He takes a deep inhale, hoping that the nicotine will settle him down. His breakfast is sitting like a rock in his stomach, weighing it down uncomfortably. He feels jittery, hand shaking slightly as he raises the cigarette to his lips.

*Probably shouldn’t have had that second cup of coffee.*

He had needed it though. He’s exhausted, the nightmares and restless sleep returning last night after a week’s respite.

*But why now? What’s wrong with me?*

He’d woken up several times during the night shouting, body drenched in sweat. He’d even woken up Zayn with his cries, but Zayn didn’t get mad at him or call a nurse like he’d expected him to. He didn’t even ask him to explain what was going on.

*Not that I could have anyway.*

Zayn had simply pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to Louis. They smoked in their moonlit room, Zayn watching Louis silently as he reached for another cigarette as soon as he finished the first one. Louis got the sense that Zayn had been waiting for him to talk if he wanted to, but didn’t want to make him feel obligated. Louis had just needed to exist with someone else and Zayn seemed to understand that without being told. They had sat up together, smoking silently in the moonlight for at least an hour before Louis sighed and crawled back under his covers, feeling calm enough to try to sleep again.

Louis was embarrassed about how he had judged Zayn the instant he saw him.

*Isn’t that like a golden rule? Don’t judge a book by its cover?*

Louis had learned his lesson; he knew he’d be eternally grateful to have met such a decent guy.

*Pink...no...purple hair, piercings, and all.*

And so here he is. Dead on his feet, trying not to vomit from the acidic taste of coffee creeping up his throat, and about to face the people closest to him for the first time in 16 days. Great. Just great.

James approaches him. “Ready, Louis?”
He grinds his cigarette out. “As I’ll ever be.”

Louis trudges along next to James, who is rather solemn today. He hasn’t been to this wing of the center before, but everything looks the same to him anyway. The same hardwood flooring and same colorful accent rugs as every other hallway here. Same soft but warm lighting. He briefly wonders who the hell designed this place. After a few moments of walking in silence, James speaks up.

“Everyone is here. I’ve already briefed them on how this is going to work, so we’ll get started right away.” He pauses outside the door and turns to look at Louis. “Remember what I told you,” he says seriously. “You’re here to listen and listen only. I’ll give you a chance to talk at the end, but until then, you’re not to speak. No adding commentary, no contradicting what anyone is saying, nothing. Just listening. Is that clear?”

“Crystal,” Louis says tartly.

James pushes open the door and guides Louis into the room. The room is tense, the kind of tense where you know that people were talking about you seconds before. His mother looks sad, while Nick and Harry look murderous, shooting daggers at each other from opposite ends of a semicircle. Mark looks angry.

What else is new?

“By all means, don’t stop on my account,” Louis snarks before he can stop himself.


Louis looks down at his toes. “Sorry,” he mumbles.

Can’t do anything right, can you?

There are two chairs set slightly apart from the rest. James leads Louis to one of them, taking the other for himself. Louis looks out at the rest of the circle. Nick offers him a big smile that is painfully fake, judging from the tension around his eyes. Mark gives nothing away, while his mother is already on the verge of tears. And finally, Harry. Harry’s keenly observant eyes sweep over him, taking in his appearance. The corners of his mouth are turned down and his green eyes are troubled.

Yes, Haz, I know I look like shit, thanks for confirming.

“The first step in conquering an addiction is admitting that you have a problem,” James starts. “Louis, since you are having a hard time doing that, I’ve brought in the people closest to you to talk to you. They all care about you and want to help you, okay? They’re not here to condemn you. This is a safe space and I’ve asked them to be as honest as possible in regards to how your recent behavior has affected them. It’s not going to be easy for them to say or for you to hear...but my hope is that this will help you realize how you and your addiction are affecting the people you love. I need you to listen to them first and then you can respond, okay?”

Louis nods and then glances over at Harry, but he’s looking at the floor, picking at his nails. He always does that when he’s nervous.

James looks around the circle. “Does anyone want to start?”

“I will,” Mark says immediately.
Of fucking course.

Louis immediately feels his spine turn to steel and he crosses his arms defensively.

Let’s get this over with.

“Okay, Mark,” James says kindly. “Tell Louis how you feel.”

“I’m angry and disappointed.”

“How so?”

Mark turns to James. “He’s throwing away–”

“Don’t talk to me, Mark,” James says patiently. “Talk to Louis. I need you to look at him.”

Louis bites his lip and forces himself to meet his stepfather’s eyes. He holds Mark’s gaze, his spine stiff.

Just get it over with.

“Louis, you’re throwing away everything we’ve worked so hard for. You’re throwing away opportunities I would have killed for at your age. It infuriates me that I have sacrificed so much to send you to a good school and you don’t care enough to go to class most of the time!”

Louis flinches.

Goddammit don’t give him anything.

“You think I didn’t know that, Louis? I’m an alum and I have friends in that department! How do you think I feel when they call me concerned that you’re failing? It’s humiliating, that’s what it is. It’s humiliating trying to make excuses for you, when really you’re just being lazy and wasting my money.”

Lazy? Fuck you. Most of the time I’m fucking up all night trying to study. Come to think of it, that’s how the pills started in the first place.

“And now you’re being lazy here too. You’re such a disappointment.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Louis sees both Nick and Harry quietly seething. He almost starts laughing at the fact that the only time Nick and Harry ever find themselves on the same side is when it comes to Mark.

“Mark, remember we’re not here to berate Louis or shame him,” James interrupts. “That’s not the purpose of this meeting. I understand your anger. I know it’s frustrating to see someone you love appear to be wasting their potential, but how has his addiction affected your relationship with Louis? Can we focus on that?”

Ha. What relationship?

“Louis, ever since I married your mother, I’ve treated you as if you were my own flesh and blood. I adopted you, gave you my own name. We planned on giving you siblings; I know your mother always wanted a houseful of children and I never would have treated you any differently. But–”

Mark stops himself, scrubbing a hand over his face and sighing deeply. “Well, you know this already. We tried for years but weren’t able to have any more children, and you...you’re all I have, Louis.”
Yeah and I’ve never been enough for you, have I? I’ve tried and tried and tried to be enough for you. It’s always fucking something with you.

“So I’ve poured everything I have into you, Louis. You’re my legacy. I’ve been nothing but supportive of you, son. You know I have. I stood by you when you came out even though that was never the future I imagined for my son. I accepted it. I’ve loved you. I’ve invested in you. I’ve dreamed big for you. So this? This feels like you’re spitting in the face of everything I’ve sacrificed for you.” Mark leans forward, looking him straight in the eye. “How dare you disrespect me like this, Louis.”

Louis bites back a bitter laugh but can’t help a huff escaping from his lips.

Fuck this. I don’t have to listen to this shit.

James stills him with a hand on his knee, squeezing firmly. Louis cocks his chin defiantly, hugging his arms around his chest tightly. His mother is sniffing, dabbing at the corners of her eyes with a tissue. Harry’s hand is on her shoulder, his eyes trained on the floor. Nick’s posture echoes his own; he shifts uncomfortably in his chair next to Mark, his hazel eyes full of sympathy.

“Anything else, Mark?” James asks tightly.

“That’s all I have to say,” Mark replies.

“Thank you for sharing. I appreciate your honesty.” James turns to Jay. “Jay, what about you? Why are you crying?”

Jay looks between Louis and Mark. “Why do you two act like you hate each other? What has happened to our family? Like, you said, we’re all we have, so why do you treat each other this way? I don’t understand it!”

“I don’t hate–” Mark starts to reply.

“Mark, you had your turn to talk,” James says sternly. “It’s Jay’s turn now.” He smiles gently. “Go ahead, Jay.”

Louis locks eyes with his mother. He feels a lump form in his throat as her blue eyes, the same blue eyes he sees every morning when he looks in the mirror, fill with fresh tears.

Because of me. I did that.

“Louis, my heart is breaking. You used to be so happy. You were so full of life. People couldn’t help but gravitate towards you because you just pulled everyone in without even trying to. You were a sun, baby. The sun. What happened to you?” Her chin trembles as she tries to control her tears.

His chest aches.

I don’t know what happened to me, Mom.

“You’re so...angry all the time. There’s a bitterness in you that I’ve never seen before. And that hurts, Louis. It hurts so much because you don’t think you’re different. But you are.”

“How is he different, Jay? Tell him,” James says quietly.

“You never want to come home anymore. You’re always making excuses as to why you can’t see
us. You...you lie. You hide things from us...from me. You used to tell me every single detail about your day and now it’s like pulling teeth to get anything out of you. And that’s when you bother to even check in. I know you’ve been hiding from me, Louis.”

Louis knows that he’s pulled a disappearing act over the past few months. He just didn’t realize that his mother noticed.

Jay reaches for her purse and rests it on her lap, rustling through it. “I knew there was something off about you the day we brought you here, so I went back to your apartment that night. At first, I was just going to clean up, but I...I found this.” She pulls out a bottle of pills.

Louis gasps.

*Oh fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

“I found this bottle in your kitchen. The lid was still open. You were high the day you came here, Louis,” she says tearfully. “You kept taking these even after you almost died from an overdose!”

Harry lets out a pained cry, sounding like a wounded animal. He buries his head in his hands, his broad shoulders shaking. Louis snaps his gaze to him, his eyes wide. Harry doesn’t look up at him.

“So I just thought...maybe I should look for more,” Jay continues, her voice wavering. “Just in case.” She pulls bottle after bottle out of her purse, tears streaming down her face. “I found them all over your apartment, Louis. They were hidden everywhere. I practically tore the place apart. God knows how many I may have missed.”

Louis counts six bottles lying in her lap.

*Jesus Christ, did I really have that many?*

Jay holds a bottle up, her face hardening. “These pills are the only thing you care about, Louis.” She throws the bottle to the floor. The lid pops off and pills scatter everywhere, the echo of them hitting the hardwood floor bouncing around the room. Louis feels like he jumps a foot out of his chair at the sound. And the fucked up thing is that he feels his brain start to itch again. They’re right there. It would be so easy to just hit the floor and sneak one. Just one. It’s only a pill. Just do it.

She holds up another bottle. “You don’t care about me.”

The sound of the pills hitting the floor strangely makes Louis think of the crackle of fireworks going off.

Another bottle. “You don’t care about your father.”

The sound of this bottle hitting the floor is muffled by Harry’s agonizing sobs.

*Hazza, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.*

Another bottle. “You don’t care about Nick.”

Tears start running down Louis’ face as he turns to look at his boyfriend. Nick’s face is ashen, his mouth hanging open in shock. Louis feels ashamed.

Another bottle hits the floor. “You don’t care about Harry.”
No, I do. I do care. Harry, look at me. I do.

Harry doesn’t look at him.

“You clearly don’t even care about yourself.”

Jay throws the final bottle, which lands at his feet.

He yelps and kicks the bottle away from him as if it were on fire.

“You don’t care about your own life, Louis,” Jay continues. “You break my heart.”

The tears are falling in earnest now. Louis can barely breathe because his nose is so clogged, so he gasps shallow breaths.

*How could I have been so careless? This isn’t me. I don’t treat my mother this way. I don’t make her worry. God, I’m such a fucking mess. What’s wrong with me?*

James hands Louis a tissue, which he takes gratefully, blowing his nose immediately. James gets up and grabs a large broom that’s resting in the corner and starts sweeping up the pills.

“I’m sorry I made a mess,” Jay says softly.

“Don’t apologize,” James replies, as he sweeps everything into a dustpan. “I know that was hard for you to do, Jay.” She sniffs, dabbing away her tears. “You did well. Thank you for sharing.”

James returns to his seat next to Louis after emptying everything into the garbage can. “Do you have anything else to say before we move on?”

His mother looks at him for a long time and Louis can tell it’s all she can do to not touch him.

*I wonder if James told them they couldn’t?*

She straightens in her chair, laser-focused on him. Her gaze is intense, so intense that he wants to look away, but he forces himself to maintain eye contact.

*She deserves that from me.*

“I love you, Louis.”

Louis feels like something is coming loose in his chest.

“I love you so much,” she says fervently. “You’re my baby. You always will be. I hope you know that.”

Louis closes his eyes, trying to allow her words to soak in. After a moment, he takes a shaky breath and nods.

James looks between Nick and Harry as if he is pondering who should go next.

“Nick, what about you?”

Okay then.

Nick fidgets in his chair. He’s still a bit pale and he looks like he’d rather be anywhere but here.

*You and me both, babe.*
“I...I don’t know,” Nick stammers.

“Well, you’re his boyfriend, so Louis spends a lot of his time with you, doesn’t he?”

“Of course he does.”

“So,” James continues, infinitely patient. “What have you noticed about his behavior over the last few months?”

Nick looks at Louis questioningly, almost as if he doesn’t want to rat him out. “We...um...we’ve partied more lately than we usually do. Um...harder than we usually do too.”

Nick gives him a look that asks Was that okay?

*I’m usually well on my way to being drunk already by the time you pick me up. Not that you’ve ever noticed.*

Louis nods, biting his lip, hoping the pain will stop his tears.

“What’s it like to party with Louis, Nick?”

“We have fun. We’ve always had fun together,” Nick says emphatically. He hesitates, looking at Louis apologetically. “But lately...I don’t know...lately it’s been more about me babysitting you and making sure you don’t get too out of control. And that...that’s not fun.”

*Sorry to get in the way of your good time, I guess.*

“How is he out of control? Be honest,” James prods. “Be specific.”

“You...um...you drink so much,” Nick continues reluctantly. “Like, so much Louis. You just never stop when we go out. You...you mix pills with your drinks.” He looks at James, slightly panicked. “Not many! Just one or two and not every time we go out...”

*Or three or four. And yes, babe, every time.*

“You always say you just need to take the edge off, and I get that. Believe me, I do. But you just...you just drink until you get sick or pass out. You don’t stop.”

Louis thinks of all the times that Nick has had to literally carry him out of a bar and cringes.

“It’s either that or you’re so wired that you won’t go to sleep. You...you have these crazy mood swings? You go from happy and flirty to depressed to angry in a manner of minutes. It’s...like emotional whiplash? I can’t keep up with you anymore.”

“How does that make you feel, Nick?”

Nick ignores James’ question, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. “It’s not that I don’t like taking care of you,” he says earnestly. “I do. It makes me feel good that you need me. No one else really needs me. But...I need you too? Lately it’s just...I feel like I’ve had to take a back seat to you?”

*Oh God, no. Not that. Can’t have Nick in the back seat.*

“I just...I don’t know what’s going on with you, Louis. And you won’t...you won’t tell me. And that’s so frustrating, babe. We used to...we used to be so much fun? And this...this is so much? I just want my happy and fun-loving boyfriend back.”
“It’s okay to be frustrated, Nick. Addiction is a hard disease to understand.”

Nick runs his hands through his blond hair, blowing out a massive sigh as he looks up at the ceiling. “Yeah.”

They sit in silence for a moment. Louis knows who’s next and he’s not at all ready for him. Louis takes a deep breath and angles his body towards Harry.

*Why won’t you look at me, Haz?*

“Harry, you’ve been very quiet today,” James says gently. “But you’ve obviously been very affected by what’s been said. What are you feeling right now?”

Harry keeps his eyes trained on his hands. “I’m feeling a lot of things,” he replies quietly. He doesn’t elaborate.

Louis’ heart is racing.

*Would you just look at me? I’m right here.*

“Harry, you’ve been friends with Louis since you were kids, right?”

“Since we were five,” Harry rasps.

“And you’re the one who found Louis when he overdosed, correct?”

Louis glares at James, the urge to protect Harry surging through his body.

*Dammit, James, you know he did. What the fuck are you doing?*

Harry nods, his hair swinging back and forth with the motion.

“Harry, I think you need to tell Louis about that day.”

Harry keeps his eyes fixed on James. “Well, we had our–”

“I need you to look at Louis, Harry. Please.”

Harry takes a deep breath and *finally* looks at him. His green eyes are fearful, red-rimmed from crying. Louis is suddenly reminded of the little boy in kindergarten who was crying because the other boys were making fun of his Care Bears lunch box.

*Cheer Bear is my favorite bear too. I’m Louis, what’s your name?*

Louis gives him a little nod of encouragement, even as a single tear slips down his cheek.

Harry straightens his spine and tucks a curl behind his ear.

“We had our inorganic chemistry midterm that morning…”
Fuck it’s early, *Harry thinks as he trudges up the stairs to Louis’ apartment.* I hope Louis has coffee brewing.

Their midterm is in two and a half hours. *Plenty of time for a good old-fashioned cram session.** Harry knows the material cold, of course. He’s been preparing for the exam for two weeks, making flashcards and drilling himself during the downtime during his shifts at the library. *But Louis...Louis is struggling in the class. He has been all semester.*

(“My brain doesn’t fucking work this way, Haz. I can’t make myself understand any of this. What the fuck am I even doing here? I feel so stupid.”)

So yeah, *Harry’s going to do whatever it takes to help him. Besides, a last minute study session won’t hurt him either.*

He arrives at Louis’ door and knocks. While he waits, he goes over the formulas that he thinks Louis will need the most in his head.

No answer.

“C’mon, Lou,” *Harry says a little impatiently. He pulls out his phone and calls Louis’ number. He hears Louis’ phone ringing from inside his apartment.*

Well, at least he’s home. Probably still sleeping. Or maybe he’s in the shower?

Harry pockets his phone and fishes out his keys. *He flips through his keyring looking for his copy of Louis’ key. (It’s come in handy when Louis has locked himself out for the umpteenth time.) He finds the blue capped key and pushes the door open.*

“Lou? Lou, are you up? Study time, let’s go!”

Something is...wrong. All the lights are on but the apartment is deathly quiet. *The living room is a mess, which is typical of Louis, but Harry can’t help but feel like something is off. Dread pools in the pit of his stomach as he makes his way back to the bedroom. “Louis?” he calls tentatively as he swings the bedroom door open.*

His eyes sweep over the room. Louis’ window is shattered and the curtains are in a heap on the floor. *His desk chair is upside down. Harry’s eyes frantically search the room.*

Where...where’s Louis?

Then he sees it: a small hand peeking out from next to the bed.

“Louis!” *Harry shouts as he sprints to the space between the bed and the window. “Jesus Christ, Louis!”*

Glass is everywhere, crunching under *Harry’s boots. Louis is lying unconscious on the floor, blood pooling around him. Harry kicks as much glass as he can out of the way as he crouches next to him. He checks to make sure Louis is breathing (he is, thank fuck) before looking for the source of the bleeding. He finds a gash on Louis’ left arm gushing blood.*

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

“*Hold on, Lou.*”

When did I start crying?
“Hold on, I’m here.”

Harry presses one hand on the gash, blood seeping in between his fingers.

It’s so...sticky? No one ever told me blood was this sticky?

Harry looks around frantically for something to use to soak up the blood, finding nothing within arms length. He quickly starts to unbutton his shirt with one hand, keeping the other firmly gripped around Louis’ arm. He shrugs the shirt off, quickly switching hands when he needs to get his opposite arm out of it. He shivers in his t-shirt as he presses his shirt to the wound, feeling the soft fabric absorb the blood.

What the fuck are you doing just sitting here? Fucking call 911!

His hand shaking, he digs for his phone.

Move fucking faster, Harry.

He presses the emergency call button on his home screen.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“I need an ambulance,” Harry gasps. “My friend...my friend’s had an accident.”

“What happened, sir?”

“I...I don’t know!” Harry exclaims through tears. “I found him like this! I don’t know when it happened?! Oh, Jesus. He’s...he’s breathing but he’s unconscious and he’s bleeding from his arm. An artery, I think? His pulse...his pulse is so weak. Please...please hurry.” Harry presses harder on Louis’ arm. “There’s so much blood, please help me.”

“What’s your address, sir?”

Harry rattles off Louis’ address and tosses the phone away once the dispatcher assures him that help is on the way.

He hauls Louis' torso into his lap, clutching him tightly. His hand hurts from gripping Louis’ arm so hard but there’s no way in hell he’s letting go. “They’re coming, Lou,” he says, pressing a kiss into his hair. “Hold on, love.”

Louis moans brokenly.


Don’t panic, don’t panic, he can’t see you freaking out. Keep him calm. They’re coming.

Louis moans again. His eyelids flutter open. Harry feels a massive sense of relief rush through his body.

He’s awake, this is good. Keep him awake.

Louis blinks several times, almost as if he’s trying to focus in on Harry’s face. His face is so, so, so pale.
“Hey, Boo,” Harry says softly, stroking Louis’ cool cheek, his fingers trembling. Louis’ blue eyes widen, pupils dilating. “You’re fine. You just...ah...you just had an accident.” He presses a kiss to his forehead. “Just some cuts,” he chokes, tears streaming down his face. “You’re okay, I promise.”

Louis’ eyes suddenly roll back in his head and he goes limp in Harry’s arms.

“Louis?” Harry squeaks, shaking him. “Lou, no no no nonononono.”

Louis is completely still. Harry leans over him, hovering his ear above Louis’ nose and mouth listening for breath sounds. He slaps his face several times.

“Louis, wake up!”

Nothing.

“Oh, fuck, Louis, don’t fucking do this,” Harry cries.

He feels for a pulse. It’s faint but it’s there.

Where the fuck is that fucking ambulance? I called ages ago.

He furiously wipes the tears from his cheeks. He moves Louis off his lap, making sure he’s flat on the floor.

Fuck, I need two hands for this.

Harry looks at the blood soaked shirt.

Just tie it really tight. Breathing is more important right now.

He wraps the shirt firmly around Louis’ arm, tying the ends tightly. Once he’s satisfied that it’s as secure as it can possibly be, he tilts Louis’ head back and forces his mouth open. He pinches Louis’ nostrils with one hand, keeping the other firmly on his jaw. He takes a deep breath and seals his mouth over Louis’, blowing two strong puffs of air into his lungs. He watches Louis’ chest rise and fall and waits a few seconds, repeating the process when he gets no response.

“Come on, Lou, breathe, Goddammit!”

Two more breaths. Louis’s lips are starting to turn blue.

Check his fucking pulse, Harry.

Harry shoves two fingers into Louis’ neck, right under his jaw. He doesn’t feel anything. He presses harder. Nothing.

Oh, fuck, no.

Harry takes a steadying breath, willing his CPR training to come to him. He folds his hands over Louis’ chest and starts compressions.

One, two, three, four…

“You listen to me, Louis,” Harry cries as he pounds on his chest. “You’re not fucking dying, okay? You...you can’t leave me, love. Don’t leave me. I can’t be without you.”
He pauses to breathe for him. Rise and fall.

Ten, eleven, twelve…

Harry can hear the sirens approaching. He keeps pounding.

“I love you. Don’t do this, Louis. C’mon, baby. Come back to me. You can do it. I love you, I love you, I—” Harry hears banging on the door. “It’s open!! We’re back here!”

Two paramedics burst into the room. He scrambles out of their way.

“He…I lost his pulse…he’s not breathing. It…it hasn’t been long. I tried. I tried so hard…I’m sorry…please help him, please!”

It’s only when Louis’ life is literally no longer in his hands that Harry allows the panic to settle in fully. He’s shaking uncontrollably. He slides to the floor, sobs coming in earnest now. He watches as the paramedics insert a chest tube and bag him. They work quickly, tossing around medical terms that he would ordinarily recognize but now only hears as mumbo jumbo.

“Clear!”

The first time the paddles jolt Louis’ body, Harry jumps as if his own body was shocked.

C’mon, Lou, please!

Harry hears the machine whirring to life again, the high pitched wail resounding in the room.

“Clear!”

They shock him again. Harry sobs into his hands.

He’s dead, he’s dead. I didn’t do enough, where did I go wrong? Why didn’t I get here earlier? It took me so long to find his key. Fuck.

“We have a pulse!”

Harry scrambles to his feet. “Louis! Is he okay?”

Louis’ entire body starts spasming.

“What...what’s happening?”

The paramedics ignore him, focusing on strapping Louis to the stretcher.

Is he foaming at the mouth? Why the fuck is he foaming at the mouth?

“What’s happening to him? Tell me what’s going on!” Harry cries hysterically.

“We’ve got to get him out of here,” the lead paramedic says tersely. “He’s going to crash again, he needs blood now. On my count. One...two...three.” They pop the stretcher up. They start moving him out of the apartment, Harry following close behind.

“Lou, I’m right here, love,” Harry calls after the stretcher. “You’re going to be okay, I’m not leaving you! You’re doing so good, Lou.”

They reach the ambulance, Harry watching as they load him in. He moves to get in the back of the
ambulance with Louis, but a paramedic stops him. “Are you family, son?”

He’s the love of my life.

“He...he’s my best friend. Please, you have to let me come with him,” Harry sobs.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that, son,” the paramedic replies in a kind but firm manner. “Family only. You can meet us at the emergency room.”

“I’m his emergency contact! Please,” Harry begs. “Please, I promised I wouldn’t leave him. I promised. Please...please, you have to let me...”

The ambulance doors practically slam in his face.

“Louis!” He screams hysterically as the ambulance pulls away, sirens blaring. “Louis, I’m coming!”

“I don’t remember getting to the hospital,” Harry says quietly, fat tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Liam found my car in the hospital parking lot, it’s a miracle I didn’t get into an accident. I sat in the emergency room for five hours before I found out that you were alive. But...um...I told you that already.”

Louis is weeping openly. He doesn’t know if he’ll ever forgive himself putting Harry through that for as long as he lives.

He sees James surreptitiously wiping his own tears away.

“How did you feel when you found out what caused the accident, Harry?” he asks.


“Why guilty, Harry?”

“I just...I feel like I should have known? I mean, I knew something was wrong, Lou. I knew school and just...life...was getting to you. But I just...I had no idea it was this bad.”

This isn’t your fault, Haz. I didn’t want you to know.

“It’s not your job to save him, Harry,” James says gently. “Louis has to do the work himself.”

Harry looks at James. “He...” Harry stops and shakes his head. He casts his gaze back on Louis. “You...you’ve looked after me my whole life, Lou. You’ve always been there. Cheering me on. Protecting me. Fighting battles for me.” Harry offers him a watery smile. “Even when I didn’t need you to. And I like to think that I’ve always been that for you. Even if I’m not as tough as you are.”

You are. Tougher even.

“So what I don’t understand is why didn’t you trust me with this? Why didn’t you ask me for help? You’ve always told me everything, Lou. The good...the bad...the really ugly. Everything. Did you not trust me? Did you think I would judge you? That I wouldn’t try to help you? Jesus Christ, Louis, this isn’t you. It’s like I don’t know who you are right now and that scares me, Lou. This isn’t us.”
Harry looks at James questioningly and James gives him a small nod.

Harry reaches for his messenger bag. “James asked me to bring something that symbolized how I feel about all of this.”

He retrieves three photos from his bag, fanning them out. He studies them, dragging his finger over one of them, smiling sadly. He looks up at Louis.

“I look at these and they make me sad.”

He holds up the first one, showing it to Louis. Seven-year-old Harry and Louis smile back at him. Louis has a big bandage on his forehead and Harry’s arm is in a cast. Louis is doodling on it.

*That was when we went sledding after that big blizzard. We had never seen so much snow before. You let me steer and we crashed into a tree stump. You grabbed me and kept me from flying head first. You broke your arm when we landed. I covered your entire cast with drawings and told all the kids at school how you had saved me.*

“This boy was fearless,” Harry says sadly. “He always dove headfirst into things, completely unafraid, just excited about the adventure. He always took me along for the ride.”

He lifts up the second picture. It’s sixteen-year-old Harry and Louis now. Louis is sitting on the hood of an electric blue Toyota Corolla, arms spread wide with a thousand-watt grin on his face. Harry stands next to the car, beaming, clutching a “Sold” sign.

*You worked two jobs the summer after we turned sixteen. You had seen that car in a lot and you fell in love with it immediately, naming it and everything. So you were determined to earn enough money to get it. You worked in the bakery every morning and I would come in almost every day to get one of your chocolate chip cookies. I always put a couple of dollars in the tip jar, saying I was contributing to the Olivia Fund. You were so fucking proud when you bought that car, even though Gemma and I gave you so much shit about the ridiculous color. You still love that car.*

“This boy was supportive,” Harry says. “He didn’t have much money of his own, but he shared what he had with me.”

He holds up the final picture. It’s eighteen-year-old Harry and Louis. Harry is in a classic black tuxedo with a light blue bow tie, Louis in a powder-blue number with a ruffled shirt. Harry is beaming at him as he pins a rose to Louis’ lapel.

*That loser Ethan dumped you a week before prom and you were devastated. I wasn’t going to go because prom is a dumb tradition but the minute I saw you crying about it, I said I’d take you. There weren’t many options left for tux rentals a week before the prom, which is how I ended up with that blue polyester monstrosity with the ruffled shirt. It was the only thing that fit me. You bugged me and bugged me to know what my tux looked like so you could coordinate. All I told you was “Blue. Like my eyes.” The moment you saw me get out of the car, I didn’t give a flying fuck how ridiculous I looked. All that mattered was how happy you were.*

“This boy,” Harry chokes out. “The boy was willing to look like an idiot in front of our whole class just to see me smile.”

Louis can’t stop crying. Harry studies the pictures again and then looks up at him. They study each other for a few moments, Harry clearly searching for some sort of answer in his eyes. Louis doesn’t know if he finds it or not.

“I look at these pictures and then I look at you and I see two different people. This boy?” Harry
holds up the oldest one. “This boy doesn’t exist anymore.”

Harry rips the picture in two. The pieces flutter to the floor.

Louis lets out a strangled cry.

Harry holds up the next picture. “This boy didn’t depend on drugs and alcohol to face his problems.”

He rips the second picture. Louis howls as if he were in physical pain.

“That’s enough,” Nick shouts suddenly. “You’ve made your fucking point, Boy Scout. Knock it off!”

Harry whirls around to Nick, his eyes furious. Harry gets out of his chair and towers over him.

“You shut up! Call me Boy Scout one more time, you fucking asshole. I fucking dare you.” Harry clenches his fist, tears of rage pouring down his face. “You have no right to tell me what to do. You knew he was using for months and you didn’t do a goddamn thing about it. As long as it didn’t affect your perfect little life, right? As long as Louis is the perfect boyfriend who’s on your arm and smiling whenever you go out it doesn’t matter to you what he does, does it?”

Nick cowers away from him, stunned by the outburst.

“Do you have nightmares almost every night about finding his dead body? Do you ever worry that next time you’ll be too late? Do you, Nick?!”

Nick says nothing.

“So shut the fuck up.”

Harry turns to Louis, eyes fierce. “I don’t know any other way to get through to you, Lou.”

He rips the prom picture in two, the pieces joining the others on the floor.

Louis falls at Harry’s feet with a sob, gathering the fragments of the pictures.

“Harry...Haz...I’m sorry–” he cries, grappling for Harry’s ankles.

Harry’s face hardens as he takes a step back from him. It’s a look Louis has never seen Harry give him before; it’s so cold he shivers. He never wants to see that look on Harry’s face again; it doesn’t belong there.

“You told me you were sorry in the hospital, remember? You cried and you told me you were sorry and then what happened? You kept fucking using, Louis! After you almost died!”

Louis sits on his knees and buries his face in his hands.

I did that. What the fuck?

“I’m so sick of your apologies because they clearly mean nothing to you. They’re just words, Louis,” he accuses. “So you’ll have to forgive me if they don’t mean anything to me at the moment.”

“Hazza, I–”
“Do something about it,” Harry shouts. “The Louis I know always does what he says he’s going to do. The Louis I know doesn’t hide from his problems. The Louis I know never backs down from a fight. The Louis sitting in front of me right now? This isn’t you. Or maybe it is and I just don’t know you anymore.”

Harry collapses into his chair, completely spent. Jay immediately wraps her arms around him and he cries into her shoulder.

“Thank you, Harry,” James says solemnly. “That was...that was very brave of you.”

Louis crawls back into his chair, clutching the torn pictures to his chest.

James turns to Louis. “Do you have anything to say, Louis?”

*I’m so sick of your apologies because they clearly mean nothing to you.*

“I...I don’t,” he gulps. He looks around the room helplessly. Mark stares at him stone-faced. “I don’t know what…” Nick looks at him, completely shell-shocked. “Mom, I...” Jay looks at him sadly, even as she mutters words of comfort into Harry’s hair. “Hazza? Please don’t hate me. Hazza, look at me.”

Harry refuses to look at him. Louis’ shoulders slump in defeat.

“I’ll take you back to your room, Louis.”

Louis gets up obediently.

“Thank you all for coming,” James says genuinely. “I know this hasn’t been easy for any of you.” He’s speaking to all of them, of course, but Louis can see his gaze is trained on Harry. “If anyone feels like they need some individual counseling, I can set you up with one of my associates. I can connect you with support groups in the area. Whatever you need. I appreciate everything you’ve said to help Louis. I’ll be back soon to see you all out.”

Louis wipes his nose with the sleeve of his sweater. James rests a hand in between his shoulder blades and gives him a gentle push, guiding him towards the door.

“I’m sorry,” Louis whispers, taking one more glance at Harry. “I’m so sorry.”

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James brings Louis back to his room. He keeps a hand on Louis’ back, quietly giving him words of comfort and encouragement the whole time. Louis doesn’t process a single word he says, he can only concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other as the tears roll down his face, dripping from his chin. When he gets to his room, he’s relieved to discover that Zayn isn’t there. He really doesn’t want anyone seeing him like this. James leaves and Louis stands alone, feeling raw and exposed, even in this small bedroom.

The bathroom. The bathroom feels safer.

He locks himself inside and suddenly his stomach feels like it’s in his throat. He crouches over the toilet, vomiting up his breakfast. Hot tears pour down his face as his stomach continues to clench painfully, long after its contents have been emptied. He rests his forehead against the cool porcelain of the toilet bowl as he cries great big heaving sobs.

*You’re such a disappointment.*
These pills are the only thing you care about, Louis. You break my heart.

I can’t keep up with you.

This isn’t you. Or maybe it is and I just don’t know you anymore.

Every time Louis closes his eyes, he sees Mark looking at him with disdain. He sees his mother’s sad eyes and Nick’s pale face. He sees Harry’s eyes going cold. He hurts. He hurts so much.

Jesus Christ, what have I done? How did I get here?

He flushes the toilet and pushes himself up from the floor, staggering over to the sink and turning it on. He cups his hands under the faucet and splashes water on his face. Louis looks in the mirror and it’s like he’s seeing himself for the first time in months. He sees the purple bags under his eyes and his sallow complexion. He notices his sunken-in cheeks and unkempt scruff and prominent collarbone. His shaggy hair falls limply across his forehead and his eyes are bloodshot and dull. His clothes are hanging off his slim frame, almost swallowing him. He’s horrified.

Fuck, I look like a drug addict.

Because that’s what I am.

Holy shit.

The sudden realization brings forth a new wave of bone-wracking sobs. Louis backs away from the mirror in panic. When his back hits the wall, he slides down to the floor, bringing his knees up to his chin.

He feels like the pieces are finally clicking together, like he’s solved a Rubik’s cube. The constant itching in his brain. Feeling like he couldn’t function without the buzzing in his veins. The way he craved the powerful feeling the pills gave him. Taking 2 or 3 pills in the morning because just one didn’t do it for him anymore. Taking more in the afternoon. His weight loss. The overwhelming exhaustion. All the excuses, all the creative ways he disguised what was really going on. Telling himself he was in control, denying that deep down he knew he wasn’t. Lying to his mother. Sneaking pills behind Nick’s back. Keeping Harry in the dark.

Harry.

They’re just words, Louis. So you’ll have to forgive me if they don’t mean anything to me at the moment.

What have I done? What have I done?

He can’t get Harry’s face out of his mind. His haunted eyes as he recounted the morning of the accident.


The way he cried as he held up the pictures.

This boy doesn’t exist anymore.

The way Harry’s face turned to stone as he flinched away from his touch.

I’ve lost him. I’ve actually lost him. He’s never looked at me that way before. He hates me. I deserve it after what I’ve put him through.
Louis didn’t think he could cry any harder. He was wrong.

The doorknob jiggles.

“Louis?” Zayn calls.

Louis stills, holding his breath.

*Maybe he'll go away if I stay quiet.*

A sob escapes from his lips.

*So much for that plan.*

The doorknob jiggles again.

“Louis, I know you’re in there. I can hear you crying.”

“Go away,” Louis sobs. “Please.”

“Louis, open the door. You’re scaring me.”

“Go away, Zayn!” Louis shouts.

“I’m not going to do that, Louis. You don’t have to do this alone. Let me help you.”

“You can’t help me,” he whimpers. “Please...just leave me alone.”

“I know what you're going through,” Zayn says quietly. “Believe me, I do.”

Louis hugs his legs tighter to his chest. He rests his chin on his knee. “You do?” he asks through sniffles.

“Yeah,” Zayn replies.

There’s silence for a few moments. Louis desperately wants a cigarette but they are on the other side of the door. It’s quiet so long that Louis thinks Zayn may have left, so he starts scooting towards the door.

“The first time I got stoned was ninth grade,” Zayn says on the other side of the door. Louis startles.

“He didn’t leave?”

“I was fifteen and I was lonely. We had just moved to Charlottesville from Los Angeles...which was a complete culture shock. My high school was small, like everyone had known each other since they were kids, so they paid me no mind. I ate my lunch by myself for two weeks. One day this guy Danny sits down at my table. I knew he ran with the stoner crowd, but I was so desperate for some sort of connection with someone, I didn’t care. I found myself under the bleachers after school and Danny handed me a joint. I took it because I was so afraid I’d lose the one friend I had managed to make. I’ve never really been good at making friends. I’m...I’m sure you’ve noticed that I don’t talk very much.”

Louis huffs a small laugh through his tears.

“I’ve struggled with anxiety my whole life,” Zayn continues. “I just...I tend to get really
overwhelmed and shut down in social situations. I’m always questioning everything I do and I get really in my head and I work myself into a panic attack. Anyway, that first high was something else, yeah? It...it got me out of my head and it was...empowering. I felt like I could connect with people. All the sudden it was easier, you know?”

Yeah, I know.

“I never felt like I fit in with my family. Which is so fucking stupid, really, ’cause my family is great, man. Like...so great. I have three sisters. Doniya, Waliyha, and Safaa. I adore them; they are the lights of my life. Doniya is a year ahead of me in school. She’s good at everything she does. She’s gorgeous and popular and the move didn’t bother her a bit. She fit in instantly. Wali is super smart, straight-A student. Saf? Safaa is just this little ball of sunshine. Everyone falls in love with her instantly. And then there’s me. Painfully awkward. Invisible. Until the drugs anyway. I felt like they gave me an identity; suddenly I had a crowd at school, people I could talk to, people who seemed to have my back. I...I had never had that before.”

Louis closes his eyes and just listens to the soothing sound of Zayn’s voice.

“That’s all it was for a while. Just the pot. Totally harmless, right? But then it suddenly wasn’t enough. Like no matter how much I smoked I couldn’t quite capture the feeling I was looking for. I needed something else to get there. So I started drinking. I would go to parties with Danny and we’d just...take whatever was handed to us. X, Molly, Percocet, speed, you name it. Anything that just got me out of my head. But what got me was the coke. Fuck, I loved how it made me feel. I felt so...alive. It was like I was a completely different person when I was high. Energetic, talkative, unafraid. The crashes sucked. It got to the point where my mind couldn’t deal with any sort of stress without drugs in my system. Not good for someone with an anxiety disorder. Seeking out that next hit got more and more important. Not just important...essential.”

Yeah, I know that feeling.

“The summer after I graduated was a bit of a nightmare. I wasn’t going to college, nothing about it interested me. So I was...lost. I was high all the time. It was...it was really bad, Louis. And my family tried to help me. They did. They sent me to a shrink, put me on anti-anxiety meds. I just abused those too, trading them for more coke like they were money or something. I just...ah...couldn’t see my way out. One day, I had to pick up Saf from soccer practice. I was high as a kite. I shouldn’t have been behind the wheel. I...I totaled the car completely.”

Louis gasps. He scoots over to the door, unlocks it, swinging it open to reveal Zayn sitting on the floor. Zayn looks back at him sadly, tears sparkling in his charcoal lined brown eyes.

“By some miracle, we were fine. Just...bumps and bruises. But, shit, it was a wake-up call, you know?”

Louis nods.

“I could have,” Zayn continues, voice cracking. “I could have killed my baby sister. I checked into my first rehab after that. I was there for a month; it was really one of those places that focused on detoxing. I didn’t really learn anything, yeah? I was fine for a while. I went to beauty school. Did I tell you I’m a hair stylist?”

Louis shakes his head.

“It’s like an art to me. I’d always liked experimenting with my hair and my style. I love tattoos and piercings, obviously, but also those things are like...really fucking personal. It’s enough for me to
hand that little piece of myself over to a tattoo artist when I get some new ink, I can’t imagine being responsible for all those little pieces that people would give me. If that makes any sort of sense. I just...I like making people feel beautiful, like they can be the best versions of themselves. I may not be good with them on a personal level, but I’m good at doing that.”

“You’re better with people than you think,” Louis says softly.

Zayn smiles bashfully. “I don’t know about that, but thanks. Anyway, like I said, I was fine for awhile. I tried so hard. But that craving never really goes away, yeah? Like it was always there in the back of my head. ‘Just a little bump. It won’t hurt. You’ll be fine.’ I’m sure you know what I mean.”

Fresh tears spring to Louis’ eyes. “Yeah,” he chokes out. “Yeah, I do.”

Zayn reaches out and squeezes his hand.

“So I started using again. I went back to rehab, a different clinic this time. Lather, rinse, repeat.”

Louis chuckles a watery laugh at the pun.

“That clinic didn’t work either. I was looking to score a fix almost as soon as I got out. I just...I couldn’t get out from under it. I knew I was killing myself, one hit at a time but at the same time I just...I was powerless to the pull of it. Being high is when I felt most like myself, as fucked up as it is. Or at least the most like the person I wanted to be? I don’t know. I’ve had a lot of therapy and I still don’t fully understand it. I probably never will.”

Zayn sighs heavily.

“Doniya and I...we want to open up a salon together. She’s really amazing with makeup and styling. So we started looking for buildings we could rent. Two months ago, she came over to my apartment unannounced because she had found a place. The place. She found me snorting coke. Like, a lot of coke. I probably would have OD’d had she not shown up. And she was like ‘Enough is enough, Zayn,’ and I was crying and begging for help because I knew, you know? I knew I was going to eventually end up dying and that’s not what I wanted, Louis.”

Louis is sobbing again. For Zayn and for himself. Their stories are wildly different and completely the same all at once.

Is this why James put us together?

“Doniya did a lot of research into different rehab clinics because clearly what I had done in the past wasn’t working. That’s how I ended up here. She thought the whole communal aspect that James has established here would really help me. And she was right. It’s like...we do a lot of work on ourselves here with the individual therapy sessions. Those are intense and I’m so grateful for them. James is really fucking brilliant. But what’s helped me the most is the group stuff. The chores, the classes, even the movie nights...it’s all about establishing yourself as a part of a community. It’s about finding your voice and your identity in a healthy way. I’ve learned a lot about my triggers and how to handle them and how to move past them. I told you on the night we met that this is the first time I’ve ever truly felt I could beat this and I mean it. And you can beat it too.”

“I...I don’t know how to do this,” Louis sobs. “I’ve fucked up so many things.”

Zayn crawls over to Louis and wraps his arms around him. Louis stiffens for a moment but then relaxes into Zayn’s embrace, clinging to him as he cries.
“You’re not alone, Louis. You’re not,” Zayn says soothingly, his hand in Louis’ hair. “Look, Louis, I don’t know what’s happened to you or what made you end up here. I don’t know your story but I’ll listen to it if you want to share it with me. I do know what it’s like to be at the bottom of a pit and feel like there’s no way out. I know how hopeless you feel right now. I know you’re fucking terrified. I know, man. But I also know that you can climb out of that pit. It’s going to be awful and it’s going to be hard work but you can do it. It’s okay. You’re okay. I’ve got you. We’ve all got you, Louis. We won’t let you fall.”

Louis isn’t sure how long they sit on that bathroom floor crying together. It’s a long time. Finally, Zayn asks him if he wants to smoke. They pull themselves up from the floor and smoke a few cigarettes by the window in silence. When they finish, Zayn climbs up on his bed. Louis stands there awkwardly for a few moments, desperately wanting a cuddle but not quite sure how to ask for it. Zayn looks at him and smiles. He scoots against the wall and pats the space next to him, holding his arms open. Louis grabs Rainbow Bear from his bed and climbs into the bed with Zayn. He presses himself tightly to Zayn’s side, slinging one arm across Zayn’s middle and resting his head against his chest. Zayn wraps his arms around him, one hand resting at his waist, the other scratching his scalp soothingly.

Louis clutches Rainbow Bear with his other arm, pressing a kiss into his soft fur.

_Harry really knew what he was doing when he sent you to me, buddy._

Louis’ heart clenches when he thinks of Harry. He takes a shuddery breath as tears start to stream down his face yet again.

_Will I ever stop crying? Jesus._

Zayn looks down at him questioningly.

He’s not ready to talk. Not yet.

“Tell me about beauty school,” Louis murmurs into his chest. “Is it just like they say it is in _Grease_?”

Zayn’s chest shakes with gentle laughter. “Yes, Louis,” he says wryly. “It’s exactly like that. In fact on our very first day, we had to recreate that whole blonde pineapple look.”

“Don’t lie to me, Zayn. _Grease_ is very important to me and I can’t have you shattering my illusions.”

Zayn tugs his hair gently. “Never.”

Zayn starts talking about beauty school, about how it inspired him, and about how he felt he had finally found his calling in life. Louis wonders what that feels like because he certainly doesn’t know. His eyelids are heavy. Zayn’s voice is almost hypnotizing and he’s so warm beside him and the way he’s gently petting his hair is so soothing. Louis yawns deeply. He’s so exhausted, emotionally and physically.

“You can go to sleep, Lou,” Zayn says softly, the nickname flowing easily from his lips. “I don’t mind.”

Zayn smiles and keeps talking lowly. Louis is asleep within seconds.

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When Louis wakes up, the first thing he notices is the waning sunlight casting shadows through their window. Zayn still has one hand in his hair, stroking it idly; he’s clutching a novel in his other hand, resting the spine against his propped-up knee. Louis stretches like a cat, nuzzling his face into Zayn’s chest.

“Jesus, how long was I out?” Louis asks, his voice sleepy soft.

“A few hours,” Zayn says mildly, turning a page.

“Don’t you like...need to pee or something?”

“It’s not like I could have anyway, even if I needed to,” Zayn says drily, a smile quirking his lips as he places a bookmark in the novel. “Someone had me in a death grip and I couldn’t move.” Louis guiltily starts to loosen his grip on him, but Zayn immediately wraps his arms tighter around him. “S’okay, Lou. You’re fine. I promise to alert you to any bladder-related emergencies, should they arise.”

Louis sighs contentedly, squeezing Zayn’s waist. “Okay. Thanks...thanks for staying.”

“Of course.”

Their door flies open and Niall barges into the room, clutching a bag of chips and a couple of sandwiches.

“Zayn, where’ve you been all day? You missed dinner. Don’t worry, I stole some sandwiches from the kitchen during clean-up – oh!”

Niall’s bright blue eyes widen in surprise. He recovers quickly and very deliberately places the food on the dresser, turning towards Zayn and Louis. He crosses his arms and looks at them expectantly, one eyebrow raised.

“What?” Louis says after a moment.

“Do you mean to tell me,” Niall says, pointing between them. “That you two have been having a cuddle party all day and you didn’t invite me?” He saunters towards the bed, hands on his hips, a smug grin cracking his facade. “Zayn, I’m wounded. I thought we were best friends.”

Zayn blinks at him, a placid smile on his face. Niall hops onto bed, plastering himself to Louis’ back. “Scoot over, Bender,” Niall says, nudging Louis’ side. “I’m falling off the edge here.”

Louis rolls his eyes, but there’s no malice behind it. He and Zayn adjust themselves to make room for Niall. Niall tangles their legs together as he wraps one arm around Louis’ waist.

“So what’s the cuddle party occasion,” Niall asks once they’ve made themselves comfortable. He rests his chin on Louis’ shoulder. I’m still not ready to talk about it, thanks though.

“He had the meeting with his family today,” Zayn pipes up after a few moments of silence.

“Oh, shit, really?” Niall wriggles closer. “What happened? What did they say?”
For fuck’s sake, Niall,” Zayn says, a hint of exasperation in his voice. “Can’t you see he doesn’t want to talk about it?”


Saying it out loud makes it real though.

Louis crumples against Zayn’s chest, a pained whimper escaping from his lips.

“I’m a drug addict,” Louis says in a tiny voice.

Niall rubs his back soothingly. “Is that what they said?”

“I mean,” Louis sniffs. “Nobody said that but...that’s what I am. I just...I didn’t see it until today. My mom...she...” Louis gulps. His heart feels like it’s going to beat out of his chest. “She found my stash of pills. I had bottles hidden all over my apartment.”

“Classic addict behavior,” Niall interjects.

“And I just...I didn’t realize how much I had until I saw it all together? And then she...she started throwing them at me and it’s just...it’s so fucked up because the first thought I had when that first bottle hit the floor was whether or not I could manage to sneak a few. My mother is sitting there sobbing in front of me and all I could think about was the pills.”

“Fuck,” Zayn says quietly.

“That’s not a normal reaction, right?”

“It’s normal for an addict,” Niall says, giving him a quick squeeze.

“Christ.” Louis wipes his nose. “I was high the day I came here,” he admits. “I ground up three pills and snorted them right before my parents and my boyfriend came to pick me up. I...I started back on the pills the night I got home from the hospital. How...how fucked up is that?”

“Pretty fucked up,” Zayn agrees.

“And Harry, he...God, you should have heard the sound he made when he found out I was still using.”

“Is Harry your boyfriend?” Niall asks.

Louis twists around to look at him. “Harry?” he asks, slightly surprised. “No. Harry’s my best friend. My oldest friend.” Niall cocks an eyebrow. “My boyfriend, Nick, he...he sat there the whole time looking like he didn’t know what hit him, but Harry...he...oh, fuck...Harry hates me.”

Concern flashes in Niall’s eyes. “Did he say that, Louis? Like actually say the words?”

“No...but he...listen I’ve known Harry for fifteen years and just...the way he looked at me. It was so...cold. He’s never looked at me that way before.”

“But what did he say?” Niall pushes.

“He said he didn’t know me,” Louis whispers, wiping his face with his sleeve. Niall brushes Louis’ hair out of his eyes, patiently waiting for him to continue. “And just...shit, if anyone knows me, it’s Harry, you know? He...he had these pictures of us and he...ripped them in half one by one. Right in
front of me. He was sobbing as he did it. And then he just...let them fall to the floor like they meant nothing to him.”

“Jesus,” Zayn whispers.


“I hit the floor, scrambling for them. Those pictures...they are...were...some of our best memories. And I was apologizing over and over and I reached for him and he...backed away from me and started shouting at me. He didn’t want me to touch him.” Louis scrubs his hands over his face. “My best friend didn’t want me to touch him. Fuck...how did I let this happen? How do I even start to fix it?”

Niall angles away from Louis, reaching over to the nightstand. “These are the pictures?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t...I couldn’t let James throw them away.”

Niall studies the torn photographs.

“He’s cute.”

“He’s gorgeous,” Louis corrects him automatically. “And don’t even think about it, Neil. Absolutely not. He’s off limits.”

Niall smirks. “Nice tux by the way. Maybe you should have gotten it in green though,” he adds pointedly.

“Harry said the blue matched my eyes.”

Niall’s smirk turns into a full-blown grin. “Did he now?”

Zayn huffs a laugh.

“Shut up.”

Niall cackles and ruffles Louis’ hair affectionately. Louis shoves him playfully in return and Niall just tightens his arms around him.

“He doesn’t hate you, Louis,” Niall says gently, hooking his chin over Louis’ shoulder.

“You think so?” Louis feels a tiny bit of hope.

Niall shakes his head. “No. You don’t...you don’t do something like what Harry did for someone you hate. Trust me, I know. I think he loves you. I think he loves you very much.”

“How do I fix it? I have to fix it.”


“Welcome to rehab, Louis!” Niall crows, smacking a kiss on his cheek. “It fucking sucks. You’re going to love it.”

Louis laughs. A real, genuine laugh.

_Fuck, that feels good._
“You stole that line from *Friends*, Neil.”

“So what if I did, Bender? What are you going to do about it? Two hits? Me hitting you, you hitting the floor?”

Louis groans. “That’s not even Bender’s line.”

Niall cackles again, cuddling close and tickling Louis’ ribs.

Louis giggles and grabs Niall’s hands, resting them on his stomach. He burrows closer into Zayn’s chest and sighs contently.

“You guys are first-rate cuddlers...and first-rate guys too.”

Niall gasps. “Did you hear that, Zayn? He likes us! He really likes us!”

“Oh my God, I take it all back. Get the fuck off of me.”
Louis gives the kitchen counter a final swipe with his sponge, admiring his handiwork. Looking around the sparkling kitchen, Louis feels a sense of pride; he’s never even kept his own kitchen this clean. He rinses out his sponge and places it in the basket beside of the sink before storing the bottle of Lysol in the cabinet under it. His breakfast shift tasks completed, he glances up at the clock on the wall and is surprised to discover that he’s finished early.

*I’m really getting the hang of this.*

He hangs up his apron by the door, calling out a cheerful goodbye to the kitchen staff. He strides down the hall, humming under his breath.

*Today is going to be a good day.*

As he rounds the corner leading to James’ office, he hears faint music echoing down the hall. Louis focuses on the tune, a vaguely familiar mix of sweeping violins and horns. James’ door is slightly ajar, so the music grows louder as he approaches, the melody becoming apparent.

*Is that…?*

The trumpets blare and Louis laughs.

*Yeah. It is.*

He raps on the door, poking his head through the crack at the same time. “James? Sorry, I’m a bit early.”

James looks up, smiling warmly. “Come on in, Louis.” He closes the folder he was writing in, adding it to a stack on the corner of his desk. He grabs a remote and pauses the music.

“Was that…” Louis starts with an amused grin. “Was that *The Imperial March*?”

James barks a laugh. “You got me. I like to listen to the *Star Wars* soundtrack while working on case notes.”

“Bit ironic, isn’t it? Listening to Darth Vader’s theme while writing about all of us? Are you planning to lure us all to the Dark Side, James?”

James steeples his fingers, resting his chin on his fingertips. “I prefer to think of myself as Yoda.”

Louis settles down on the couch. “Do or do not. There is no try.”

“Precisely, my young padawan,” James beams. He picks up a folder and pen from his desk and moves over to his armchair. “Well, Louis. Here we are. Day twenty-eight.”
“I know.”

“Are you planning on leaving us like you said you would?”

Louis bites his lip as he cringes. “Yeah, I did say that didn’t I?”

James’ eyes are twinkling. “You sure did. I can show you my notes if you don’t believe me.”

“Oh, I believe you,” Louis huffs good-naturedly. “Can I...can I take that back?”

“You mean you want to stay?”

“Yes,” Louis says definitively. “I want to stay. I need to.”

James’ grin is about to split his face in two. Louis chuckles.

“You can feel free to say I told you so at any time. I’m sure you’ve been practicing your victory dance.”

“I’m not going to say that. I’m going to say I’m proud of you.”

“Yeah?”

“Look how far you’ve come in the past twelve days,” James says. “Is this really the same guy who came here expecting spa treatments?”

“I’m still upset about those,” Louis pouts.

“Oh, like you haven’t been doing mani/pedis with Zayn and Niall on a regular basis. What do you have to complain about?”

Louis admires his pale blue manicure and smirks. “Absolutely nothing.”

“In all seriousness, I am really glad you’re choosing to stay.”

Louis sighs. “I just feel like I wasted a lot of time, you know?”

“It’s not wasted time,” James says earnestly. “Everyone comes to grips with their addiction in their own time. Not everyone comes here on day one ready to conquer them. You just...took a little longer to get there. The thing that matters is that you did.”

Louis nods and takes a deep cleansing breath. James opens his folder and looks over his notes, muttering to himself.

“Those are a lot of notes, James.”

“You talk a lot, Louis,” James deadpans.

“Touché.”

James finds his place in his notes and circles something.

“Right. Okay. How are you today?”

“I feel good. Today just...it feels like a good day. I can’t explain it. But it does.”

James smiles. “That’s great. I’m glad. How are you feeling in regards to what we talked about in
Louis resists the urge to pick at his nails. “I can’t talk to Mark,” he says quietly. “Not until I have a plan. With him, I need to have a clear plan or he won’t listen to me. He’ll just bulldoze me. I...I know I can’t go back to pre-med. I know that. But I don’t know what the fuck I want to do with my life and I don’t know how to tell him that. He’s going to be so disappointed in me. Again.”

“You know that’s okay, right? Not the disappointment, the not knowing what you want. We’ll figure it out. That’s why you’re here. Not everyone knows what they want to do with their life at twenty.”

Harry does.

Louis’ heart clenches. They haven’t talked about Harry yet. He studies his hands again, noticing a tiny chip in the polish on his thumbnail.

“Something on your mind, Louis?”

“Have you...have you talked to Harry?”

James raises an eyebrow. “Have you?”

“No,” Louis admits. “I can’t stop thinking about what he said, James. I can’t stop thinking about how he looked when he said it. He’s never spoken to me like that before and just...I’m afraid he doesn’t want to talk to me. I’m afraid he’ll hang up or tell me to fuck off or something.”

“Do you honestly believe Harry would do that? Or are you just telling yourself that so you can hide because you’re ashamed of yourself?”

Louis’ jaw drops.

I never thought of it that way.

“Tell me about your relationship with Harry, Louis.”

“What do you want to know?”

James smiles. “Just...tell me about it.”

Louis tucks his legs under him, leaning against the couch’s armrest.

“It was just...one of those things you know? I met him when we were five; it was the first day of kindergarten. You know how sometimes you meet someone and you just instantly connect with them? That was me and Hazza. I knew right away that he was my best friend. We were a perfect fit right from the start and it’s been that way ever since. We just...work. I’ve always been the impulsive one. I tend to jump into things head first without thinking it through. And I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m a bit dramatic.”

James chuckles.

“Harry is more deliberate, more intuitive. He likes to take his time with things; he always weighs all the options. We balance each other out. He keeps me grounded and I loosen him up. We’ve seen each other through...everything. His dad leaving. Both of our moms getting remarried. Whenever things would get tough with Mark, I would just go to his house and we’d play Scrabble for hours or we’d snuggle up in his basement and watch movies all night. He was the first person that I came
out to. There’s just...not a single significant moment in my life that he hasn’t been there for. And...he would say the exact same thing about me, you know? He knows me inside and out...no one knows me like he does. That’s why it hurt so much when he said he didn’t know me.”

“You know he didn’t say that to hurt you, right? He was telling you how he felt about your addiction. Not how he felt about you. Do you know what I saw that day, Louis? I saw someone fighting for you with everything he had.”

“I’m just...I’m scared that I’ve fucked things up too badly. I really hurt him, you know? I feel sick over it.”

“You have to forgive yourself, Louis,” James says gently. “You can’t carry that guilt around with you. You’ll never heal that way. You and Harry will have to work together to build that trust back up...but you have to be willing to take the first step. He’s already laid everything on the table for you. It’s your turn.”

“I don’t think I’m ready yet. I can’t just say I’m sorry. Not again. I’ve got to be able to show him that I’m better, you know?”

“Can you explain something to me?”

“I can try.”

“There is a lot of open hostility between Harry and Nick—”

Louis exhales a big breath. “Yeah, you picked up on that, didn’t you?”

“It’s pretty hard not to.”

“They don’t get along.”

James raises an eyebrow.

“Fine,” Louis sighs. “They can’t stand each other.”

“How does that make you feel? How does it affect your relationship with the two of them?”

“It’s...stressful. It’s almost like I’m being pulled in two different directions. It’s a vicious cycle, you know? I feel like one of them is constantly mad at me. I just...can’t win?”

“So why put up with it?”

“I’m used to it? Nick has to accept that Harry’s a part of my life. He always has been. I’m not cutting him out. But I can’t force them to get along. Believe me, I’ve tried. They’re like oil and water. Harry tried with Nick for a little while. He did. But Nick...it’s like he’s threatened by Harry or something.”

James leans forward, frowning a little. “Why do you think that? Be specific.”

“Harry and I have just always lived in each other’s pockets, you know? It’s just how we’ve always been. I definitely would not have made it through the past year of pre-med without him helping me. Our friend Liam jokes that it’s like we have our own language that no one else speaks. We’ve always been very affectionate. We have all these jokes that are just for the two of us...”

Including one where I pretend to be a phone sex operator to try and get a rise out him?
Louis rubs his temples, resting his chin between his hands.

*Nick would lose his shit if he knew.*

He sits up decisively, cracking his knuckles as he does so.

*It’s just a fucking joke though. It doesn’t mean anything. We’ve done it for years. It’s not anything to get worried about.*

“But really, that’s all it is.”

“I can see why he seems to be threatened. You and Harry have an...intense relationship. I’ve been in the room with the two of you once and I saw that immediately. Nick has see it almost everyday.”

“He...belittles Harry. All the time.”

“The Boy Scout thing?”

“Yes,” Louis sighs, “Harry was a literal Boy Scout. Eagle Scout, actually,” he adds proudly. “For scholarships. Nick has never wanted for anything; his family’s loaded. Harry’s worked really hard to get where he is and Nick just...makes him feel small. And I’ve told him repeatedly to stop it, but…”

Louis shrugs helplessly.

“I’m not saying Nick is right in the way he treats Harry,” James says. “He’s not. I just want you to think about whether or not Nick is acting out because he’s picking up on something between the two of you.”

“He just...he doesn’t get the kind of friendship Harry and I have. That’s all.” Louis crosses his arms, effectively closing the subject.

“Do you love Nick, Louis?”

Louis sputters, taken aback. “What kind of question is that?”

“A valid one,” James replies seriously.

“I...I mean...yeah...of course I do? He wants me. He accepts me as I am and just...lets me be me. He doesn’t need me to be perfect. We have fun together. He makes me laugh. We have–”

Louis hesitates, breaking eye contact.

Fuck, this is awkward. Didn’t really plan on discussing my sex life with my therapist today. Oh well, here goes nothing.

He takes a deep breath and looks back up at James.

“We have a lot of sex, and it’s really good, okay? It’s always been the easiest part of our relationship.”

Louis waits for James to crack a joke or something. He doesn’t; he simply looks at Louis while he waits for him to continue.

“He’s...it’s like whenever we go out, he’s proud to be with me. I know it seems like I’m shitting on him today but honestly...the good times outnumber the bad. They do.”
“Are you in love with him?”

Louis tosses his hands up in frustration. “What’s the difference?”

“Seriously, Louis?”

“I am serious, James. I just listed off all these things I love about him but you’re still questioning me.”

“What was the first thing you said though?”

Louis pauses. “...He wants me?”

“That’s the point I’m trying to make. ‘He wants me.’ It’s an interesting response considering you’ve been together for a year and a half.”

“So you’re telling me I don’t love Nick? That’s bullshit.”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all,” James says patiently. “I don’t doubt that you care about him.”

“Then what the fuck are you saying?”

“Okay, let me put it this way,” James says, clapping his hands together. “Who is the first person you call when anything important happens?”

“Harry,” Louis says automatically.

“Who do you turn to for advice?”

“Harry,” Louis replies, a hint of trepidation creeping into his voice.

“Who did you cry out for in the darkest moments of your detox?”

Oh.

Louis wrings his hands and feels a blush flooding his cheeks.

“...Harry,” he says softly, looking at his hands.

James reaches forward and squeezes Louis’ knee gently. “This is what I’m talking about, Louis. Harry.”

Louis bites his lip as he feels his eyes sting. He looks up at James, a single tear slipping down his cheek.

“Goddammit, James, I wasn’t going to cry today,” Louis says ruefully. “Today is supposed to be a good day.”

James hands him a box of tissues. “But it is a good day, Louis. You just had a breakthrough. The tears are just a bonus for me.”

Louis blows his nose. “I hate you,” he sniffs.

“I know,” James says good-naturedly.

Louis wads up his tissue and tosses it in the basket sandwiched between the armchair and the couch.
“So I...I’m gonna need you to spell out this ‘breakthrough’ for me. If you don’t mind.”


“And I...don’t have that with Nick? Is that what you’re saying?”

James nods.

“Because...I have that intimacy with Harry?”

James nods again.

“So the question is what’s holding you back from pursuing that deeper relationship with Nick?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“I think you do though.” James studies him intently. “It’s your feelings for Harry.”

“But I…” Louis stammers. “I don’t have feelings for Harry?”

“You don’t?”

“I don’t. I......he...it’s never been that way with us, James,” Louis says. “Ever.”

“Are you sure about that?” James prods.

“Positive,” Louis clips, leaning back and nestling into the couch cushions.

But then something comes back to him. A moment completely forgotten until that very second. His hospital room. Harry crawling into bed with him. Holding him and comforting him and looking at him like he was something...precious. A puff of breath over his lips, the air around them crackling with both uncertainty and want. The moment snapping like a rubber band pulled too tight.

*Harry was going to kiss me.*

*And I wanted him to.*

Louis feels his entire body flush.

“You’re not as subtle as you think you are, Louis,” James says. “There is something, isn’t there?”

Louis shakes his head vigorously.

This is ridiculous. That was just...it was just a...he was just glad I was alive, wasn’t he? It’s like every fucking movie cliché out there, isn’t it? It was just a moment, it didn’t mean anything . And he hasn’t said anything about it since, so clearly it didn’t mean anything to him either.

“No...it’s just...I mean...he...he doesn’t want me, James,” Louis says softly. “Harry doesn’t want me.”

James frowns. “What makes you say that?”

“Because...because I’ve always been right there, you know? And it’s...it’s never come up. Harry’s dated. He’s had boyfriends. He’s been in love.”

“So have you. It goes both ways.”
“He just...he would have made a move if he wanted me,” Louis insists.

“How do you know?”

“Because Harry always goes after what he wants once he makes up his mind he wants it. Always. That’s just how he operates. And like I keep saying, he’s never made a move on me, therefore...”

“But what about you, Louis? You do realize you’re putting all of the burden on him, right? Maybe he’s waiting on you. You haven’t done anything about this thing between the two of you, whatever it may be, either. So the question is...what do you want?”

“Harry deserves better than me,” Louis says.

“Louis–”

“No, he does,” Louis says definitively. “I’m a fucking mess, James. Look at me. I’m a twenty year old drug addict. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing with my life when I get out of here. I didn’t really know what I was doing before I ended up here. I mess things up. I let people down. I’m not good enough, I never have been –”

“Louis, you know that’s not true. We’ve talked about this,” James interjects.

Louis ignores him. “And Harry...he...he’s so...good. He’s brilliant. He’s focused. He’s just... the most beautiful person I’ve ever met. Harry knows what he wants in life and he knows how to get it. He’s going to go places...big places...and I’m...I would just hold him back.”

James looks at him sadly.

“And...and this thing between us as you call it? It’s so much...it’s so much bigger and so much deeper than a romantic relationship,” Louis says fervently. “Me and Harry? We’re for life. It’s been for life since we were five years old, James. It’s the most important relationship I’ve ever had. He’s the most important person in my life. I can’t...I can’t mess that up. I’ve messed it up so much already...I mean I’m fucking terrified to even speak to him right now and just...taking it to a romantic level...it would mess everything up.”

“How do you know?” James urges.

“I can’t...I can’t lose him. I don’t know what I would do if I did. I can’t go there, James. I can’t.”

“Don’t you see what you’re doing here, Louis? You’re holding back from Harry in the exact same way you’re holding back from Nick. You’re keeping a part of yourself from both of them instead of having a fully committed relationship with either of them. It’s no way to live. It’s not healthy.”

Louis scrubs his hands over his face.

“I...I want to be healthy, James. I do. I need to be. I can’t...I can’t be this way anymore.”

“We’ve talked about your coping mechanisms before,” James says patiently. “You ignore your problems instead of facing them head on. You use humor and sarcasm to mask your real feelings. You’ve mastered the art of deflection. It’s so interesting to me that you do this because the first word Harry used to describe you was fearless.”

Louis scoffs, crossing his arms over his chest.

“What? It’s how he sees you,” James says, frowning slightly.
“He’s always believed the best of me. To a fault, really.”

“Do you not trust his perception of you?”

“It’s obvious that I’m a complete chicken shit, so...joke’s on him, huh?” Louis says wryly.

“What did I just say about using humor as a coping mechanism, Louis?”

“Shit,” he sighs, rubbing his temples. “I’m trying, James. I really am.”

“I know you are. It’s a hard habit to break. It’s not something that’s going to change overnight, okay? It’s something you’re going to have to work on every day.”

Louis picks at the chip on his thumbnail, the polish falling away in tiny flakes. “It’s so hard. It’s just...my natural impulse, yeah? How do I change that?”

“Think of what will happen if you don’t. You’re going to end up right back here if you don’t make these changes. It’s the very core of what we’re trying to fix here.”

They sit in silence for a few moments, the weight of the session sinking in.

“You’re not being fair to either of them, you know,” James says gently. “But more important, you’re not being fair to yourself. You’re denying yourself so much, Louis.”

“So what...what do I do?” Louis asks.

“At the risk of sounding like a bad romantic comedy, I think you have to choose,” James says. “Or at least figure out what it is you want from them. This ‘half in, half out’ dynamic you have with both of them isn’t working. For anyone.”

“But...”

“Before you start yelling at me, I’m not saying you have to choose right now. I know you’re not ready for that. And choosing doesn’t mean cutting Nick or Harry out of your life entirely. Not necessarily. But it does mean you have to adjust your level of emotional investment in them. You have to, Louis. It is all going to blow up in your face if you don’t.”

“I don’t...I don’t want to hurt either of them,” Louis says honestly.

“So you’d rather just hurt yourself then?” James says pointedly.

An alarm goes off on James’ phone, startling Louis.

“Time’s up,” James says simply.

“Fuck,” Louis utters.

James smiles at him warmly, patting Louis’ knee.

“You’re doing so well. I know this is difficult stuff that we’re working through and it’s not easy.”

“No shit,” Louis huffs. “You really laid it on thick today, James. Jesus Christ.”

Louis stands, twisting to his side, trying to crack some of the tension out of his back. He sighs in relief as he feels his spine crackle. He pops all his knuckles individually.
“I always find that yoga helps after a session like this,” James says mildly. “There’s a class in half an hour. You should go. Work all those kinks out. Get centered. It’ll help clear your mind.”

“Yeah,” Louis says, rolling his shoulders. “I think I will. Thanks. See you at group tonight?”


Louis pauses in the doorway, resting his head against it. “I still don’t know what the fuck I’m going to do.”

“That’s okay. One day at a time. We’ll get there. Now go. Be zen.”

Louis snickers. “Whatever you say, Yoda.”
Chapter 8

Louis hunches over his canvas, his tongue poking out the corner of his mouth as he concentrates.

*Keep your hands fucking steady.*

He takes a deep breath and slowly drags the paintbrush down the canvas, focusing on keeping the black line as thin and straight as he possibly can. Halfway through the line, Louis dips his brush back in the black paint and picks up where he left off, repeating the *keep steady* mantra in his mind. He reaches the edge of the canvas and heaves a sigh of relief. He leans back in his chair and studies his work.

There are spots where the lines are uneven; some are thicker than others and there’s a tiny spot where the line drifts into the beige square because Niall had let out a whoop and startled him. But as a whole...it looks pretty fucking good. He’d found the square canvas towards the end of art therapy on Sunday and had immediately painted it a warm beige. He spent most of today’s class meticulously drawing out a grid on the canvas, first with a ruler and pencil, and then carefully (oh so carefully) painting over them. And now he’s done. He flexes his hand, which has gone slightly numb from his intense grip on the paintbrush, and grins.

*Not too bad, if I do say so myself.*

He grabs a tube of red paint and squeezes a dollop onto his palette. He adds a little bit of white, mixing it together with the rich red to make the exact shade he needs. He cracks his knuckles and bites his lip as he starts to fill in the top left square.

“You do realize class ended twenty minutes ago, right?”

Niall laughs as Louis jumps about a foot in the air.

“Niall,” he admonishes. “What have I told you about startling me while I’m working on this?”

“But it’s so fun, Bender,” Niall laughs. “You’re so cute when you’re concentrating.”

Louis rolls his eyes, biting back a smile. He turns his attention back to the square, fastidiously filling in the red.

“We should clean up, yeah? I probably should have waited to start coloring this in until next time,” Louis sighs. “I wasted all this paint.”

Niall peers over his shoulder. “What the hell are you painting anyway? Just a bunch of squares?”

“I don’t feel I need to explain my art to you, Niall,” Louis says archly.

“Say no more, mon amour,” Niall sings.

“Can't ever get one by you, can I, Nialler?”

“Never. Not unless it's some obscure modern art thing like what you're working on now. Seriously, have you ever seen some of that shit? Why is a painting with one red stripe hanging in a museum?”

“Says the man who has literally been finger painting for the past hour,” Louis says, gesturing towards the paper on Niall’s easel.
Niall shrugs. “What can I say? I like the way the paint feels between my fingers.” He dips his fingers in a pot of paint, swiping a yellow stripe down the middle of his painting.

“Niall?”

“Yes, petal?”

Louis dips his brush in the red paint, grinning mischievously. Maybe it won't be so wasted after all.

“You're an idiot.”

He flicks his brush in Niall’s direction, the red paint splattering across his surprised face. Louis giggles delightedly as Niall lets out an affronted squawk. Niall wipes his face, smearing yellow paint down his cheek.


Louis squeals, shoving his canvas to the other end of the table.

“Just don't get it on my painting!” He grabs a few tubes of paint, along with his palette to arm himself.

“Oh no, Lou,” Niall says menacingly, a wicked grin creeping across his face. “I would never ruin your precious painting. This is all for you.”

A glob of blue paint hits him square in the face.

“Niall!” Louis sputters. “That is so much worse that just a little splatter of paint!”

Niall cackles. “That’s what you get for messing with me!”

Louis hits Niall in the chest with red paint and then a full-on war breaks out between them, limbs and paint flying everywhere.

“Brunette is a good look for you, Neil,” Louis laughs as he smears black paint through Niall’s blond hair. “Maybe you should talk to Zayn about dyeing it.”

“It’s my natural color, you jag,” Niall grits as he wrestles Louis to the floor.

Louis isn’t sure how Niall gets the jump on him, but somehow he winds up on his back with Niall sitting astride his stomach, completely immobilizing him. Niall pins his wrists to the floor, clutching a tube of blue paint in his teeth.

“Don’t you fucking....ARRRRRRRRGGGGGGGHH,” he wheezes as Niall clamps his lips down around the tube, emptying it all over his face.

Niall spits the tube out of his mouth and howls with laughter. “Weren’t you complaining about the lack of facials when you first got here?”

“Spa facials, asshole,” Louis cries, tears of laughter streaming down his face. “I can’t believe you fucking did that.” He wiggles his hips, trying unsuccessfully to throw Niall off him.

“Look at the little kitten trying to fight back! Just say uncle, Bender.”

Louis continues to squirm in his grip. “Absolutely not!”
“Um, Louis? You have a visitor.”

Louis and Niall’s heads snap up. Zayn is standing in the doorframe, an amused grin on his face. To Louis’ utter shock, Nick is standing next to Zayn, a frown creasing his handsome face. He looks completely out of place in the art studio, immaculately dressed in a camel overcoat, hanging open to reveal a black sweater with a red and green dinosaur on it, black skinnies and black boots.

“Babe!” Louis gasps.

Niall releases his wrists and sits back on Louis’ hips. “Well, h ellooooo-o gorgeous,” he grins. “Where have you been all my life?”

Nick’s frown deepens. “What?”

Louis takes advantage of Niall’s momentary distraction and bucks his hips, knocking Niall off of him.

“I win,” he crows, swiping his hand across his face and transferring the blue to Niall’s cheeks. He turns and beams at Nick.

He...he’s not happy.

Louis deflates, the complete joy he’d been feeling mere seconds ago evaporating. He suddenly feels very...foolish. And very covered in paint. He scrambles to his feet, grabbing a rag off the table.

“What are you...what are you doing here?” he asks quietly, wiping paint off his face.

“Can’t a guy come visit his boyfriend?” Nick asks, his voice pinched.

“Yeah...of...of course. Of course you can visit. I just...wasn’t expecting you is all,” Louis stutters.

Niall looks between the two of them, puzzled by the shift in the room. He grabs the rag from Louis and wipes off his hands. He peers at Nick, a cautious smile on his face.

“Hey, man,” Niall says, extending his hand. “I’m Niall. It’s nice to meet you finally. Louis talks about you all the time.”

Louis breathes a sigh of relief as Nick accepts Niall’s hand, shaking it firmly.

Thank you, Niall.

“Likewise,” Nick says. “I mean...Louis hasn’t mentioned you at all but it’s nice to meet you.”

“You never mentioned how handsome he was though, Lou,” Niall says cheekily, winking at Nick.

“Okay, okay,” Louis laughs softly. “Settle down, that’s enough.”

Niall claps his hands together and turns to Zayn. “Wanna help me clean the supply closet? It’s a disaster.”

Zayn studies Louis for a moment, eyes full of concern.

“Yeah...sure,” Zayn says, following Niall into the large closet, leaving Louis and Nick alone.

“Hey,” Louis says softly, looking up at Nick through his eyelashes.
Suddenly, Nick’s lips are on his, firm and insistent. Louis gasps into the kiss as Nick grips his hips possessively, pulling Louis against him. He flails a bit, trying to keep his paint-covered arms and hands far away from Nick’s expensive coat. He breaks the kiss, stepping out of Nick’s embrace. He holds up his hands apologetically.

“I...ah...I don’t want to get paint on your coat,” Louis says awkwardly. He takes the rag and wipes a smear of blue from the corner of Nick’s mouth.

“I don’t care,” Nick mutters, reaching for him again.

“You will though,” Louis says, nudging him with his hip as he makes his way to the sink. “It’s your favorite.”

He grabs the soap and turns on the faucet, dipping his arms under the water.

“What was that anyway?” Nick asks.

Louis shrugs. “Niall’s a real laugh, isn’t he? It was just a bit of fun.”

“Yeah, it looked like it,” Nick replies with a hard edge to his voice.

Louis peers at him over his shoulder, eyebrows raised. “Seriously? You did notice that he was blatantly ogling you, right?”

He turns his attention back to the sink, watching the blue and black stream off his arms and down the drain. He splashes water on his face and grabs a paper towel to wipe off the excess paint.

“It was completely harmless and you know it, Nicholas. So stop acting like a possessive dick.”

He shuts the water off and grabs another towel. He feels Nick come up behind him, crowding him against the counter. One hand rests at his hip, squeezing it, while his other travels up Louis’ spine to the base of his neck, massaging as he goes. Louis hums in approval as Nick’s hand brushes across his shoulder blade and then down his bicep, coming to rest in the crook of his elbow. He bends down and rests his forehead on Louis’ shoulder and Louis leans back into him instinctively, breathing in the familiar scent of his cologne.

At least this has always been easy between us, even when he’s being an asshole.

After a moment, Nick presses a kiss to his shoulder and then noses at his neck, peppering more kisses there.

Louis sighs and tilts his head to the side, allowing Nick more access. “That feels nice,” he whispers. “I’ve missed this.”

“Mmmmm,” Nick agrees. His hand creeps under the hem of Louis’ t-shirt and lightly strokes his stomach. “You haven’t called.”

“I know,” Louis says breathily. “I’m sorry.”

“If you’re mad at me, I wish you’d just say so instead of giving me the silent treatment,” Nick says, gently nipping Louis’ earlobe. “Look, I’m really sorry about all that bullshit that went down last time we saw each other, okay? Is that what you’re mad at me about?”

Louis stiffens.

Wait. What?
“It wasn’t bullshit,” he says quietly.

“Oh come on, babe,” Nick says into his neck. “It kind of was. It felt like I was in one of those Lifetime movies of the week that you love so much.”

“No,” Louis says firmly, extricating himself from Nick’s embrace. “You don’t get to do this, Nick. That meeting meant a lot to me. It...it opened my eyes up to a lot of shit. Don’t belittle it because you don’t understand it. Just...don’t.”

Nick holds his hands up. “Okay, okay. Sorry.”

They stand in silence for a few moments. Louis crosses his arms and looks at the floor.

*Just talk to him.*

“Look, I’ll tell you about it if you want me to,” he says.

“Yeah,” Nick replies. “Yeah, maybe we can talk while we’re on the road. We’ve got a six-hour drive ahead of us after all.”

Louis looks up at him. “What?”


*Fuck.*

“Babe...I...I can’t go to New York with you. I’m sorry.”

“...You’re joking, right?”

“No, I’m not.”

“It’s Thanksgiving!” Nick exclaims. “Surely they can give you a few days off?”

“I’m in rehab, Nick,” Louis says, exasperation creeping into his voice. “I can’t just up and leave in the middle of it. That’s not how it works here. It’s not actually a spa vacation, you know that right? It’s hard work and I can’t come and go as I please.”

“I got us Hamilton tickets, Louis. Do you know what I had to do to get them?”

“I’m sorry about the tickets. I am. I’m fucking dying to see that show. And I’d love to see it with you. But I can’t go.”

“What am I supposed to tell my family? They’re all expecting you.”

“I don’t know,” he sighs. “Tell them the truth? I’m fine with them knowing. Or make something up if you want. I don’t care either way. It’s up to you. Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“I don’t get it, Louis,” Nick says with frustration. “I thought you hated it here?”

“Things changed,” Louis replies simply.

Nick looks confused. “Do you think you’re an addict now or something?”

Louis laughs. He can’t help it.
“I don’t think I’m an addict, babe. I know I’m an addict,” Louis says fervently. “That meeting? The one you thought was bullshit? It made me realize that. I mean...fuck, Nick, you were at the hospital! I was in a coma for six days, babe. Six days. Do you have any idea how fucked up that is?”

“It was just an accident...”

“Yeah, it was. An accident where I almost died. God...you saw all those pills my mother had! You said yourself that I had gotten out of control. How can you not see that I have a serious problem?”

“But...you’re not on the pills now. You’ve got it under control. You’re fine!”

“I’m not though.” Louis takes Nick’s face in both of his hands. His thumbs brush over Nick’s cheekbones as he looks straight into his eyes. “Babe, I’m not fine. It’s not just about the drugs or the drinking. It’s about me and….how I deal with shit. I need help. I’m getting it here. I’ve got to learn how to not let something like that happen ever again. And it’s more than just that. I’ve been feeling so lost and...I just...I’m feeling more like myself than I have in a long time. And that feels good, Nick. Just...so good. But I’m not there yet. I still have a lot of work to do, so I’m not leaving until I’m good and ready.”

“And when will that be?” Nick asks, settling his hands on Louis’ hips. “You were supposed to be here a month, Louis. A month. It’s been almost two.”

“I don’t know,” Louis says honestly. “I can’t put a time limit on it.”

“But I miss you,” Nick sighs with a hint of a whine.

Louis presses a gentle kiss to his lips. “I miss you too. I just need to do this right now. It will be good for us too, I promise. I’ll be a much better person to be around. I want to be better for you...fuck, I want to be better for me. Please...I’m just asking you to give me this time. Can you do that?”

“How much more time do you need? You’re missing so much, Louis. We had so many things planned and you’re missing all of them. Like...what am I supposed to do now? Do you expect me to just sit around and put my life on hold to wait for you to figure out your shit?”

Louis pulls away from him, annoyed.

“Nick, I told you I was sorry about New York. I assumed that when I decided to stay here that you would know our plans would be off.”

“A phone call to let me know would have been nice,” Nick says sullenly. “You know I found out you decided to stay from your mom? What the hell, Louis?”

“I fucked up,” Louis confesses. “I’m sorry. You’re right, I should have talked to you first. I just...that meeting was a wake-up call, you know? So I just put my head down and got to work. I thought I was doing the right thing by keeping to myself and staying focused on what I needed to do without any sort of distraction.”

“Is that what I am to you? A distraction? Thanks a lot,” Nick snaps, hurt evident in his voice.

“No! Jesus, that’s not what I meant! I just meant that I need to concentrate on me! Just me!”

“I don’t understand how you can be so selfish, Louis!”
“I’m being selfish?!” Louis cries shrilly. “I’m the one being selfish?! Yeah, okay. Sure.”

“You don’t have any consideration–”

“I think I have the right to be a little selfish right now! This is my fucking life we’re talking about here, Nick!”

“But Louis, I need–”

“This isn’t about what you need right now!” Louis shouts. “I can’t have this be about what I’m not doing for you and how I’m letting you down, Nick. I don’t need that shit from you! What I need is your fucking support.”

“How am I supposed to know that when you haven’t spoken to me in almost three weeks?” Nick fires back.

“I haven’t spoken to anyone, Nick! It’s not just you! Christ, I haven’t even talked to Harry!”

“Well good to know I’m on the same level of importance as Boy Scout. For once,” Nick spits.

“Don’t start,” Louis warns, eyes narrowing. “Don’t you dare fucking start on him. It's not a contest. This isn’t about Harry, this is about us,” he spews, poking a finger in the center of Nick’s chest. “This is about you not understanding what I need right now!”

“I can’t read your fucking mind, Louis,” Nick bites. “I feel like you have all these expectations of me that you’re not telling me about and you’re setting me up to fail here! I can't win with you!”

“It’s not a matter of winning!”

“Then what is it? I don't know what you want from me!”

“I want your support!” Louis roars. Nick’s eyes widen at his outburst. Louis pauses, taking a deep breath to collect himself. “I need your support. I'm asking for it. Right now. I can’t do this without knowing that the people I love are behind me one hundred percent.”

“If that’s what you need, then come home,” Nick pleads. “Just come home, Louis. I don’t know how to support you here, but we can figure things out together at home.”

“Why aren’t you listening to me? I’m trying to tell you what’s going on with me and you’re making it about what you want! I’m trying to share what I’m going through! I’m fucking telling you why I need to be here. I’m not ready to go home. I can’t function there yet! I don’t know how!”

“I just...I just don’t understand what you’re getting here that you can’t get at home with me. Like...come on...” He gestures dismissively towards Niall’s painting. “You can fingerpaint anywhere.”


Nick looks at him with a shocked expression. “What?”

“You heard me,” Louis says evenly. He feels angry tears burning his eyes. “I need you to go.”

“Babe–”

“I mean it, Nick,” Louis says, furiously wiping a tear away. “Please...just go. Before I say anything
I regret.”

They stand in silence. Nick has his hands on his hips and is shuffling his feet awkwardly, as if he’s
debating whether he should actually leave or not.

“I’m sorry, Louis,” he says finally. “This is...really hard, you know?”


“I just...I didn’t expect this. I don’t know if I’m cut out for it? It’s a lot. I just want us to go back to
normal.”

“Well, I’m sorry it’s so hard,” Louis replies sharply. “For you.”

Nick steps toward him, his outstretched hand hovering tentatively before finally resting on his
shoulder. He leans down and brushes his lips across Louis’ cheek.

“I love you,” he murmurs into his ear.

Louis nods, his chin trembling. He squeezes Nick’s hand quickly and then lets go. “Yeah, me too.”
He takes a shaky breath and crosses his arms across his chest. Nick presses another kiss to the
corner of his mouth and heads towards the door.

“Call me when you get there so I know you made it okay?” Louis calls after him. “Please? You
have the number, right?”


“Happy Thanksgiving,” Louis says quietly.

“Same to you,” Nick says. He offers him a sad smile and goes, the door slipping shut behind him.

Louis exhales a breath he didn’t realize he was holding, tears streaming down his face. Hands
shaking, he fishes his pack of cigarettes and lighter out of his pocket. He’s trying to cut down. He
really is.

But this is merited, goddammit.

He goes to the window and cracks it open. He lights the cigarette and takes a deep pull, feeling the
smoke fill his lungs. He exhales and feels a sense of calm start to wash over him. He takes another
drag.

In and out. Just breathe.

He sniffs and wipes the tears from his face with his other hand, drying it off on his sweatpants.

A crash comes from the supply closet.

Fuck. He’d completely forgotten that Zayn and Niall were in there.

“You guys can come out now,” he calls.

Zayn and Niall emerge, both looking extremely guilty. Niall doesn’t even crack the obvious
“coming out of the closet” joke that Louis expects him to.

“You two really fucking suck, you know that right,” Louis says, but there’s no anger in it.
“I’m sorry, Louis,” Niall says gently. “I just...I had no idea that conversation would go that way. I thought you guys were just gonna make out or something. Not...that. We wouldn’t have stayed otherwise. Promise.” He grabs Louis’ hand, squeezing it tightly. “We do fucking suck.”

Louis sighs and takes another drag of his cigarette. “It’s okay,” he says, blowing the smoke out the window. “I would have told you about it anyway.”

Zayn’s arm snakes around his waist as he gently tugs Louis against his chest. He hooks his chin over Louis’ shoulder. “You okay, Lou?”

He holds his cigarette up to Zayn’s lips and Zayn takes a drag.

“Not really,” Louis replies. “I just...wasn’t expecting that today, you know? Fuck.”

“He’s gorgeous but he’s a bit of a dick isn’t he?” Niall says frankly.

“He means well,” Louis asserts. “He does. He just...he doesn’t always know how to show it.”

“You did lay a lot on him,” Zayn says delicately. “It couldn’t have been easy for him, you know? Three weeks of radio silence, Lou.”

“Yeah, I know. I really fucked up,” Louis says helplessly. “I’m still learning. I’m not always gonna do this right. I just didn’t realize…”

“But at the same time,” Zayn continues. “You asked for his support just now. And he...well he didn’t seem very open to it or willing to understand what you need. Listen, I don’t want to judge – I mean it’s not my relationship. I don’t know what’s really between you. Only you and Nick know that, Louis. But just...as an observer...it worries me. For you and your recovery.”

Louis squeezes Zayn’s arm in response and then steps out of his embrace, handing him the rest of the cigarette.

“Look, I’m not going to defend him to you guys. I don’t have the energy for it right now. You just have to trust me when I say things are fine. You don’t know him. I do. Things are fine. We’re fine. I can handle it. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

Louis ignores the growing feeling in the pit of his stomach as Niall and Zayn share a look.

“Yes, I know I just said ‘fine’ a million times. I know.”

“Louis–” Niall starts.

“I’m tired,” Louis interrupts. “I’m going to go take a nap before group. I’ll see you guys later, okay?”

He claps Niall on the shoulder, looking into his concerned blue eyes.

“I’m fine, Niall. I promise.”

Keep telling yourself that.
Why am I always so fucking early?

Harry stands in the doorway of the Cedar Springs common room, fidgeting nervously. The room is spacious, much bigger than he thought it would be. There’s a large television in the corner with a couch and loveseat clustered around it; the couches are occupied with a small group of people watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. The two sets of tables and chairs are occupied as well; one couple playing an intense looking game of chess at one, while three people sit at the other clutching cups of coffee.

*Oooh. Coffee. It’s probably terrible but caffeine is caffeine.*

Harry spots the coffee station in between the two tables. Casting his eyes around the rest of the room, he sees an empty couch with a coffee table that he decides to claim for Louis and himself. But first, he places his messenger bag on the floor and shrugs off his coat, hanging it on one of the hooks by the door. Sighing, he smooths his hands down his soft red plaid flannel button down, unbuttoning and then re-buttoning the second button from the top. He’d changed his shirt three times that morning, wanting to look his best but not wanting to look like he was trying too hard. He ruffles his hair, tucking a curl behind his ear and scrunching up the ends as he picks his bag up and slings it on his shoulder.

He places his bag on the empty couch and then makes his way to the coffee. He sighs as he surveys it, wrinkling his nose in disdain. Styrofoam cups. Little containers of creamer. Plastic stirrers. Assorted packets of artificial sweeteners and sugar.

*This coffee station is my actual nightmare.*

He grabs one of the cups and fills it from the urn, surprised at the fact that the coffee appears to be freshly brewed as he watches the steam rise from the cup. He fishes through the bowl of creamers, plucking a plain one from the assortment and pouring it into the coffee. He adds a packet of real sugar and stirs it in. He makes his way back to the couch, holding the cup gingerly.

No sign of Louis yet.

*Why would there be? I’m twenty minutes early.*

Harry places the cup on the table, waiting for it to cool just a bit. He picks at the hole in the knee of his black skinny jeans, carefully pulling out a stray thread.

*It’s just Louis, calm the fuck down. Even if it has been a month since you’ve talked to him. Even if the last time you saw each other you ripped up pictures of the two of you and told him you didn’t know him. Even if he didn’t call you himself to come today, it’s still just Louis. It’s fine, it’s fine, it’s fine.*

He exhales a big breath and reaches for the coffee. He blows on it gently.

*Except what if it’s not fine? Is he angry with me? Why hasn’t he talked to me? Is he okay? What’s going on?*

He takes a sip of the coffee, his face scrunching up in disgust.

“ Fucking awful, isn’t it?”
A blond boy plops down on the couch next to him, just a smidge too close for comfort.

“Hi,” the boy says, his blue eyes twinkling.

“Um...hi,” Harry says with confusion.

“The coffee’s awful, right?” he asks again.

“Completely,” Harry replies. He looks pointedly toward the door, hoping the boy will take a hint. He doesn’t.

“Waiting for someone?” the boy asks.

“Yep,” Harry says, taking another sip of coffee.

He still doesn’t get the hint. Harry can feel him staring. He turns to look at him, raising an eyebrow. The boy just smiles back at him.

“Look, I don’t mean to be rude but–

“Does he know you’re here, Harry?” he asks.

“I’m early,” Harry replies. “Story of my life, really...wait...how do you know my name?”

The boy grins. “I’m psychic. Don’t tell anyone.” He closes his eyes and touches his temple. “Let me do a reading for you. Your name’s Harry Edward Styles. Your birthday is February 1st, but you kind of wish it was on the second because of Groundhog Day. You want to be a pediatrician. You drive a...let me see if I can see it...oh yes, you drive a blue Corolla named Olivia.” He touches Harry’s left wrist. “You broke this arm when you were seven...”

“Am I being punked?” Harry asks, looking around the room bewildered.

“And your best friend is Louis Tomlinson, who just happens to be one of my best friends now too. Imagine that!”

The boy cackles like a hyena as Harry relaxes into the couch cushions.

“I’m sorry, buddy,” he says, smiling brightly. “You just looked so tense sitting here all by yourself, I had to come and mess with you a little.” He extends his hand. “I’m Niall, by the way.”

Harry takes his hand, shaking it firmly. “Harry,” he says. “But you knew that already, apparently. How did you...how did you recognize me?”

“Your pictures, of course! Louis has your pictures up on his dresser. I must say, Harry, I don’t know how you went to prom with Louis in that ridiculous blue get-up.”

Harry’s heart flutters.

He kept the pictures. That...that’s...wow, okay.

“I thought he looked beautiful,” Harry says softly, a blush tingeing his cheeks.

Niall smiles at him knowingly.

“Now, Harry,” Niall says, clapping his hands together. “I insist that you tell me all about this
sledding accident that the two of you had.”

“Oh,” Harry says, picking at his jeans again. “I...I’m sure Louis told you all about that.”

“He did,” Niall chirps. “But I want to hear your version.” He nudges Harry with his shoulder. “C’mon. It’ll take your mind off whatever it is you’re torturing yourself about.”

“It’s that obvious, huh?”

“Pretty sure they can see it from space,” Niall says with a grin. “Now, come on. Tell your new friend Niall a story.”

“It was Louis’ fault,” Harry says after a moment.

“He said that too!”

Niall’s enthusiasm is infectious and Harry can’t help but be endeared by it. He grins and continues.

“Okay, so we grew up right outside of Philly, so it wasn’t like we’d never seen snow before. But this blizzard dumped like a foot and a half of snow, yeah? We had two days off from school because of it. There was a park in our neighborhood that had this hill that was perfect for sledding. It was massive,” Harry says, hands gesturing to demonstrate the size. “Louis insisted on steering us and you know what it’s like to say no to Louis, right?”

Niall laughs. “You don’t.”

“Yeah, exactly. He took us off the path that all the rest of the kids were using because he thought we’d go faster. Which...we did. Until we hit a tree stump that had been buried under the snow and we went flying. I grabbed Louis around the middle to stop him from landing head first.”

“What a hero!”

“That’s me,” Harry laughs. “I hurt my arm when we landed. Lou? Not a scratch except for a big bump on his forehead from knocking heads with me. I was in so much pain, yeah? I was crying and we had no idea what was wrong, so Louis just left the sled right there and took me to his house because his mom is a nurse. She knew immediately that my arm was broken, so she drove us to the hospital. He refused to leave my side as they set my arm.”

Harry closes his eyes, his mind suddenly flooded with the memory of that hospital room and then another hospital room thirteen years later, their roles reversed.

“He...he held my hand the whole time,” Harry says, his voice thick. “He drew all over my cast...there was hardly any room for anyone else to sign it. He told everyone at school that I’d saved him from certain death.”

He turns and looks at Niall, who is smiling softly.

“It’s funny,” he says warmly. “You guys tell that story the exact same way. Almost word for word. Same hand gestures too. It’s a little freaky.”

“Years of practice, I guess,” Harry replies with a lopsided smile. He looks at his watch and then does a quick scan of the room. Louis could be here any minute.

“Is he late?” Niall asks, angling his body towards Harry. “I can go drag his ass down here if you want. He’s probably just doing his hair.”
“No, no...it’s fine. Like I said before, I’m early. I...I was a bit of a basket case this morning, if you want to know the truth. I like...I couldn’t stay in my apartment any longer, not when I knew that Louis wanted to see me. Honestly, it took everything I had to not get in the car the moment James called me on Wednesday. Which why the hell is James even calling me anyway? Why won’t Louis talk to me?”

Niall rests his chin on his palm, looking at Harry inquisitively.

“On my way here, I thought of a million things I wanted to say to him. And now my mind’s just...blank? Well...not blank. That’s not the right word.”

He runs his fingers through his hair as he tries to gather his thoughts.

“It’s more I have no idea what to say to him and I’ve never felt that way about Louis before. I don’t know what to expect from him? More than that, I don’t know what he wants from me and that scares me...I’m just...I’m not used to not knowing what he’s thinking.”

His eyes rove the room, constantly on the lookout.

“I haven’t heard from him in a month! A month! We...up until now the longest we’ve ever gone without talking to each other was while he was in detox, okay? So I’m going a little crazy here.”

He furrows his brow as he picks another thread out of the hole in his jeans.

“I just...I said some terrible things to him, Niall,” he sighs heavily. “I know it was the right thing to do. I keep telling myself that. I don’t regret it either, you know? It was probably the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do but it’s what had to be done to help him. But...sometimes I wonder if I went too far? Does he hate me?”

Niall grins at him.

“Why the hell are you smiling at me right now? I’m glad this is so amusing.”

“No...it’s not that. Sorry. It’s...you two are so alike.” Niall claps Harry on the shoulder, eyes still twinkling. “He doesn’t hate you, Harry. Far from it, I’d say.”

“I mean...what would you think if you were me? What am I supposed to think?”

“Look, I can’t speak for Louis,” Niall says solemnly. “But he has his reasons. I imagine he’s planning on sharing them with you today. Hear him out, okay?”

“Of course I will. It’s why I’m here.”

“Go easy on him,” Niall says, his eyes hardening ever so slightly. “Because his last visitor sure didn’t.”

Harry frowns.

So Nick’s been here then.

“Oh,” he says quietly.


Harry looks at his hands, picking at his nails.
“I always want to know where his head is, Niall. Even if it’s hard.”

“You want to know what I think?” Niall asks gently.

“I don’t know, do I?”

“You’re both making yourselves nuts worrying about the other because you’re…”

Harry’s sure Niall is saying something profound but he doesn’t hear it. Not a single word.

Louis just walked into the room.

Harry observes him, a soft smile on his face.

He looks...well...he looks like my Louis.

He’s gained some weight since Harry last saw him. His skinny black jeans hug his thighs and are cuffed at his delicate ankles, his feet in a battered pair of Vans. Harry smiles fondly because it is so typical of Louis to not wear socks, even in December. His gray sweater skims his torso, the slight scoop of the neck showing a hint of collarbone; it’s a little big yet somehow perfect on him, sleeves pulled down over his hands just like always. He’s got his color back and he looks well rested, the purple bags under his eyes having just about faded completely. A faint hint of stubble dusts his cheeks. His long hair looks soft and feathery, pulled back off his face with a black headband. Louis is clutching a flat square package in his sweater paws and his eyes are searching the room, clearly looking for him.

Their eyes meet at last. Harry’s heart pounds in his chest.

They stare at each other for a few seconds before Louis smiles, his eyes crinkling up at the corners. He holds his hand up in greeting and starts to make his way toward them.

“...and you haven’t listened to a single word I’ve said since he set foot in this room, which is exactly my point, Harry,” Niall finishes.

Harry flushes and tears his eyes away from Louis, looking at Niall ruefully. “Sorry.”

“No, no,” Niall says smugly. “No offense taken. At all. This is like a fucking Nicholas Sparks novel come to life.”

Harry’s flush deepens.

Could you be more obvious?

“Lou!” Niall says brightly, getting to his feet. Harry rises as well, standing slightly pigeon-toed, his hands clasped behind his back, eyes on Louis. “Does this gorgeous boy belong to you? Cause I'm keeping him if he doesn't.”

“Nope,” Louis rasps. It's the most beautiful sound Harry’s heard in a month. “He’s mine, thanks.”

Mine.

“Hey, Haz,” Louis says, smiling at him shyly.

“Hey, Lou,” Harry replies, equally bashful.

Niall stands between them grinning, his hands on his hips, his eyes darting back and forth from
Harry to Louis. Finally, Louis clears his throat and looks at Niall, his expression slightly murderous. Niall’s smile only gets brighter as Louis raises his eyebrows. Harry watches the whole exchange with interest, not quite sure what to make of it.

Finally, Niall claps his hands together. “Well, my work here is done. I’m going to go learn about the true meaning of Christmas from Linus. Nice to finally meet you, Harry.”

“Nice to meet you too. Um...thanks for coming over to talk,” Harry says. Niall beams at him and then joins the small group clustered around the television.

“So that’s Niall,” Louis says, eyes smiling, stepping closer to him. “Don’t believe a word he says.”

They stand in silence, taking each other in. Louis fidgets nervously, tugging at his headband.

“Your hair’s so long,” Harry blurts out. He reaches out and brushes his fingertips through the ends of Louis’ hair.

*Yep. As soft as it looks.*

“I’ve never seen you in a headband before.”

*Really? That’s what you’re going with?*

“My hair’s making me fucking nuts. I don’t know how you do it,” Louis replies, tugging on one of Harry’s curls. “I borrowed this headband from Zayn. I told you about him, remember? My roommate? He’s a hairdresser, he has tons of them.”

“A hairdresser, you say,” Harry says with a smile. He taps his lips as he hums, pretending to be deep in thought. “And you need a haircut. Hmmmmm...”

Louis rolls his eyes.

“I wonder...and I don’t know, I could be reaching here...but maybe...just maybe Zayn could help you out with that?”

“Such logic, Harold. What would I do without you?”

They laugh softly.

“You...you look good, Lou,” Harry says, brushing his fingers down Louis’ cheek. “Really good.”

“What are you saying,” Louis says dramatically, his hand on his chest. “That I looked bad before? Do you mean to tell me that the speed diet didn’t suit me?”

Harry freezes, pulled out of the moment. He feels the color drain from his face as he takes a step away from Louis.

*Oh right. That’s why we’re here.*

Louis’ face falls.

“Shit,” he says quietly. “Shit, Harry, I’m sorry.” Louis scuffs his shoe, looking down at the floor. “James says I do this, yeah? Using humor as a coping mechanism when I’m uncomfortable.”

“It’s fine, I—”
“No, Harry,” Louis says gently, closing the distance between them. He rests his hand on Harry’s bicep, squeezing once gently before letting go. “It’s not fine. It was the wrong thing to say to you and I’m sorry. Please forgive me.”

“You’re,” Harry gulps. “You’re uncomfortable around me?”

“No!” Louis exclaims, eyes widening. “Shit, I’m doing this all wrong. It’s just...I’m...shit, Harry, I’m just really fucking nervous right now.”

Harry offers him a tiny smile. “I’m really fucking nervous too. But we...we can be nervous together, yeah?”

Louis blows a big breath. “Yeah. Yeah, okay. Can we start over?”

Harry nods.

Louis places the square package he’s been holding on the coffee table and then plops down on the center cushion of the couch. He pats the spot next to him, looking up at Harry. Harry smiles and settles in, tucking a leg underneath him and leaning his back against the armrest so he can see Louis properly. Louis mirrors his posture, slinging his arm along the back of the couch.

Harry waits patiently, content to just be Louis’ presence again, but Louis doesn’t start talking. Instead, he fidgets, avoiding Harry’s gaze. He picks at the couch cushion and then moves to his sweater, plucking invisible pieces of lint from the soft wool. Louis moves to sweep his hair off his forehead, which has always been a nervous tic of his, making a disgruntled face when his fingers brush the headband. Harry places a hand on his knee and Louis stills immediately.

“Lou.”

“Sorry,” Louis breathes, finally meeting his eyes. “Why is this so fucking weird?”

“It’s just me, you know,” Harry says, tracing gentle circles on Louis’ knee, soothing his nerves. Both of their nerves, actually.

“I don’t know where to start,” Louis says honestly.

“Just...talk to me.”

Louis pauses and Harry can see the uncertainty in his blue eyes, so he taps gently on his knee with his thumb. Louis takes a deep breath.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I haven’t called,” Louis exhales in a rush. “And don’t say you haven’t ’cause I know when you’re lying, Harry. You have. And it was really shitty of me. I had my reasons, I swear I wasn’t just being an asshole.”

“Okay.”

“It was just...what you did...what you said...one of the biggest things that stuck with me was how my apologies didn’t mean anything to you anymore.”

Harry’s heart clenches.

“And I...I couldn’t just say I was sorry again. Not to you. So I...I just got to work and threw myself in the program here. I put my blinders on. I ignored everything and everyone that was not here. I know it was selfish of me, but it was something I had to do, Haz, you have to believe me–”
“It wasn’t selfish,” Harry interjects.

“And then it hit the point where I felt like I was really making some progress,” Louis barrels on.
“And I just...I felt like I couldn’t just call you? It had been too long and I didn’t know how to reach out to you. I also knew that I would just end up spilling my guts to you over the phone and you deserve so much more than that, Harry. I owe you more than that. That’s why I had James call you first. You deserve me looking you in the eye and telling you that I’m getting better and that I’m so grateful for you and for what you did. You have to know that you were on my mind every single fucking day, Hazza. Every single goddamn day. I–”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me, Lou,” Harry says fervently. “I mean, I’m not going to lie. This past month...not hearing from you...especially after everything I said...it really fucking sucked. I missed you so much and I was just...I was so worried about you. But I understand why it had to be this way. Even if I hated it.”

“You do?”

“Well...yeah,” Harry shrugs with a small smile. “It’s not about me, right? It’s about you.”

“Thank you for understanding. Unlike Ni–”

Louis stops, his shoulders slumping slightly as he looks down. After a few seconds, he looks back up and his eyes are sad. Harry grimaces.

“Just...not everyone gets it,” Louis continues. “So thank you. It means a lot.”

_Fucking Nick Grimshaw._

The air around them feels heavy and Harry can’t stand to see Louis looking so downtrodden, so he leans into him conspiratorially.

“It was Liam, wasn’t it?”

Louis barks a surprised laugh.

“Yeah, you know Liam. So unreasonable. Always makes everything about him.”


Harry withdraws his hand from Louis’ knee and props his elbow up on the back of the couch.

“You kept the pictures,” Harry says, resting his head against his palm.

“What?”

“Niall said he knew me from your pictures. You kept them. Even after–”

“Of course I kept the pictures, Haz,” Louis says softly. “Of course I did. I could never throw them away. Those memories are fucking precious. So I taped them back together and put them on my mirror as a reminder.”

“What?”

“Of the person I used to be,” Louis says simply. “You were right, you know. I look at those pictures and I look at my life lately and it’s two different people. I don’t know when I stopped being that guy in the pictures, Haz. I haven’t...I haven’t been him for a while. And I
don’t...recognize this version of myself.”

“I miss him,” Harry says gently, nudging Louis’ ankle with the toe of his boot. “The Louis in the pictures. He’s the best person I know.”

“I miss him too,” Louis sighs, resting his head on the cushion, next to Harry’s elbow. “He was happy.”

Harry toys with the ends of Louis’ hair. “And you’re not?”

“No,” Louis replies, leaning into his touch. “I don’t think I’ve been happy for a long time. I just didn’t realize it.”

“And how do you feel now?”

“I’m happy right now, sitting here with you.” Louis reaches out and takes Harry’s other hand, lacing their fingers together. He burrows deeper into the couch, eyes trained on their hands.

Harry looks up at the ceiling and sighs, blinking back tears.

This is so much.

“Every day I feel a little bit better,” Louis continues quietly. “I want to be that person again, Harry. The one in the pictures. I’m not there yet...but I will be.”

Harry squeezes his hand. “That’s great, Lou. I’m really glad.”

They sit in comfortable silence. Harry gently strokes Louis’ hair while Louis rests his other hand over their linked ones.

“That’s not the only reason I wanted to see you,” Louis says eventually.

“Oh?”

Louis releases his hand and sits up.

“I realized...in the midst of all the work that I’ve been doing, I realized something. I never thanked you, Harry. For saving my life. Literally.”

Harry inhales sharply.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.

He sits forward, his face in his hands, breathing deeply. He’s trembling. He feels Louis’ hand on his back.

“Haz?” he asks tentatively.

The dam breaks and Harry bursts into tears. He didn’t realize how much he needed to hear that until that very moment. He flings himself at Louis, wrapping his arms around him and burying his face into his chest as he cries. Louis holds him close, one hand tangling in his hair, while the other runs up and down Harry’s back soothingly.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” Louis murmurs into his hair. Harry feels him kiss the top of his head, which really just makes him cry harder, all the anguish and the fear and the frustration of the past two months finally coming undone. “Forgive me, Hazza, please forgive me, I’m sorry, I’m
so sorry.”

“Of course I forgive you,” Harry sobs.

Harry feels overwhelmed, like his chest is about to explode, so he shifts to lay on his side, tucking his knees up with him. He rests his head over Louis’ heart and keeps his arms looped around his waist, holding him tightly. It’s a little awkward; his legs are too long for the space between Louis and the armrest, even with him scooting over to accommodate Harry’s change in position. His knees are hanging off the edge and his shoulder is at a strange angle but still he feels like this is the most comfortable he’s been in a month. He breathes Louis in, trying to calm himself. He smells clean, like soap and an unfamiliar laundry detergent. But he still smells like Louis.

“Of course I fucking forgive you, Louis. Jesus Christ. Warn a guy before you spring something like that on him.”

Louis’ chest shakes as he chuckles lightly.

“Sorry.”

Harry has no idea how long they sit there, Louis combing his fingers through Harry’s hair, gently smoothing out any tangles he comes across. Harry sniffles and nuzzles into him, his eyes sliding shut.

“Don’t you go to sleep on me, Styles,” Louis warns.

“M’not,” he replies languidly.

“Uh huh, I’ve heard that before,” Louis says, tugging a curl. “Up.”

Harry obeys, unfolding his legs and sitting up. He peers at Louis, smiling. His blue eyes are shiny, his long eyelashes in clumps from his tears. Louis thumbs a tear from Harry’s cheek and then presses it into his dimple, smiling back at him fondly.

“Jesus, I’m a mess,” Harry says. He turns away from Louis, reaching toward a box of tissues on the coffee table. He blows his nose noisily as his eyes fall on the package that Louis came in with.

“What’s that?”

“Oh!” Louis exclaims. He grins at Harry. “That’s for you.”

“For me? Seriously?”

Louis’ eyes are sparkling. “Open it.”

Harry grabs the edge of the package, sliding it towards him. It’s wrapped in pages of *Us Weekly*, Brad and Angelina frowning up at him. Harry cocks an eyebrow at Louis. He shrugs, still grinning.

“I had to be creative.”

Harry eagerly tears the wrapping, revealing his gift. Louis watches him, biting back a smirk.

*Oh my God?*

Harry gasps as the paper falls away, revealing a square canvas, painstakingly handpainted as a replica of a Scrabble board. There are Scrabble tiles glued in the middle of the painting, laying over the spaces that would make a triple word score. V-I-B-E-Y. Two spaces underneath the word,
Louis has glued an “L” tile and painted a little smiley face with Xs for eyes. Harry gently traces his fingers over the tiles and looks up at Louis, his eyes wide.

“Do you like it?” Louis asks, eyes glinting with mischief.

*Do I like it? Christ.*

“You are...such a shit,” Harry laughs.

Louis throws his head back and laughs delightedly, his eyes crinkling shut completely. It’s like the sun has suddenly come out from behind the clouds and all Harry wants to do is bask in its warmth.

*Oh there you are, Louis.*

“Loooooooooou,” Harry whines through his laughter. “You ruined the whole set!”

“Oh, it was worth it,” Louis wheezes. “Just to see your face. Besides...it’s no fun playing with anyone other than you.”

Harry’s smiling so hard that his cheeks are starting to hurt.

“I can’t believe you did this,” he says with awe. “You painted this all yourself?”

“That is many hours worth of art therapy right there, Harold. You better treasure that forever.”

*The thing is I will.*


He reaches down and pulls his messenger bag towards him from where it had been resting against the table. He gingerly slides the painting into the sleeve that normally holds his laptop. He also grabs the tupperware that’s been sitting in the bag.

“I guess I should give you these then,” Harry drawls with a smirk as he holds the container out to Louis.

Louis’ eyes go comically wide.

“Are those,” he cries eagerly, snatching the container from Harry. He cracks it open and Harry can smell the rich chocolate immediately. “Oh my *God,* they are!”

Louis plucks one of the chocolate chip cookies from the container and takes a giant bite. He rolls his eyes, moaning obscenely.

“I love you so much,” he says, his mouth full. He swallows and takes another giant bite. “Fuck, these are so good. You’re the best, Hazza.”

Harry looks at him with bemused affection as Louis devours the cookie. “Are they not feeding you here?”

“Not my favorite cookies in the whole world, no,” Louis says with a hum of appreciation before popping the last bite in his mouth. He grins at Harry, grabbing another cookie. He has a glob of chocolate on the corner of his mouth.

“Easy there, Tiger,” Harry says. “You’ve got–”
Without even thinking, Harry gently wipes the chocolate from Louis’ mouth with his thumb and then puts it to his own mouth, sucking the chocolate off, keeping his eyes on Louis the whole time. Louis’ eyes go wide, his jaw dropping ever so slightly. Harry stills, his hand dropping to his lap.

_Oh shit, I crossed the line. I went too far. Did I really just suck that chocolate off my thumb while looking at him? Jesus, what was I thinking? I wasn’t thinking, that’s the problem. I’m such an idiot...I didn’t even..._

Louis gulps, his gaze darting between Harry’s mouth and his eyes. His cheeks have gone red.

“Th-thanks,” he says breathily, tripping over the word.

_Wait a second. Did he...did he like that? Oh my God, he liked it. Holy shit._

Harry feels his heart race.

“You’re welcome,” Harry replies cautiously.

_No. I’m reading too much into this. Right? I am. Reading too much. Into this. It’s nothing._

They stare at each other, the air around them rife with tension.

_Say something, Lou. Anything. Come on._

Harry can normally read Louis so easily but right now he’s finding it impossible to do so. Harry has no clue what he’s thinking. He studies him intently and feels like he can actually see the wheels turning in Louis’ eyes as he looks at him agape.

_What aren’t you telling me? What are you holding back?_

Suddenly, Louis shakes himself out of his trance and the moment is broken. Harry lets out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. The whole exchange was probably less than a minute but to Harry, it felt like an eternity.

“Enough about me then,” Louis says brightly, setting the cookies aside. “Tell me about you. I want to know everything that’s new and exciting in the life of Harry Styles.”

Harry’s mind races, trying to catch up with Louis’ change of topic. He knows he had something to tell Louis today.

_What the fuck was it?_

He gasps as he remembers, his hand going to his hair. “Oh my God! I can’t believe I forgot to tell you.”

“What?”

“The summer internship! In Boston!”

A huge smile starts to creep across Louis’ face. “...Yeah?”

“I fucking got it, Lou! I got it!”

Louis lets out a whoop and then suddenly he’s in Harry’s lap, straddling him as he tackle hugs him. Harry flails about a bit, wondering where the fuck he should put his hands.
He settles his hands in the dip of Louis’ waist.

“Harry!” Louis cries, slapping his chest and then sitting back on his knees, arms draped over Harry’s shoulders. “Oh my God, Harry, congratulations! What did I fucking tell you? I told you you would get it! I told you.”

Harry beams at him. “You did. You did tell me.”

“I can’t believe it! The whole summer in Boston! Can I come visit? You don’t have a choice.”

“You don’t have to ask.”


“He was a brain surgeon, Lou.”

“McSteamy then.”

“Nope. Plastics.”

“Who’s the fucking pediatrician, Harry?”

“Alex Karev. Or George Clooney on ER,” Harry smirks.

“Ah, yes,” Louis sighs dreamily. “Doug Ross. Just don’t cut your hair in that Caesar style, okay? It would be such a crime to lose these curls. I forbid it.”

He tucks a lock of hair behind Harry’s ear and then gently pulls it, watching the curl spring back into place. Harry shivers, the feeling of being completely surrounded by Louis affecting him. He squeezes his waist lightly as Louis smiles back at him sweetly.

“Yo, Bender!” Niall shouts from the TV area. “Enough already, this is a family place!”

Louis flips him off, never taking his eyes off Harry. Niall cackles and turns back to the television, where Charlie Brown has given way to How the Grinch Stole Christmas.

Louis leans his forehead against Harry’s.

“I’m so fucking proud of you, Haz,” he whispers before climbing off of him.

“Thanks,” he replies, blushing furiously. “Um...Bender?”

Louis laughs. “Long story. Speaking of which...how long can you stay?”

“I’m hanging out with Liam later tonight. Oh! He gave me your magazines!”

Harry reaches into his bag and pulls out a small stack of glossy gossip magazines. He passes them to Louis, who claps with delight.

“God bless Liam.”

“Anyway, I don’t have anything until then,” Harry says. “I cleared the day for you.”

“James allows visitors to join us for lunch on Saturdays,” Louis says shyly. “If they want. I...I’ve never had a visitor. Would you...would you stay? You’ll get to meet everyone. You need to meet
Zayn!

Harry smiles softly. “I’d love to.”

Louis beams, squeezing his hand.

“Neil!” Louis shouts.

Niall looks back at them. “Yes, pet?”

“I’m starving. Harry’s staying for lunch. Let’s go find Zayn and eat.”

Niall sounds a yelp of approval.

Louis rises, grabbing his cookies and shoving the container between the stack of magazines. “I’ve got to hide these,” he explains. “He’ll try to eat them all and they’re mine.”

Harry laughs and reaches for his bag. Louis grabs his hand and pulls him to his feet.

“So the Bender thing,” Louis starts.

“Excuse me, Lewis, are you telling fair Harry our origin story without me?” Niall gasps as he joins them. “You know I tell it better.”

Louis rolls his eyes, tugging Harry towards the door. “Fine. Go ahead. I’ve got to take these up to my room anyway,” he says, gesturing to the magazines.

Niall scoffs.

“Harry, I can’t believe you brought him more of that shit.”

“Hey, I’m just the messenger,” Harry replies with a grin as he grabs his coat. “Besides, he loves them.”

“And I’m not even sorry about it,” Louis says primly. “Right. I’ll take these to my room and grab Zayn. He’s probably reading. You okay with Niall, Haz?”

“Yup,” Harry says happily. “We’re pals.”

“So I walk in for group and there’s this grumpy pixie sitting on my favorite pillow smoking a cigarette…”

“Niall!” Louis squawks as he opens the door. “I’m not a pixie, you leprechaun!”

Harry snickers as Niall elbows him.

“You are though,” Harry teases.

“Oh my God, I hate you both.”

“Like I said,” Niall continues seriously. “There was this grumpy pixie sitting on my pillow…”
“Good session, everyone,” James says later that evening. “Let’s get the room cleaned up and then you’re all free for the night.”

Louis grabs several pillows, stacking them in a small pile before taking them all to the storage bin in the corner. He tosses them in the bin and turns to Zayn, who is adding his own small stack of pillows to the pile.

“Hey Zayn?” Louis asks, rocking back on his heels.

“Yeah?”

“Can you cut my hair?”

Zayn’s eyes light up.

“You want me to cut your hair?”

“Well, yeah,” Louis says, smiling brightly. “It’s what you do, isn’t it?” Louis shuffles his feet, his face falling slightly. “But you probably can’t right? You don’t have any of your scissors here.”

“Um,” Zayn says, ruffling his lavender hair. “I do, actually. Well...James does. I had my travel kit in my bag when I checked in. Force of habit, you know? So James—”

“James!” Louis shouts.

James looks up from his conversation with Niall.

“No need to shout, Louis,” James says with a smile. “I’m right here.”

Louis grabs Zayn by the hand and drags him over to James.

“Can we have Zayn’s scissors?” He bounces up and down on the balls of his feet. “I want Zayn to cut my hair.”

“Please?” Zayn asks. “We’ll give them right back, I promise.”

“We promise,” Louis implores. He tugs at his headband and ruffles the ends of his hair. “Look at me, James, my hair is a disaster.”

“It really is,” Zayn adds. “In my professional opinion.”

“His professional opinion!”

“You can trust us,” Zayn says. “It’ll take an hour. Tops.”

“Cutting hair is Zayn’s life purpose,” Louis wheedles. “He hasn’t done it in so long. It will be therapeutic for him. Right, Zayn?”

“Right.”

Niall snorts with amusement.

“I mean, you’re a therapist, James. You get it, don’t you? He needs this. I need it. It’s my
makeover moment!"

James bites back a grin, his eyes sparkling with mirth.

“Are you two quite finished?”

“I don’t know,” Louis says, batting his eyelashes. “Are you going to give us the scissors?”

James laughs.

“You have an hour,” James says. “Then I’m sending Perrie to get them, got it?” He claps Zayn on
the shoulder. “Let’s go get your scissors.”

Zayn and Louis whoop with delight.

“I’ll see you back at the room,” he calls as he heads out with James.

“Spa night, Neil?”

“Fuck yes,” Niall replies. “What kind of question is that?”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s go.” Louis laughs.

“Let’s stop by my room first,” Niall says as they make their way down the hall. “I want to grab my
guitar.”

“Of course,” Louis says. “Wouldn’t be spa night without you serenading us.”

They climb the stairs in companionable silence.

“So,” Niall says innocently after a minute. “What prompted this sudden desire to cut your hair?”

Louis feels his face heat up. “You know I’ve been bitching about my hair for ages,” he says,
noticing his voice is pitched slightly higher than normal. “That’s all.”

Niall smirks. “Uh huh.”

“Get your fucking guitar, asshole,” Louis says affectionately.

Niall cackles as he pushes open his door. The room is small and impeccably neat, yet cozy, Niall
having made it as homey as one possibly could with multiple movie posters on the walls, lots of
pillows, and a fluffy blanket. Niall grabs his guitar case from where it sits in the corner opposite his
bed.

“You still haven’t told me how you managed to get the only single room on the floor,” Louis says,
leaning against the doorframe.

“Because James knew I’d lose my shit if I ended up with someone as messy as you,” Niall
deadpans as he closes the door. “It would be a danger to my mental health.”

“Hey! I’m not that messy!” Louis cries, opening his door.

Niall smirks as he enters the room. Zayn’s half is tidy, while Louis’ half is a bit more chaotic, with
clothes and magazines strewn everywhere. There are a few coffee cups swiped from the dining
room on his dresser and half eaten bags of chips on the nightstand. Louis rifles through the pile of
clothes on his desk chair, searching for a t-shirt to change into.
“Sure you’re not,” Niall says, crinkling his nose. “Anyway, the single room was all that was available when I checked in. The privacy is nice and all but sometimes I wish I had a roommate. For the cuddles and late night talks.”

“You know that’s not actually how it works, right?” Louis says, finally finding the shirt he was looking for.

“Don’t ruin my fantasy, Lewis. I know you and Zayn do both of those things. Don’t lie to me.”

“Come to think of it, we do.”

“See what I’m missing out on?” Niall pouts.

“Aw, Neil, you know I’ll cuddle you whenever you want.”

“I know,” Niall replies. “That’s why I forgive the fact that you’re a slob.”

Louis pulls off his sweater and throws it at Niall, hitting him in the face. He laughs and tosses it back. Louis slings it over his desk chair before pulling on his t-shirt as Niall sits on Louis’ bed and shoves aside his new pile of magazines. They fan out, revealing the container of cookies. Louis cringes as Niall’s eyes light up.

“Are those...homemade chocolate chip cookies?”

“They are,” Louis says simply.

“Can I have one?”

“Nope.”

“Please?” Niall cracks open the lid. “Oh, holy Jesus, they smell good. C’mon, you have like two dozen here, Bender.”

“Yeah and they’re gonna last me until I get out of here,” Louis says stubbornly, crossing his arms across his chest.

“You’re here for another month,” Niall counters. “They’ll go stale if you ration ’em out that long. It’s tupperware, not magic. Besides, how many have you eaten already? Be honest.”

“That’s none of your business.” Louis says weakly.

As if he can sense Louis’ resolve cracking, Niall ratchets the puppy look up to eleven, batting his blue eyes dramatically.

“C’mon, Lou. Coooooooooookies.”

“Harry made them for me,” Louis grits out.

“Harry would want you to share,” Niall volleys back. “Especially with his new friend Niall.”

“One. You can have one.”

Niall squeals with delight and then plucks a large one from the container. He passes the box over to Louis, who helps himself to a cookie as well.

“Oh my God,” Niall moans after he takes a bite. “These are the best cookies I’ve ever had in my
Louis grins as he takes a bite. “No one makes chocolate chip cookies like Hazza. I don’t know what the fuck he does to them to make them so good.”

“Gorgeous, smart, so fucking nice, and he bakes like this? Christ, Louis, if you don’t marry him, I will.”

“Is that a threat?” Louis says, cocking his hip.

“Goddamn right it is,” Niall grins. “These are marriage worthy and you know it.”

Louis smiles as he breaks off a piece of his cookie, the molten chocolate oozing over his fingers. He sucks it off, the mental image of Harry doing the exact same thing coming to mind. The gesture had been completely innocent but at the same time, Louis had been shocked by how overwhelmingly sexy he had found it. It had literally taken his breath away. He feels his cheeks start to heat at the memory.

“You’re blushing, Bender,” Niall says sweetly.

“No, I–”

Zayn appears in the doorway, clutching a small black case.

“Zayn!” Niall cries. “Have you had one of these cookies?”

Louis gives Niall a death glare.

“Didn’t realize Louis was sharing,” Zayn says, grinning slyly.

“I wasn’t,” Louis pouts. “Neil, there better still be cookies left by the time we’re done with this haircut or you’re a dead man.”

Niall unabashedly wipes crumbs from his lips, ignoring the threat.

Zayn places his kit on his bed and then reaches for a box that’s on his nightstand.

“Doniya sent me some samples of products we’re interested in stocking for the salon. I’ve got some face masks...”

“Oooooh!” Niall cries, putting the cookies aside and jumping up to look at the contents of Zayn’s box. “Can I try?”

Zayn laughs. “I figured you would want to.” He hands Niall a tube. “Try this one. It’s lavender based. Super moisturizing. You keep borrowing my moisturizer, so your skin must be dry.”

Niall nods as he unscrews the lid and sniffs it. “It smells good.” He squeezes out a dollop onto his finger. “And it’s purple!”

Zayn laughs. “I knew you would like that one.”

“Plus, you’ll match Zayn’s hair,” Louis quips.

Niall swipes the purple clay down Louis’ cheek.

“That’s funny, that’s the exact part of my cheek that had been feeling dry lately.”
Niall sticks his tongue out at him and then swings open the door to their en suite bathroom. He moves to put the mask on.

“Wet your face first, Niall,” Zayn says patiently. “Your skin needs to be damp.”

“Oh,” Niall laughs. “Right.” He turns the faucet on and splashes water on his face. He looks back at Zayn, who nods. He starts smearing it over his cheeks.

“It’s tingling already,” Niall cries with delight.

“Let it sit for about 20 minutes, okay?” He turns to Louis. “What about you, Lou? Do you want to hop in the shower and get your hair wet?”

“Can you wash it? That’s my favorite part,” Louis says, feeling a little bashful.

Zayn eyes their sink.

“I can make it work. It won’t be as comfortable as it could be, but we should be fine. The spout is definitely high enough.”

“Then I want the full treatment! See you in your full element so I can write some glowing reviews as soon as your salon opens.”

Zayn smiles shyly.

“You would do that?”

“Duh,” Louis replies, squeezing his shoulder. “I’m going to be your top customer.”

“Thanks,” Zayn says, his cheeks turning a bright pink. “That means a lot.”

Zayn holds up several small bottles of shampoo, studying the labels intently. He decides on one and then rifles through the box to find the corresponding conditioner.

“You’re gonna get me hooked on fancy ass shampoos, aren’t you?”

“I’ll give you a discount. Roommate special.” He plucks a small packet from the box’s contents. “These will help with the bags under your eyes.”


“You’re the one who keeps bitching about them, Louis,” Zayn replies mildly, cocking an eyebrow.

“Good point,” Louis says, popping the last bite of his cookie in his mouth. “Let’s do this.”

Zayn drags his desk chair into the bathroom as Niall finishes putting on his mask. Niall washes his hands off and dries them, popping out of the bathroom to fetch his guitar. He perches on the edge of the bathtub, humming as he starts to tune. Zayn rolls up one of his towels and wedges it between the chair and the sink. Louis sits and leans his head back. It’s a little awkward fitting them all in there, but it works.

“Comfy?” Zayn asks.

“Yup,” he replies happily.

Zayn turns on the faucet, dipping his fingers under the water after a few moments to check the
temperature. He grabs a washcloth and wets it, carefully swiping the stripe of mud mask from Louis’ cheek. Then he rips open the packet and pulls out a sheet of small gel pads. He leans over Louis and places them under his eyes, pressing gently to adhere them.

Louis jumps. “Those are cold!”

Zayn laughs softly. “Sorry. Should have warned you.”

He tests the water again and nods with satisfaction.

“Stretch back a little, okay?” Zayn says in a low voice. “Let me know if the water gets too hot.”

The water temperature is perfect and Louis lets out a contented hum as Zayn gets his hair wet, massaging his scalp as he does so. Niall strums his guitar, softly singing “Peaceful Easy Feeling.”


Niall stops playing abruptly.

“Get out.”

Louis laughs. “It’s my room. You get out.”

“Just for that, I’m having another cookie,” Niall taunts, easing around Zayn to go grab one. “You can’t do anything about it.”

Louis sighs, resigned to the fact that he’s going to have to ask Harry to send more cookies. Niall returns with a cookie clenched in his teeth. He resumes strumming and Louis feels himself drifting off as Zayn lathers the coconut-scented shampoo in his hair. All too soon, Zayn taps him on the shoulder.

“Sit up, you’re done.”

“Already?” Louis whines.

Zayn chuckles as he rubs a towel over Louis’ hair. “You fell asleep for a little while there. You’re like a little kitten, I swear to God.”

“I’m a big manly cat,” Louis grumbles, standing up and peeling the eye patches off. “Hey,” he cries as he gingerly touches the skin under his eyes. “They do look better!”

Zayn grins as he turns the chair towards the mirror. Louis sits and Zayn drapes one of his spare sheets over him.

“What do you want?” He asks, looking at Louis thoughtfully.

“Definitely lose the length in the back.”

“Yeah, I figured that bit for sure,” Zayn says. “Okay. I’m thinking a fringe to frame your face.”

“Fringe?”

“Technical term for bangs,” Zayn explains. “Well. Not bangs, really. I don’t believe in bangs on men. Really, it just means I’m going to cut some longer pieces that will fall across your forehead.”

“Fancy.”
“I like some of the length you have on top,” Zayn ponders as he runs his fingers through Louis’ damp hair. “I just need to shape it up.”


Zayn grabs the scissors and a comb from his kit. He flexes his hand and smiles.

“Thanks for asking me to do this, Lou,” he says. “Feels good to be holding these again.”

“Just don’t slit my throat, Sweeney Todd,” Louis replies.

Zayn laughs and centers Louis’ head. “Not on your first visit. Now stay put.”

He starts clipping, quietly humming along with Niall’s guitar. Louis sighs happily and tries not to fidget.

“So,” Zayn says mildly after a few minutes. “That was Harry.”

“He’s great, isn’t he?” Louis says effusively.

“He is,” Zayn agrees.

“Definitely lives up to the reputation,” Niall pipes up, plucking at his guitar.

“I’m so glad you guys like him,” Louis beams. “God, I’m so happy today went well, you know? It’s such a fucking relief.”

“It certainly went better than your last visit,” Niall comments.

“That’s not a fair comparison, Niall,” Louis says, a hint of defensiveness creeping into his voice.

“It’s as fair as Nick was to you that day,” Niall says bluntly.

Louis moves to protest but Zayn stops him with a firm hand on his head.

“Do you want an uneven haircut?” Zayn asks quietly.

“Sorry,” Louis replies.

“Louis wasn’t exactly fair that day either, Niall,” Zayn points out. “We’ve covered this already.”

“I’m just saying there’s a difference,” Niall insists. “Harry made an effort to get to know us and understand what Louis is doing here. Nick had no interest in that. That means something. To me anyway.” He pauses. “Did Harry like his painting?”

“Oh my God, you should have seen his face,” Louis laughs. “He loved it.”

“He didn’t think it was just fingerpainting?” Niall clips.

“Niall, let it go,” Louis pleads. “He didn’t mean it—”

“You said you’ve been talking to Nick more though, right Lou?” Zayn interjects. “Niall, wash your face, the mask is dry.”

“I didn’t know that!” Niall exclaims as he gingerly leans his guitar against the doorframe. He grabs his washcloth and turns on the faucet, getting it wet. He splashes water on his face and starts washing the mask off. “I knew you two were cuddling and swapping secrets at night while I have
to sing myself to sleep all alone.”

Louis rolls his eyes.

“It’s not like there’s anything major to talk about,” he says. “We’ve talked a couple of times. It’s still pretty...awkward?”

Niall turns to face him, leaning against the lip of the sink as he scrubs the washcloth over his face. “Awkward how?”

“I don’t know how to explain it,” Louis says. “It feels like we’re just being polite to each other? It’s either that or we just don’t know what to say, so the conversations have been pretty brief. Surfacey.”

Zayn frowns as he comes around in front of him, measuring out pieces of Louis’ hair with his fingers and snipping. “Have you tried going deeper though?”

“Of course I’ve tried. I just...I don’t feel like I’m getting anything back from him? Maybe it’s just the doing this on the phone thing. I hate talking on the phone. It will be better when I get out of here. It will. We’re better in person. It’s fine. We’re fine.”

“What does James have to say about it?” Niall asks as he wrings out the washcloth and places on the edge of the sink. His face is a glowing pink.

“I’m still trying to process what this all means,” Louis says slowly. “James, he...he says our relationship lacks emotional intimacy because I get that from Harry.”

“Makes sense,” Zayn murmurs, snipping another piece of hair. “You guys trust each other. A lot. It’s obvious.”

“He said that I have two halves of a full relationship. Physically – but not emotionally – intimate with Nick. Emotionally – but not physically – intimate with Harry.”

Niall bursts out laughing.

“You’re joking, right? You aren’t physically intimate?”

“Um...no?” Louis says with confusion. “I have a boyfriend, Niall. You think he’s gorgeous. Remember?”

“You do realize you and Harry can’t keep your hands off each other, right?”

Louis looks up at Zayn questioningly. He smiles back at him gently as he snips another section.

“He’s right.” Zayn stops to ponder his next words as he brushes a lock of hair to the side of Louis’ face and trims it. “It’s like...there’s no concept of personal space. One of you is always touching the other in some way. Not in like...a gross way or anything.”

“Oh, it’s plenty gross,” Niall teases.

Zayn sighs and gives Niall a pointed look before turning back to Louis. “It’s very sweet. But...it’s just a lot, yeah?”

“That’s...that’s just how we are,” Louis protests. “We’ve always been affectionate, have been since we were kids. But it doesn’t...mean anything. We...we haven’t even kissed.”
Niall sputters.

“Really? Even when you both figured out you liked boys? You didn’t like...mess around?”

Louis looks at him with a slight expression of horror.

“I would never just ‘mess around’ with Harry. He’s...he’s too important to me to just ‘mess around’ with. Christ. I would never do that to him.”

“Well, shit. No wonder then.”

“No wonder what?” Louis says suspiciously.

“No wonder the whole day felt like foreplay.”

“Niall!” Louis screeches. “I just told you it’s not like that.”

“Okay, look,” Niall says, sitting back on the edge of the tub. “I know I’m giving you a hard time, Bender, but hear me out. Physical intimacy doesn’t just mean sex, you know? It’s also a level of comfort with each other. Take me and my best friend Bressie for example. I literally owe my life to him. He’s the best person I know. No one knows me like he does. But even with all that history and love between us, we don’t touch each other as much as you and Harry do.”

“But we–”

“Look,” he says earnestly, grasping Louis by the knee. “I get that it’s your normal. And it’s...special. I watched you two all day and–”

“You know that’s creepy as fuck, right?”

Niall grins. “That’s me. Anyway. I watched you guys today and I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it before. You were all lit up, Louis. And I may not know Harry very well but he–”

“Which reminds me...what the hell were you two talking about when I got there?”

“Stop distracting me when I’m trying to be real with you,” Niall says pointedly.

Louis gulps, feeling his heart rate pick up. “Sorry. Continue.”

“What I’m trying to tell you is that what you and Harry have? It’s not everyone’s normal. It’s like...look, if Harry were to wear his hair in pigtails, you’d be the one pulling them. Far be it for me to agree with Nick, but I get why he has an issue with Harry. I do. I think that’s what James means about the intimacy thing. It’s like you can’t move in any direction with Nick until you sort out how you feel.”

Louis takes a deep breath, trying to settle himself. It doesn’t work. His heart continues to jackrabbit in his chest.

“These problems you’re having with Nick and not being able to talk to him? They’re not because you’re here and he’s there, you know,” Niall continues. “They aren’t going to magically disappear when you get out of here because it’s not just about you and Nick. It’s about you and Harry too.”

Louis feels the building sense of panic suddenly overwhelm him. His heart is racing; his chest feels tight and it’s like he can’t breathe properly. He squeezes his eyes shut and concentrates on the comforting feeling of Zayn’s hands in his hair. He grapples for Niall’s hand on his knee, grasping it tightly when he finds it.
“Louis?” Niall says, his voice filled with concern.

Louis focuses on his breathing, trying to take measured breaths. In and out. In and out. In and out.

“It’s fucking scary, okay?” Louis says through clenched teeth. Zayn’s hands move to his shoulders, pressing there firmly like he’s trying to ground him. Niall rests his other hand on their joined ones.

“I know,” he says seriously.

“I can’t lose Harry,” Louis gasps. “The thought of it scares the shit out of me. I’ve never considered anything more for us. I can’t risk losing him.”

“Why do you think you’re gonna lose him?” Niall asks gently.

“What if I fucked it up, Niall?” Louis asks, shaking his head furiously. “There would be no going back with him, you know? And let’s be honest, I’d probably fuck it up and lose him forever. Nick’s the only real relationship I’ve ever had, he’s the only guy that’s wanted to date me and look how well that’s going. And Harry, just thinking about it...it’s overwhelming. And like...he’s been my best friend for fifteen years! You might not believe this but I’ve genuinely always thought we were just friends. Best friends. But it’s like lately...I don’t know...all of this...has just...opened my eyes to some things and it’s...fuck, I’m just really confused.”

“Do you have feelings for him? Do you think he has feelings for you?”

“I don’t know!” Louis cries. “It’s not like we’ve ever talked about it! How do you even talk about something like this?”

Niall opens his mouth to say something but stops when Zayn softly says his name.

“And then there’s still Nick, yeah? I’ve been with him for a year and a half! Have I been wasting my time? His time? Look, I know you think he’s a dick but he’s a good guy. We have fun together. He makes me laugh. That’s all I can ask for, right?”


“I don’t know! How do you know?”

“I think you do know.”

Louis swallows hard. “The thought of being with Harry, actually being with him...Jesus...okay, I know I said I was scared of losing him but the thought of getting him...the thought that everyone’s right about us...it’s fucking terrifying.”

“Why though?” Niall asks softly.

“Because he’s been here, right in front of me the whole time and that scares the fuck out of me because how could I not know? How haven’t I seen it? It’s ridiculous. No one meets the love of their life at five years old, Niall. This isn’t a fucking movie.”

Niall’s jaw drops and his eyes go wide.

“The love of your life?”

“Zayn, have I completely fucked up my hair?” Louis deflects. “I’ve been moving around a lot, I’m sorry.”
“Oh no,” Zayn says quietly. “I’m done. I’ve been done for a while. I just...didn’t want to interrupt.” He leans over and grabs his hair dryer and a small brush. “Can I finish?”

“Please,” Louis says. “Neil...can you grab the cookies?”

“Yeah...of course.” Niall scrambles to his feet, grabbing his guitar as he leaves the bathroom. Louis sighs and focuses on the hum of the hair dryer and the gentle pull of the brush as Zayn styles his hair.

“Leave it to me to make spa night an emotional minefield,” Louis says ruefully.

“Don’t do that,” Zayn says, barely audible over the sound of the hair dryer. “It’s all good.”

Niall returns with the container of cookies, handing one to Louis and taking one for himself. Louis takes a bite, savoring the way the flavors of chocolate and sea salt explode on his tongue.

“Lou?” Niall mutters.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry if I pushed you too hard,” he says remorsefully. “I’m just trying to help.”

“Hey,” Louis says, grabbing his hand. “Hey, I know, buddy.”

“I know I have a big mouth and it’s none of my business. It’s your life. You can always tell me to fuck off if you need to.”

“I love your big mouth, Niall. Don’t ever change, okay?”

Niall’s eyes are watery as he smiles.

“Okay.”

Zayn clicks the hair dryer off.

“Well,” he says, biting his lip. “What do you think? I didn’t put any product in it, since we’re going to bed soon. I can style it more tomorrow if you want.”

Louis stands and steps closer to the mirror so he can examine himself better. His eyes widen as he takes in his new look. It’s shorter, like Zayn promised, the length in the back hitting just below his ears. His hair is artfully mussed on top and the piecey fringe sweeps across his forehead perfectly. He runs his fingers through the sides and grins.

“I love it,” he proclaims.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Louis says, pulling Zayn into a hug. “It looks amazing. You’re a genius.”

Zayn sighs happily into Louis’ shoulder. “Thanks. I’m so glad you like it.”

Louis holds out an arm.

“Get in, Neil. You know you want to.”

Niall laughs and the three of them embrace in the small bathroom. After a moment Zayn pulls
away and grabs his scissors, gently wiping them with a towel.

“I should take the scissors back to Perrie. Don’t want to get in trouble. Be right back.”

“Okay,” Louis says. “I’m gonna have a cigarette and then go grab a broom. Neil, go change into your pajamas. You’re sleeping in here tonight.”

Niall’s eyes brighten. “Really?”

“Yeah! I could use a cuddle. And Zayn hogs the covers, so that leaves you. If you want. Just don’t steal my bear.”

“I won’t,” Niall calls as he heads to his room. “I claim little spoon!”

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Louis is half-asleep, buried under his covers, when he hears his door creak open. There are muffled whispers and a crash as someone bumps into something.

“Careful,” someone says in a hushed whisper.

“Oh, fuck, I stubbed my toe. Christ, that hurts,” another voice whispers back.

“You’re going to wake him up!”

“I thought that was the plan.”

“It is when we’re ready. Which we’re not.”

Louis nestles deeper into his pillow, desperately trying to block out the voices so he can go back to sleep. Maybe if he concentrates hard enough, Chris Evans will keep taking off his shirt.


“Mrrrrmmnngghppph,” Louis grumbles into his pillow.

“Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up,” Niall’s voice chimes.

“Don’t wanna,” he mumbles, pulling his blanket around him. “Go away. M’dreaming.”


Louis flops over to his side, turning his back on their voices.

“Jesus, is he always this difficult in the morning?” Louis hears Niall mutter.

“Yes,” Zayn replies drily.

“It’s my birthday, you assholes,” Louis whines, rolling onto his back and flinging his arm over his eyes. “And I was having a very good dream about me, Chris Evans, and a hot tub.”

“That’s right. It’s your birthday, dick,” Niall laughs loudly. “Get up or I’ll eat this cake all by myself and you know I can do it. Chris Evans be damned.”

Louis cracks an eye open. “Cake?”

Suddenly, Louis realizes that he smells the telltale scent of candles burning. His eyes fly open and
he sees a grinning Niall and Zayn standing by his bed. Zayn is holding a plate with a small and lopsided looking chocolate cake on it; 2 and 1 shaped candles glowing in the middle of it. Niall is next to him, making jazz hands.

“Happy Birthday!” They cry in unison.

Louis sits up, scrubbing his hands over his face. “Oh my God? You guys! How did you–”

“Blow out your candles before they ruin the frosting,” Niall laughs. “Don’t forget to make a wish!”

Zayn extends the plate. “Happy Birthday Louis” is written on the top in gloppy blue frosting.

“Sorry it’s a mess,” Zayn says sheepishly. “We’re not bakers. We tried.”

“It’s the best cake I’ve ever seen,” Louis says honestly.

He closes his eyes and blows out the candles. Then he plucks them off the cake and sucks the frosting off the bottoms as Niall claps gleefully. Zayn places the cake on the nightstand.

“Niall, the plates,” he says over his shoulder. Niall grabs some plates and forks from where they sit on Louis’ dresser, holding them out for them out for Zayn as he cuts generous slices with a plastic knife. Niall passes the first slice to Louis with a bright smile.

“Cake for breakfast,” Louis says happily, taking a bite. He can tell the cake is made from a boxed mix and the frosting is from a can, but to Louis, it may as well be gourmet cooking. “So good. I can’t believe you did this. When did you even have time to make me a cake?”

“Last night during the movie,” Niall says smugly, perching on the foot of the bed with his own slice of cake. “Or did you really think we weren’t in the mood to watch Elf, the greatest Christmas movie of our time?”

Louis laughs and takes another bite. “You guys are the best. Thank you.”


Louis turns and looks at Zayn’s bed. There’s a small pile of boxes and envelopes there. His jaw drops.

“I have presents?”

“Well, duh,” Niall snickers. “It’s kind of how birthdays work.”

Louis feels tears sting at his eyes. He blinks furiously and then places his plate on his nightstand, wiping the tears away. Zayn gently brushes his hair out of his face.

“You okay?” he asks quietly.

“I just,” Louis chokes, overwhelmed. “I just wasn’t expecting anything this year, you know?”

“Well, that’s dumb,” Niall say, patting his knee. “It’s not every year you turn twenty-one!”

“Yeah, I can finally ditch that fake ID I’ve been using,” Louis laughs wetly. “Not that I’ll be getting any use out of my real one. Not like I’ll be carded asking for Shirley Temples.”

“Ugh, no,” Zayn says, wrinkling his nose. “Give me a club soda and lime any day.”

“Too sweet?” Louis asks, raising an eyebrow. “You literally just threatened to eat my entire birthday cake. And don’t get me started on how quickly we blew through my cookies, Niall.”

“Chocolate is an entirely different matter, Louis,” Niall quips. “You can never have too much chocolate.”

“Can I open my presents now?”

“Go for it,” Niall cheers. “I’ve been dying to see what’s in these boxes.”

Louis tosses his blanket aside and hops to the floor. He looks at the pile of presents, awestruck. There are multiple envelopes from his parents, packages from Liam, Nick, and Harry, along with messily wrapped presents from Zayn and Niall. He picks up the box addressed to him in Harry’s way-too-neat-for-a-future-doctor handwriting and sets it aside, saving it for last.

“I still can’t believe it,” Louis says, opening one of the cards from his mother. “How did you manage all this?”

“James got that package from your friend Liam over a week ago,” Zayn replies. “He tipped us off that more would probably be coming, so we’ve been stockpiling things since then. We got Perrie to do some shopping for us too.”

“It’s been a very covert operation,” Niall adds proudly. “Operation Twenty-One Candles. And it was a success.” He holds his hand out to Zayn for a high five. Zayn smacks his palm with a sly smile.

Louis lines all the cards from his mother up on the windowsill. Some are silly, some are sentimental; one of them has a gift card for his favorite movie theatre chain in it, another holds a Starbucks card. He refuses to be bothered that Mark only signed one of the cards. Not today.

He grabs Liam’s box and laughs out loud. “DO NOT OPEN UNTIL DECEMBER 24TH. I MEAN IT LOUIS!!” is scrawled on top in permanent marker.

“Well, since Liam sent his first, it’s only fitting I open it first,” he declares.

The box has clearly been opened and resealed (a reminder that he is in rehab and it had to be searched), so Louis opens it easily. He pulls out two bags of Cool Ranch Doritos, several cans of salt and vinegar Pringles, and a giant bag of M&Ms. There’s also the requisite pile of trashy celebrity magazines. A Batman card clearly meant for a child’s birthday rests on top of two hardcover books.

“Well, what is it?” Niall asks.


“Oooooh,” Niall says approvingly. “Excellent choices. He’s the one who sends us snacks every week, right?”

“He sends me snacks every week, Neil,” Louis replies archly.

“Right. Liam. I like Liam.”
Louis grins as he places the Batman card on the windowsill. “Yeah, you will.” He grabs a gold bag with blue tissue paper sticking out the top. “Who is this from?”

“Me,” Zayn says with a smile.

Louis plucks the tissue paper out of the bag and tosses it to the floor, where it joins the pile of discarded envelopes and packing paper.

“Relax, Niall,” Louis says when he squawks. “I’ll clean it up later. It’s my birthday.” He pulls out a large bottle of the coconut shampoo Zayn had used the night he cut Louis’ hair. He peers inside the bag to find a matching bottle of conditioner. “Zayn!”

“Well, you did use up all the samples,” Zayn says wryly. “It was a no brainer.”

“Thank you so much,” Louis says earnestly. “Should I do yours next, Niall?”

“Nah, open Nick’s,” he replies. “Since you’re so obviously saving Harry’s for last.”

Louis sticks his tongue out at him and reaches for the slim box with Nick’s handwriting on it. He slides a black garment box out of the outer package. There’s a black ribbon around the box, secured by a gold sticker with an embossed Bergdorf Goodman logo; a card is tucked under it. His eyes go wide.

“Someone got something fancy,” Zayn comments.

“Yeah, holy shit,” Louis says as he reads the card. “He got it in New York over Thanksgiving.”

He adds the card to his growing collection and then slides his fingers under the ribbon, breaking the seal. He takes the lid off the box and folds open the tissue paper to reveal a sweater. Louis gingerly unfolds it and holds it up in front of him, his mouth agape. The sweater is black and feels soft and luxurious. It has a large white stripe across the middle, bordered in red; “Givenchy” written in the middle of the chest in black capital letters. It’s gorgeous...but Louis can’t help but think that it’s not him. He turns it around to show Zayn and Niall.

“Jesus,” Zayn says softly. “That must have cost a fortune.”

“He has money,” Louis mumbles. He gently folds the sweater up and places it back in the box. He doesn’t know what else to say.

“Yeah,” Niall coughs. “Probably should have opened my gift first. It’s...not as nice as that. Sorry.”

Louis snatches Niall’s present from the bed. He rips the wrapping paper off the soft package, revealing a bright green hoodie with a small Adidas logo stitched in gold over the left corner of the chest. He grins at Niall and immediately pulls it on. It’s perfectly oversized, the fabric draping at his wrists and hips.

“I told Perrie to get you the coziest looking thing she could find,” Niall says shyly. “I know you like being comfortable and you’re so fucking cold all the time. Also, I wanted to get you in some color, for the love of God. You’re always in black or white or gray.” Niall’s eyes are uncertain. “Do you like it? I know it’s not fancy or anything like that...”

“I love it,” Louis declares. “It’s comfortable as fuck. It’s exactly what I would buy for myself. And you got it for me. Thank you.”

Niall’s smile is dazzling and his cheeks are bright pink. Zayn claps him on the back, giving him a
reassuring smile.

“Open Harry’s, open Harry’s, open Harry’s,” Niall chants after a moment. He takes another bite of cake. “It just got here yesterday. Real flair for the dramatic, that one. I was going to have to have words with him.”

“Harry would never miss Louis Day,” Louis says haughtily, tilting his chin up.

“Louis Day?” Niall asks with a snicker.

“Yes,” Louis says seriously. “Louis Day. He started calling my birthday that when we were kids because of Christmas Eve stealing my thunder. He always goes over the top for it. For my 18th birthday, he got us tickets to Bonnaroo. I gave him such a hard time that I had to wait six months for my birthday present.”

“It was worth it though, right?”

“Damn right it was,” Louis grins. “Best four days of my life. And no, Niall, there was no fooling around in the tent.”

“I didn’t ask!” Niall cries.

“You were about to though,” Louis says.


Louis rolls his eyes and sits on Zayn’s bed, pulling Harry’s box into his lap. Jittery with anticipation, he pulls the flaps back, revealing an iPod and a blue set of Beats headphones.

“Harry, I swear to God,” he mumbles as he reaches for the card, which has a drawing of a ship on it and reads “Oh ship, it’s your birthday!” Louis giggles at the terrible pun.

Lou –

Relax, I got the iPod secondhand. Can’t say the same thing about the headphones. It’s your 21st birthday! So shut up. Happy happy happy birthday, Boo. I can’t wait to see you soon.

– H

P.S. Sharing is caring :-)

Louis lifts the headphones and iPod out of the box and finds a large tupperware container of cookies. He laughs and passes it to Niall.

“That’s why the package just got here,” Louis says. “He wanted to make sure they were fresh.”

“Cookies!” Niall squeals.

“Please restrain yourself this time,” Louis orders. “I want them to last more than two days.”

He clicks on the iPod and sees that Harry’s already loaded a ton of music onto it. He scrolls over to playlists and feels his heart skip a beat when he finds that Harry’s meticulously arranged tons of them, ranging from “Run, Forrest, Run” (Louis rolls his eyes fondly because, as much as he tries, Harry’s never going to convince him to take up running) to “Zen Master Louis” to “Epic Karaoke Hits” to “Bonnaroo” to one simply called “Twenty-One.”
“I can’t believe him,” he says softly. “Guys, he’s filled this with playlists!”

He hands the iPod to Zayn.

“This must have taken him days,” Zayn mutters as he looks at the iPod. “Weeks is probably more like it. Lou, I think there are twenty-one of them.”

“There are?” Louis squeaks, grabbing the iPod back from him.

“So what you’re telling me is that Harry made you like twenty-one mixtapes,” Niall smirks.

“He’s just being practical,” Louis says, his cheeks reddening as he scrolls back through the playlists. “Having the right playlist for every occasion is very important. You’re a musician, Neil. You should know this.”


“As great as chocolate cake is for breakfast, should we go downstairs?” Louis asks, dodging the question. “It’s Saturday, there’ll be pancakes. I want pancakes. And bacon. Pancakes and bacon. I’m going to shower. With my new shampoo. Meet you guys in fifteen minutes? Great. Okay.”

He grabs his shampoo and conditioner and shuts himself in the bathroom, Niall’s cackles echoing behind him.

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After breakfast and a session with James, Louis commandeers the phone. He calls Liam and leaves a voicemail thanking him for his presents and promising to see him soon. He calls his mother next.

“Louis?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Happy birthday, sweetie,” she says and Louis can feel her smile through the phone. “I can’t believe my baby is twenty-one. Best Christmas present I’ve ever gotten.”

“Mooooooooo,” Louis whines good-naturedly.

“It’s true. Have you had a good day so far?”

“I have,” he replies. “Zayn and Niall woke me up with cake and presents.”

“That’s so lovely,” Jay says.

“Thank you for the gift cards,” Louis says. “I can’t wait to use them; I’ve missed so many movies.”

“You’re welcome, baby. And we’ll plan a weekend in January for Mark and I to come down and we’ll have a proper belated birthday and Christmas celebration, okay?”

Louis swallows, his throat suddenly feeling tight.

“I...I’m sorry about missing Christmas this year. I don’t have any presents for you. I’m...sorry for so many things.”

“Don’t be silly, Louis. You getting better is the best possible present you could ever give me. You
sound better every time I talk to you.”

“I feel so much better, Mom,” he says thickly. “So much better.”

“I’m so proud of you, baby.”

“What are you up to today?”

“I’m busy in the kitchen right now,” Jay replies. “Anne invited your father and I over for Christmas Eve dinner with the family, so we’re bringing appetizers. Gemma and Harry are home, though I’m sure you knew that already.”

“I did.”

“It will be good to spend the night with them.”

Louis’ throat feels tight again and this time a tear trickles down his cheek.

“I’m so glad, Mom. Please give them all hugs for me. Um...is Mark there?”

“He’s out doing some last minute shopping. You know he always waits until Christmas Eve.”

“Oh...okay...I can call–”

“I’ll tell him you called,” Jay says conspiratorially.

Louis laughs, relief flooding through his veins at being spared an awkward conversation with his stepfather.

“I’ll let you go then,” he says. “I love you so much, Mom.”

“I love you too, darling boy. Happy birthday. Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, of course. Have fun tonight. Bye.”

He hangs up and wipes the tears from his cheeks. He takes a deep breath and dials Nick’s number.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” Louis says warmly.

“Hey there, birthday boy,” Nick replies. “How are you? Did you get your present? I mailed it in plenty of time. You got it right?”

“Yes, I did. It’s gorgeous, babe. It was such a surprise.” He sighs softly before continuing. “It’s so much though, Nick, you really shouldn’t have...”

“But I wanted to, Louis,” Nick says earnestly. “I just...I wanted to get you something nice. It was right after we had that fight and I just...I wanted to make up for it, okay? I saw it in Bergdorf’s and it made me think of you, so I got it. It looked like something you would wear.”

Louis bites his lip and stuffs his hand in the pocket of his new hoodie, looking at the floor.

“Thank you,” he says after a moment.

“You’re welcome, babe. I’m glad you like it. So what are you doing today? Do they have big raging parties in rehab?”
“You know it,” Louis jokes. “Everyone sang to me at breakfast this morning. I have a yoga class soon. And I get to pick the movie tonight. It’s wild. What about you? How’s home?”

“Just...typical family stuff. The annual Christmas party is in a few hours and then we have the midnight service at church. Eileen’s making us crazy. No one is allowed to touch anything. She’s been yelling at the caterer non-stop today because she brought shrimp instead of scallops. Never mind that the caterer said that the scallops didn’t seem fresh. What Eileen wants Eileen gets.”

“What is the point of even having the party now?”

“Jesus, I know right? It’s like a national tragedy. I’m trying to help her out but you’ve seen how she gets.”

“Silly Nicholas. Your mother doesn’t need any help terrorizing the help. She has that down pat.”

“My Dad and Andy are hidden away in his den, zoning out to football just so they can stay out of her way.”

“Well, at least it isn’t basketball,” Louis says sarcastically.

“Thank God for small miracles,” Nick replies. “I’m just waiting for Jane to get here so she can deal with Eileen and I can steal my niece away to educate her on the difference between Backstreet Boys and *NSYNC. Get her while she’s young, yeah?”

“Best uncle ever.”

Nick pauses and Louis can tell that he’s shuffling around. “I only have to be here for two more days,” he says. “Then I can get back and get ready for my New Year’s Party.”

“I’m sorry I’m missing it,” Louis says quietly.

“Me too.”

“What’s the theme this year?”

“Gatsby. The Leo version.”

“My flapper dress is at the cleaners anyway,” Louis quips.

“Pity. Won’t be on the same without you dancing on the kitchen table at two in the morning,” Nick laughs.

“Jesus, don’t remind me,” Louis cringes. “I was wasted.”

“You were hilarious,” Nick says fondly.

They are silent for a few moments.

“I made us dinner reservations at the Ivy Inn for the fourth,” Nick says finally.

“Aw, Nick, you know you don’t have to do that. I would be happy—”

“I thought we could celebrate somewhere nice. You liked it when we went there for our anniversary, right?”

“Ten days,” Nick says.

“Ten days,” Louis replies. “I love you. Don’t let your family get you down too much, okay?”

“I won’t. I love you too. Talk soon?”

“Yeah, of course. Bye.”

Louis hangs up and runs his hands through his hair. He fumbles in his pockets for his cigarettes and lighter, sighing with relief when he finds them. He lights one and then leans against the wall. Taking a deep pull, he closes his eyes and slides down to the floor, needing time to gather himself. After smoking the cigarette down to the filter, Louis pulls himself up and grinds the butt out in the ashtray that sits on the shelf under the phone. He brushes himself off and grins. He saved this phone call for last.

He dials Harry’s number.

“Happy birthday to you,” Harry sings as soon as he picks up. “Happy birthday to you–”

Louis giggles. “Harry!”

Harry barrels on. “Happy biiiiiiiiiiirthday, dear Boo Bear! Happy birthday to yooooooooou!”

“I’m never going to live Boo Bear down, am I?”

“Nope,” Harry laughs. “Never. I’ll be singing ‘Happy Birthday, Boo Bear’ until we’re old and gray.”

“You’re the worst,” Louis says fondly. “Thanks for my present. Even if you did spend too much money. Again.”

“Well, I figured you were going crazy without your phone ’cause it has all your music on it,” Harry explains. “And I know you hate earbuds, so…”

“The playlists, Haz. I haven’t been able to look through all of them yet, but they’re amazing. I can’t believe you actually made twenty-one of them, you sap.”

“You didn’t think it was dumb, did you?” Harry asks bashfully. “I don’t know, I was loading the songs and I got inspired and it just kind of spiraled from there–”

“I love it, Hazza. So much.”

Harry sighs with relief. “Good.”

“Niall is happy you sent more cookies too.”

“Hopefully they’ll last you more than two days this time.”

“I doubt it,” Louis replies.

“Well, they’re the last ones you’re getting in there,” Harry teases. “Make ’em last.”

“Excuse me, Harold. That’s rude.”

“I’m not your personal baker, Louis,” Harry deadpans.
“Since when? This is news to me.”

“How is Niall, by the way? I probably should have sent him his own—”

“You invited my parents over for Christmas Eve,” Louis interrupts suddenly.

Harry pauses.

“I did,” he says cautiously. “Well, technically my Mom did, but...yeah, it was my idea. Just...with you not here, I...I just didn’t want them to be alone. Not on Louis Day. Besides, Mom said it’s been way too long since she split a bottle of wine with Jay, so...why not, you know? Was that not okay?”

Louis feels like his heart is going to explode.

“No it’s...it’s wonderful. Thank you, Harry. That—” Louis pauses to take a deep breath as tears prick at his eyes. “That means so much to me. I can’t even say how much. You’re amazing, Haz. Do you know that? Amazing. And you’re always so good to me. Always. And I just...I...I love you,” Louis gulps. “A lot.”

Harry is quiet for a few moments. Louis chews on his lip nervously.

“I love you too, Lou,” Harry says softly.

The tears spill over despite Louis’ attempts to stave them off. He squeezes the receiver between his ear and his shoulder as he wipes at his face with both hands.

“Listen,” he sniffs. “As your elder, I have to pass on this wisdom. Turning twenty-one makes you really fucking sentimental. I just want you to be prepared. I’m probably going to confess my undying love to Niall next.”

“Not if he eats all of your cookies,” Harry counters.

“This is true,” Louis muses. “I’m probably safe then.”

“Thank God.”

“I should go,” Louis says regretfully. “I’ve kept you long enough. And I have a yoga class in twenty minutes.”

“Never thought you’d become a yogi, Louis.”

“I’m a changed man, Harry,” Louis asserts. “Just wait. You’ll see.”

“I can’t wait,” Harry says warmly. “Have a good rest of your day, okay?”


“I will. Thanks for calling.”

“Always. Thanks for my presents.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll talk to you later, yeah?”

“Hang up the phone, Haz,” Louis grins.

“Hang up the phone, Lou,” Harry parrots.
They laugh and hang up the phone simultaneously.

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That night, Louis wedges in between Niall and Zayn on the couch in the common room. He hands Niall the container of cookies and then pops open one of the cans of Pringles. Zayn slings his arm over his shoulders and Louis curls into him as Hugh Grant starts to talk about how love actually is all around. He sighs happily.

“Good birthday, Lou?” Zayn says lowly.

“The best.”
Chapter 11

Louis stands at his window, clutching a mostly empty mug of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He takes in the view of the grounds, squinting as the early morning sunlight reflects off patches of bright white snow. He drains his mug and then takes a deep pull off his cigarette, exhaling with a big sigh.

*Today’s the day.*

Zayn emerges from the bathroom, zipping up his toiletry bag.

“You forgot this,” he says, holding up a razor.

“Oh,” Louis replies. He takes it and adds it to his own bag, zipping it up. “Thanks.”

Zayn joins him at the window, helping himself to one of Louis’ cigarettes. He lights it and they smoke in silence for a few moments. Zayn surveys Louis’ empty suitcase, raising an eyebrow.

“That suitcase isn’t going to pack itself, you know,” he says wryly.

“Right,” Louis says, taking a final puff of his cigarette. He grinds it out in the dregs of his coffee and then places the mug on the nightstand. “Okay.”

Louis empties the dresser, unceremoniously dumping his clothes in the suitcase. When he finishes, he stands over the overflowing case and frowns.

*How the hell am I going to get this closed?*

He hops on his bare bed, stripped of sheets and blankets which are now piled on the floor, along with Zayn’s, waiting to be taken down to the laundry room. He tucks errant sweater sleeves hanging out of the suitcase back in, then closes the flap. He bites his lip and then lays his torso across the top, trying to press the mound of clothes down far enough so he can get it zipped.

“You know you’d probably be able to get everything in if you folded it properly,” Zayn says slyly.

“This method of packing worked when I was coming here,” Louis grumbles.

Zayn laughs as he stubs out his cigarette in the coffee cup. He gathers his remaining belongings while Louis dumps everything out of his suitcase and starts folding the right way.

“You ready to go?” Zayn asks quietly after a few minutes.

“Truth?”

“Always,” Zayn replies.

“No,” Louis mutters, placing a small pile of neatly folded t-shirts into his suitcase. “I’m scared shitless.”

“Good,” Zayn sighs.

Louis looks at him with surprise. “What?”

“’Cause I’m scared shitless too,” Zayn says, shrugging his shoulder. He places his toiletry bag in
his suitcase and zips it up.

“Well, that makes me feel better,” Louis laughs.

A party horn blasts shrilly and Niall appears in the doorway with the noisemaker clenched in his teeth. He tucks it behind his ear and grins.

“Happy trails to you,” he sings, tossing a handful of confetti. “Until we meet again! Happy traaaaaaaails to yoooooooou–”

“Niall!” Louis yelps. “What are you doing?”

“I raided the leftovers from New Year’s,” Niall grins, tossing more confetti at Louis. “Thought I would send you two off in style.”

“We just cleaned up in here, you idiot,” Louis says with feigned annoyance. “You’re making a mess!”

Oops, I guess you have to clean again,” Niall says, sticking his tongue out. “Serves you assholes right for leaving me.”

“It’s only two weeks,” Zayn says comfortingly. “Then we’ll all be together again.”

“I know,” Niall replies, grabbing one of Louis’ sweaters and folding it. “I need a little bit more time, you know? I still have some work to do. But I’m gonna miss you guys. So much. It’s not going to be the same here without you.”

“Aw, Niall, you’re like the most popular person here. You’ll have new best friends immediately,” Louis says.

Niall pauses as if to think about it. “Nah,” he says thickly, tossing the sweater into Louis’ suitcase. “No one can replace you two.”

When Louis looks up at Niall, he sees that his eyes are bright with unshed tears. He grabs him in a fierce hug, squeezing him tightly.

“You’re a fucking sap,” Louis says fondly, smacking a kiss on his cheek. “I love you too, buddy.”

Niall takes a shaky breath and blinks away his tears, smacking his own kiss on Louis’ cheek. “Nice sweater, by the way,” he adds, elbowing Louis as he folds more clothes.

Louis smooths the front of the Givenchy sweater self-consciously.

“Nick’s picking me up,” Louis explains. “I thought it would be nice to wear it.”

“Big plans tonight?” Zayn asks.

“Yep,” Louis grins. “He’s taking me to the Ivy Inn for dinner.”

“Fancy,” Niall comments.

“Yeah, we went there for our anniversary last year. I mean...the whole place isn’t really my style. The food is really good and the restaurant is super romantic, but I’d be happy with burgers, you know? But we are celebrating after all, so might as well go all out, right? It will be nice.”

“When are you seeing Harry?” Niall asks. “He’s got to be excited you’re coming home.”
“I talked to him early this morning,” Louis replies. “He’s taking a class for January term, so I’m not seeing him till Friday night. He’s got seven episodes of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* on his DVR for us to catch up on and apparently two more episodes air that night, so—”

“So you have a DVR and chill date,” Niall smirks.

“If I didn’t have to get all this shit into my suitcase, I would throw something at you, Neil,” Louis retorts. “It’s one of our shows, he didn’t want to watch any of it without me.”

“Like I said. DVR and chill date.”

“What about you, Zayn?” Louis asks quickly. “Big plans for tonight?”

He looks at Zayn pleadingly, silently asking him to take the heat off him. Zayn’s mouth quirks into a knowing grin before he speaks.

“Doniya is picking me up and then taking me to get my hair done. Time to change up my color,” Zayn says, ruffling his fading lavender hair.

“Can’t you do that yourself?” Niall asks.

“Even professionals like to be pampered every now and then,” Zayn says. “I’m torn between silver and blue. What do you guys think?”

“Blue,” Louis says definitively.

“Silver,” Niall says simultaneously.

They laugh.

“Silvery blue?” Niall questions. “That could work.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Zayn smiles. “After that, I have a tattoo appointment.” He rubs the outside of his left forearm. “I’m getting ‘wisdom to know the difference’ in Urdu here. I’m going home and having dinner with my family after that. I can’t wait to see everyone.” He pauses, his cheeks flushed pink. “My mom is cooking up a storm apparently. All my favorite things. It’s going to be great.”

Niall hands Louis a small pile of folded clothes, which he takes gratefully, stacking them in his suitcase. He adds his last few sweaters and a faded pair of Vans and then folds the flap over. The suitcase is still overflowing a bit, but Louis can see that it will definitely close now.

“I’ll get it,” Niall says, pressing down on the suitcase with his elbows and chest. “You zip.”

Louis zips the suitcase with only a minimum struggle. Niall hoots triumphantly when it’s finally closed and Louis sighs heavily, brushing his hands off on his jeans. He looks around the room sadly. It looks bigger without all their stuff cluttering it up. It feels wrong not seeing Zayn’s novels stacked on the nightstand or Louis’ magazines and half-eaten bags of chips strewn everywhere. Even the can that had served as their ashtray is no longer sitting on the windowsill. This room has been his home, his safe haven, for the past three months and it’s *empty* now. It’s not theirs anymore. Suddenly Louis’ heart aches at the thought of someone else living there in his room. Tears sting his eyes as he draws another ragged breath.

*I don’t want to go.*

Louis unzips his suitcase.

“Nope,” he says, his voice shaking. He takes a pile of clothes out of the suitcase and sets them on his bed. “I’m not okay. I’m gonna stay. I can stay, right? James won’t mind. Maybe I’ll just crash with you, Niall? I can do that. You’ll finally get that roommate you’ve been dying for, yeah? I’m staying.”

He reaches for another pile of clothes but is stopped by Niall’s hand at his wrist. Louis looks up at him in shock.

“Louis.”

“I’m not ready,” Louis whispers fearfully. “Niall, I’m not ready.”

Niall squeezes his wrist.

“You are though,” Niall reassures him. “You’ve worked so hard. You’re ready.”

“It’s okay to be afraid,” Zayn says softly, hugging Louis around his middle and hooking his chin over his shoulder. “Scared shitless, remember? But it’s time to go, Lou. It’s time for both of us to go. We’ll help each other, yeah? Gotta pave the way for Niall here.”

“What if I mess everything up?” Louis asks, his voice small. “What if I don’t fit into my life anymore? Things are going to be really different...I’m not the same person I was when I came here.”

“No, you’re not,” Niall says solemnly. “That’s how you know you’re ready to go.”

“I’m not going to be fun to be around, though,” Louis says, scuffing his feet. “My moods are all over the place.”

“Who the fuck cares whether you’re fun or not?” Zayn mutters, uncharacteristically biting.

“Yeah, who cares,” Niall echoes. “Besides, I think you’re a lot more fun now than when you first got here.”

“You do?”

“Need I remind you of the first time we met, Grumpy Pixie?”

“Shut the fuck up, Niall.”

“There’s the Louis I know and love,” Niall cackles.

“And of course your moods are all over the place,” Zayn adds softly. “It’s to be expected. But they will even out over time, Lou. Especially once you get used to recognizing your emotions and actually feeling them as opposed to numbing them with drugs and alcohol.”

“You’re right,” Louis sighs. “I know you’re right. But what if–”

“Louis,” Zayn says firmly, letting go of him and coming around to look him in the eyes. His chocolate eyes are fierce. “You can’t answer all these questions right now, so there’s no point in driving yourself nuts. You just have to get out there and put what we’ve been learning into practice. You’re going to mess up. It’s inevitable. But you’re a good person. A better person for coming
here. If there are people in your life who can’t see that and aren’t willing to make some changes in how they relate to you, then fuck them, yeah?”

“I just feel so safe here,” Louis admits. “It’s like living in a bubble, you know? Like there’s zero chance for temptation. Out there it’s like...I don’t know I going to react when I get stressed. It’s one thing to know what you’re supposed to do; it’s an entirely different thing to actually do it, right? It could all go to shit so easily.”

“But here’s the thing, Lou,” Zayn says quietly. “We can’t hide here.”

“A very wise woman once said to me,” Niall says sagely. “These walls were not built to shut out problems. You have to face them.”


“Do you not think the Reverend Mother is a wise woman, Louis?”

Louis rolls his eyes. “The wisest.”

“Climb every mountain, Bender. Pack every sweater. Zip every suitcase. You’ve got this.”

Louis takes a deep breath.

*I’ve got this.*

“Okay,” he says with determination. He carefully wedges the clothes back into his suitcase and flips it shut once more. “I’ll go. I’m going.”

“Good. M’tired of looking at your ugly mug anyway,” Niall quips, pressing his torso down on the suitcase as Louis zips it back up. “It's distracting me from my recovery.”

“You were just saying how much you were going to miss us.”

“Changed my mind,” Niall says, shoving him playfully. “Get the fuck out of here.”

“Louis.”

The three of them turn and see James standing in the doorway, smiling kindly. Louis feels his heart drop into his stomach.

*This is it.*

“Nick’s downstairs,” James says. “Are you ready?”

“Not really,” Louis replies honestly. He grabs his coat from where it rests by his suitcase. “But it’s time to go anyway.”

Louis reaches for his suitcase but Niall beats him to it.

“If you think we’re not walking you out, you’re insane,” he says, gripping the suitcase.

Louis looks at Zayn, who nods. James claps Louis on the back and leads him out of the room, Zayn and Niall following close behind.

“You have the information for all the local meetings,” James says as they walk down the hall. “Ninety meetings in ninety days, Louis. Double up if you need to. You need to find a sponsor.
Remember, it’s important; don’t procrastinate. Try to meet people at your first meeting; most people are approachable and want to help. Don’t rely on just Zayn and Niall for support. It’s great that you will have each other, but you also need someone who’s been sober for at least a year, okay? Work the program. Every day. Don’t worry, you’re still going to see me once a week, so if you’re having trouble finding someone, I can try to help you.”

“Okay,” Louis gulps. “This is a lot.”

James stops and turns to face him. He places both hands on Louis’ shoulders and looks him directly in the eyes.

“I know you’re scared. I know this is overwhelming. But do you know what else I know?”

“What?” Louis asks softly.

James’ blue eyes are full of pride. “I know you’re ready. Trust me. Trust in what you’ve learned. Trust yourself. You’re going to be okay. More than okay.”

“Bet you never thought you’d basically have to drag me out of here kicking and screaming did you?”

James grins slyly. “You know, I do recall telling you on day thirteen that you’d never want to leave, so joke’s on you. I was right about you the whole time.”

Louis throws his arms around James, not caring that it’s probably inappropriate to be hugging his therapist like this. James huffs in surprise before returning the hug, squeezing him tightly.

“Thank you, James,” Louis utters as he pulls back. “I’ll never be able to thank you enough.”

“I’m just doing my job.”

“No, seriously,” Louis says solemnly, looking him in the eye. “I mean it. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome,” James grins. “It’s been my pleasure, Louis.”

They walk the rest of the way in silence. Zayn comes up next to him, hooking his arm with Louis.’

“You’ve got this, Lou,” he whispers as they get to the double doors that lead to the lobby.

“Here goes nothing,” Louis whispers back as they push through the doors.

Nick is pacing around the waiting area, fiddling with his phone. Louis takes him in, feeling the familiar twist of attraction in his gut. He looks good. Better than good even, in black skinny jeans, a crisp white shirt, and Converse. His blond hair looks freshly dyed and is styled to sky high perfection. His knee-length orange plaid coat hangs open and a chunky knit orange and charcoal scarf is looped around his neck. Louis stands there, a bright smile on his face, waiting for Nick to notice him.

He doesn’t.

Nick stays fully immersed in his phone, swiping non-stop.

Louis crosses his arms, unable to keep his hackles from being raised. He can’t quite tell if he’s being irrational or not, but they haven’t seen each other in a month and a half.

Surely I’m more important than whatever level of Candy Crush he’s on? Is it too much to ask for
Louis looks at James, a bit at a loss as to what to do. James smiles and nods encouragingly. After a moment, Louis nods back.

Finally, he clears his throat.

“Hey, babe.”

Nick looks up, grinning as he pockets his phone. He strides over to Louis.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he says, pulling Louis into a hug.

They stand there holding each other, Louis’ arms wrapped around Nick’s middle and his cheek resting against his shoulder. Nick pulls back and presses a gentle kiss to his lips.

“Happy eviction day,” Nick says with a hint of laughter. He runs his hands up and down Louis’ arms. “You wore your sweater! It looks so good on you.”

“I love it,” Louis replies brightly. He gives him another quick kiss, catching Niall’s smirk over Nick’s shoulder.

“Shall we?”

Louis looks back at James, Zayn, and Niall and feels his throat constrict.

“Give me a second, okay?”

He goes to James first. James extends his hand. Louis takes it.

“See you next week,” James says, eyes twinkling.

“Counting down the hours,” Louis replies. He squeezes James’ hand tightly.

Louis turns to Zayn. His eyes fill with tears when he sees that Zayn is crying silently.


They embrace, clinging tightly to each other as they both cry openly.

“I never would have been able to do this without you,” Louis says into Zayn’s neck. “You were kind to me and you accepted me from day one, Zayn. I will never forget that. Ever.” He pulls back and takes Zayn’s face in his hands, gently wiping tears away. “I love you, man,” he says fiercely. “Thank you for being the best roommate ever.”

“Thank you for being the best roommate ever,” Zayn echoes, his voice trembling. “You...you helped me so much too, Lou. I just...I’m so glad I met you.”

“Have fun with your family tonight. I’ll see you soon,” Louis says, squeezing him once more. “Meeting buddies.”

Zayn nods.

“Meeting buddies.”

Louis turns to Niall, who is grinning mischievously. He launches himself at Louis, latching onto
“Jesus Christ,” Louis grunts as he catches him. “Warn a guy.”

“What’s the fun in that?” Niall says, sliding back down to his feet. “It was getting way too mushy here.”

“I think I’ll miss you most of all, Scarecrow,” Louis says, his mouth quirking up. Niall cackles as he hugs Louis. “I’ll miss you too, Dorothy. See you in two weeks, yeah?”

“I’ll get Harry to make a big batch of cookies for you to celebrate.”

Niall turns to Nick, who looks completely bewildered at the emotional display going on in front of him.

“Hi, Nick,” Niall says brightly.

“Hi,” Nick replies with a cautious smile.

“You take care of our boy here,” Niall says.

“Oh, I will,” Nick replies breezily, grinning at Louis.

“I mean it,” Niall says. He’s smiling but his blue eyes are steely.

“Oh...um...oh-okay,” Nick stammers, taken aback. His gaze flicks between Niall and Louis.

Louis laughs awkwardly and rolls his eyes. He ruffles Niall’s hair.

“Don’t listen to him, babe. He’s harmless. And he’s joking. You’re joking, right, Niall?”

“I’m not as sweet as I look,” Niall warns, eyes locked on Nick. “Don’t test me.”


“Love you too, Bender,” he replies, passing the suitcase over to Louis.

“I’ll take that,” Nick says quickly, giving Niall a pointed look. Niall grins triumphantly. Nick starts towards the door, pulling the suitcase behind him.

“Ready, babe?” Nick asks, turning back and holding out his hand. “We should get going. Lots to do before tonight.”

Louis smiles at his friends and takes a deep breath. He straightens his spine as he walks toward Nick, taking his hand and kissing it quickly.

“Yeah. I’m ready.”
Louis stands in his bathroom, clad only in a pair of tiny black boxer briefs. He takes a final swipe at the side of his hair with a comb and then spritzes his painstakingly constructed coif with hairspray, wrinkling his nose at the smell.

*God, does this even look right?*

He frowns in the mirror.

*I wish Zayn could have come over. Except he’s having dinner with his family and I’m an adult, I should be able to do my own fucking hair.*

He snaps a selfie from the front and then turns his back to the mirror and takes one over his shoulder, texting them to Zayn.

**IS THIS RIGHT?**

While he waits for a response, Louis heads back into his bedroom, steadfastly ignoring the way his stomach twists every time he looks at the window. His dress pants and blazer are laid out on the bed, along with several shirt options. He grabs his pants and sits on the edge of the bed, pulling them on. Once they reach his thighs, he stands up and hops a little, pulling them up the rest of the way and buttoning them. He checks himself out in the mirror, admiring the way the pants hug his body like a second skin.

He’s pondering his shirt options when his phone pings with a reply from Zayn.

*Perfect cinnamon roll. You look great.*

Louis smiles with relief. He sends a string of fire emojis as a reply and tosses his phone on the bed, turning his attention back to his shirts. He grabs a pale blue button-down and simple scoop-neck white t-shirt and turns to the mirror, holding one up and then the other. Finally, he tosses away the button down.

*If I’m going to have to wear my dress shoes and a blazer, I might as well be comfortable everywhere else.*

He moves to pull the shirt on, halting suddenly.

*Fuck. My hair.*

Louis groans.

*What an idiot. I don’t know how to do this anymore. Of course you don’t do your hair before you put a shirt on! God. What the fuck am I even doing going to a fancy restaurant? I just want to put my sweatpants on and have pizza.*

He looks back to the button-down, wondering if he should just wear that. He bites his lip, judging the width of the t-shirt’s collar because suddenly he has his heart set on the goddamn thing. Holding the collar wide, he gingerly puts it over his head, taking great care not to snag it on his
hair. He pulls it down and heaves a sigh of relief when he looks in the mirror and sees that his cinnamon roll is intact.

He grabs his blazer from the bed and shrugs it on, facing the mirror. Buttoning it, he notes how the slightly cropped cut nips in perfectly, showing off the dip of his waist. He pulls at the three-quarter length sleeves, making sure everything is on straight.

*This is good enough for this place, right? What the fuck did I wear last time? I can’t remember. I look good though. Really good.*

He turns to the side, smoothing the seat of the pants over his ass.

*Oh shit.*

**Nick’s going to want to have sex tonight.**

*Oh my God, why didn’t I think of this before? Idiot. Look at your ass in these pants. Of course your boyfriend is going to want to fuck you.*

It’s been so long since we’ve had sex? Jesus, almost four months. And I definitely can’t remember the last time we had sex sober. Shit. Okay. It’s not like we haven’t done this before. Just like riding a bike, right? A sober bike. Fuck. Is he going to want to come here? No, he likes going to his place.

Louis grabs his phone and his black patent leather shoes and practically sprints out of his bedroom. He sits on the couch as he wedges his bare feet into the shoes.

*Maybe I don’t want to have sex tonight. Should I just wait and see what happens? Is he going to be okay if I need to take things slow? He’ll be fine. He’ll understand. Fuck, I hope he understands. I don’t know if I can do this right now. I know it’s a whole romantic night out, but I …*

There’s a knock at the door.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

Louis ties his other shoe and takes a deep breath to steady himself. He strides across the room to the door and swings open the door.

Nick is standing there, leaning one hand against the doorframe; the other behind his back. His black coat hangs open, revealing an impeccably tailored three-piece cobalt blue suit. Louis sighs in relief when he notices that Nick has also forgone a tie, opting for for a blue and white patterned button-down.

*Okay, so maybe I do want to have sex tonight.*

“Hey,” Louis breathes.

Nick’s jaw drops.

“Wow, you look amazing,” Nick blurts out.

Louis feels his cheeks heat.

*Definitely having sex tonight.*

Louis tilts his chin and looks Nick up and down, smirking.
“You look completely presentable to take me out to dinner.”

Nick laughs loudly, swinging his arm around to reveal a bouquet of red roses.

“Got these for you,” he says with a bright grin. “Welcome home. Finally.”

“Baaaaaaabe,” Louis exclaims, taking the flowers. “These are gorgeous. Thank you. You didn’t have to do this.”

Nick takes Louis’ free hand and pulls him flush against his chest. Louis squeaks in surprise, trying not to crush the flowers between them.

“I wanted to though,” Nick says lowly before sealing his lips over Louis’. The kiss quickly gets heated; Nick’s tongue presses against the seam of Louis’ lips, asking for entrance, and Louis shivers as they part for him. Nick’s hands grip his hips, squeezing gently as his tongue sweeps in. Louis sighs and grasps him by the lapel, allowing himself to get lost in the familiar sensations. It’s only when Nick’s hand sweeps up to cup his jaw that Louis breaks the kiss, stepping back dizzily.

“Don’t you dare mess up my hair, Nicholas Grimshaw,” Louis threatens. “I worked on it for almost an hour and I’d like it to at least make it through dinner.”

Nick laughs, reaching for him again. “I didn’t touch your hair, babe.”

Louis dodges him. “Yeah, but you were going to,” he teases. “I know that move.”

Nick grins cockily. “You like that move.”

“I should...I should put these in water.”

It’s only when Louis gets to his kitchen that he realizes he’s shaking. He places the bouquet on the counter and then scrubs his hands over his face, trying to take stock of how he’s feeling. He takes several slow deep breaths to calm himself.

You’re okay. You’re okay. You’re okay.

This is so much.

You can do this.

It’s just Nick.

“Did you get lost in there, babe?” Nick calls after a few minutes. “We need to get going.”

“Coming,” Louis replies. “Just gotta...find a vase.”

Louis opens his cabinets, searching for something to put the flowers in. He finds a vase his mother gave him in the last cabinet, reaching up on his tiptoes to grab it. Unwrapping the flowers, he takes another steadying breath as he fills the vase with water, carefully placing the roses in it. He thumbs at the leaves of one of them and smiles.

You’re okay, you’re okay.

With one last deep breath, he returns to the living room.

“Ready?” Nick asks, holding Louis’ coat out for him.
“As I’ll ever be,” Louis huffs, taking the coat. “Let’s go, I’m starving.”

Louis fidgets in the passenger seat of Nick’s SUV as he stares out the window, watching the UVA campus fly by. He fiddles with the buttons of his heavy coat and he wiggle his toes in his slightly-too-tight shoes, longing for the comfort of his Vans. Nick’s hand is on his knee, tapping along to the beat of The Weeknd’s latest single as he chatters on about all the gossip from his New Year’s party. Louis half listens, occasionally humming in agreement.

*It’s just a dinner. Relax. You don’t need wine to enjoy dinner. Who needs wine? Not you. You don’t need it at all. It’s fine, it’s fine, you’re going to be fine.*

“...Don’t you think, babe?”

Louis shakes himself out of his trance.

“Sorry, what?”

Nick takes his hand, lacing their fingers together.

“You okay?” He chuckles. “You’re a million miles away.”

*Jesus, you’re the worst. Your boyfriend is trying to do something nice for you, get your head in the game, dickhead. Snap out of it.*

“I’m fine,” Louis sighs softly, squeezing his hand. “Just...hungry.”

“Good thing we’re going to dinner then,” Nick teases, smiling brightly.

“Can we get that pork belly thing again? It was so good last time.”

Nick laughs and brings Louis’ hand to his mouth, pressing a kiss there.

“We can get whatever you want, babe. Apps, desserts. Fuck, you can order the whole menu if that’s what you want. It’s your night.”

“Thanks, Nick,” Louis says earnestly. “I...I’m really happy we’re doing this. I missed you.”

“Aw, I missed you too, babe.” Nick squeezes his hand once more and then releases it. He arches an eyebrow, leering at him. “And the night’s just getting started.”

Louis laughs.

*See? You’re fine. It’s just you and Nick. You’re fine.*

They lapse into silence for the rest of the ride, Nick turning up the next song on his playlist and singing along quietly. A few minutes later, Nick pulls up to the stand in front of the restaurant, hopping out and handing his keys to the waiting valet. Louis opens his own door, right as Nick makes it around to his side.

“Hey! I was gonna get that for you,” Nick pouts.

“Too slow,” Louis smirks.

“Let me be a gentleman, Louis,” Nick says, placing a hand on the small of his back and guiding
him towards the door.

“A gentleman, eh?” Louis banter, pulling the door open. “There’s a first time for everything.”

“You’re such a shit,” Nick laughs. “I don’t know why I take you anywhere.”

Louis sputters a laugh as an elderly woman exiting the restaurant makes an affronted face at them.

“Language, Nicholas. This is a fine dining establishment and you’re supposed to be a gentleman.”

“Let me take your coat then, sir,” Nick says formally. “I’ll check them.”

Louis unbuttons his coat and shrugs out of it, handing it to Nick. He checks himself out in the mirror on the opposite wall, smoothing the sides of his hair.

“Have I told you how amazing you look tonight?” Nick asks, coming up behind him.

“Once or twice,” Louis preens.

“Oh. Okay then.”

“You can tell me again,” Louis says cheekily as they fall in line at the hostess stand.

“You look amazing,” Nick says quietly, pulling Louis into him by his hips. He leans down and nips quickly at his neck. “Delicious even,” he whispers against the shell of Louis’ ear, pressing a kiss there.

Louis flushes.

“Jesus, Grimshaw,” he says breathily. “Keep it in your pants. At least through dinner.”

“I’ll do my best,” Nick laughs, his hands at Louis’ hips. Louis purses his lips for a kiss, which Nick gives easily.

“You don’t look so bad yourself, you know,” Louis says softly. “You clean up nice.”

“We clean up nice,” Nick corrects, pecking his lips a second time.

“Welcome to the Ivy Inn,” the hostess says, her cheeks tinged pink at the blatant display of affection. “Do you have a reservation?”

Nick gives her his most dazzling smile. “Grimshaw, party of 2 for eight o’clock.”

The hostess consults her book and smiles. “Right this way, sirs.”

The restaurant has been converted from a two-hundred-year-old estate house, so it’s made up of several different dining rooms, all of them small and rather intimate. Nick rests his hand on the small of Louis’ back as the hostess leads them down the hall to theirs and, even though he’s been there before, Louis can’t help but gawk at their hushed surroundings. He self-consciously tugs at the hem of his t-shirt, suddenly wishing he’d worn the fucking button-down shirt after all. Or at least have tucked the goddamn shirt in and worn a less trendy jacket.

The hostess takes them to the back room, where a fireplace is lit in the corner, the flames glowing pleasantly. Antique sconces supply the rest of the lighting and classical music accompanies the soft sounds of china clinking as the rest of the diners enjoy their meals and quiet conversation. Louis feels like even a loud sneeze would have the potential of disturbing everyone’s dinner.
Their table is against the wall in the far corner by the fireplace. The hostess pulls out the chairs and places the menus across the plates.

“Enjoy your meal, gentlemen.”

Louis takes his seat, looking around the room nervously. Nick helps him scoot his chair in and rests his hands on his shoulders, pressing a quick kiss to the top of his head.

“Relax, babe,” he mutters as he takes his own seat.

A busboy appears, seemingly out of nowhere. He places a small basket of dinner rolls in the middle of the table, fills their water glasses, and is gone as quickly as he came.

“I forgot how fancy this place is,” Louis says ruefully. “I feel like I’ll get thrown out if I use the wrong fork or fold my napkin wrong or something.”

Nick snorts as he grabs a roll.

“That’s only at the French place downtown.”

Louis grabs his water glass, taking a large gulp. He picks up his menu and eyes the wine glasses nervously.

*I should ask them to take those away. Like now.*

Nick studies him, his mouth quirked with amusement.

“Okay,” he says with a grin. “I have a surprise for you. I was going to wait until after dinner but–”

“A surprise?” Louis asks. “Babe, you’ve already done so much, I–”

Nick reaches into his suit jacket and pulls out an envelope. He leans over and places it on Louis’ plate. Louis looks at him, his eyes wide.

“Go on,” Nick says, biting his lip. “Open it.”

Louis cocks an eyebrow at him and then slides his finger under the flap of the envelope, ripping it open. He pulls out a brochure for a ski resort just outside of Charlottesville, along with several pieces of paper outlining spa appointments, ski rentals, and dinner reservations.

“What...what is this?”

“What do you think it is?” Nick laughs. “I booked us a ski weekend. Starting Friday.”

*Shit.*

"I thought we could escape for a little while, just the two of us. Total privacy."

*Fuck.*


*Goddammit.*

Nick’s face falls, finally noticing Louis’ hesitance.
“Do you not think it’s a good idea?”
Louis winces, withdrawing his hand.

“No, it’s not that. But–”

“But what?”

Louis takes a deep breath.

*Rip the band-aid off.*

“I have plans with Harry on Friday.”

Nick’s face hardens.

“Are you fucking serious, Louis?” He asks through clenched teeth. “We haven’t seen each other in three months–”

“Don’t,” Louis snaps. “I haven’t seen him in three months either. It’s one night, you’re overreacting.”

“How did you think I would react?” Nick demands loudly. He pauses, flashing a tense smile to other diners who are peering at them curiously. “It’s your first weekend home,” he continues lowly. “The first time we could spend some quality time together and you go and make plans with Boy Scout.”

“How many fucking times have I asked you not to call him that,” Louis spits. “You know I hate it. It’s not funny.”

“You know, I thought you said that things were going to be different when you came back,” Nick says acidly, ripping off a piece of his roll. “Some difference.”

Louis’ shoulders slump. He wrings his hands in his lap and takes a shaky breath, fighting back the urge to cry.

*That fucking hurt.*

“You don’t think this is quality time?” Louis finally asks in a small voice.

Nick continues to sulk, popping the bread in his mouth.

“Babe, I’m just trying to be fair,” he says quietly. “To both of you. And to me. Harry’s my best friend and I miss him. I want to spend time with him. I want to spend time with you too. It’s important to me. I hope you know that,” Louis implores, reaching out to take Nick’s hand. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that I had made plans. But I’m here with you now. We’re at this beautiful and romantic restaurant. Can we...can we not ruin it by arguing? Please?”

“What about the room?”

“Can I take a raincheck? Because I would love to go away for the weekend with you. I just...can’t right now. It’s not just Harry, babe,” Louis sighs. “I just got back. I haven’t even adjusted to being in my own apartment yet. I have to go to meetings every day for the next three months. I can’t do any sort of escaping right now. From anything.”

“I guess you’re right,” Nick says, squeezing his hand. “I should have asked. I just...wanted to
surprise you.”

“I love that you wanted to do that, Nick,” Louis says soothingly. “Honestly, I do. I love you for that. I just...can’t right now, okay? Please understand.”

Nick nods, seemingly mollified.

“I’ll make it up to you,” Louis continues. “I’m at your beck and call for the next two days. Promise.”

“My beck and call, huh? Now that’s an idea I can get behind,” Nick says, raising an eyebrow suggestively.

“You’re an actual child, you know that right?”

Nick laughs, giving Louis’ hand a final squeeze and then picking up his menu. Louis sighs with relief, as he does the same.

“So I already know you want the pork belly appetizer,” Nick ponders. “I was thinking the foie gras too?”

Louis wrinkles his nose.

“Knock yourself out with that one, babe.” Louis grabs a roll and rips it in half, reaching for the butter. “Would you hate me if I ordered the cheese plate too, even though you can’t have any?”

“I already told you that you could get whatever you want,” Nick grins. “What about the entree? You got the beef last time, right? Do you want that?”

Louis scans the menu, his eyes landing on the beef dish that he got the last time they came.

*Cabernet sauce.*

*Shit.*

Louis’ stomach twists.

*I know all of the alcohol gets cooked out. But.*

“I think I’ll change it up,” Louis says quickly. “I think the short rib?”

Nick hums approvingly. “I was going to get the scallops,” he says. “But after that disaster with Eileen over Christmas, I think I’m off them for a while. You liked the beef?”

Louis nods, taking a bite of his roll.

“I’ll do that then,” Nick says. He sets the menu aside and takes Louis’ hand again. “Greg’s having a party at Trinity next week. A whole ‘kicking off our last semester’ thing. I told him we would go? Everyone will be there.”

Louis swallows, the roll feeling like a rock in his stomach.

“Babe, I–”

Their waitress appears before Louis can finish his thought.
“Welcome to the Ivy Inn, gentlemen,” she says with a smile. “My name is Sage and I’ll be taking care of you~”

“Sage! What an interesting name,” Nick says charmingly, giving her a dazzling smile. “How are you this evening?”

Louis rolls his eyes as her cheeks turn the same color as her strawberry blonde hair.

“I’m good, thanks,” she says, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, flustered. “Do you...um...do you have any questions about the menu or are you ready to order?”

“I think we’re ready if you are,” Nick says brightly, really laying it on thick. “We’ll start with the pork belly, the foie gras, and a cheese plate.” He turns to Louis and winks. “I’ll do the beef, medium rare, please, and this gorgeous boy here will take the short ribs.”

Louis sighs as the waitress smirks at him.

“Anything I can get you to drink?”

“Sweet tea,” Louis pipes up. “And...um...take the wine glasses, please?”

“Sweet tea?” Nick asks. “Don’t be ridiculous, babe, we’re celebrating!” He looks at the waitress. “We’ll have a bottle of the Veuve Clicquot, please.”

Louis lets out an affronted squawk, his jaw dropping. Sage raises her eyebrows.

“I’ll just...I’ll give you a moment,” she says, scurrying away.

Nick turns to Louis, confused.

“What now?”

“Excuse me?” Louis says incredulously.

“What?” Nick says again.

“Champagne?!” Louis exclaims shrilly.

“I mean, we’re celebrating right?”

“We’re celebrating me getting out of rehab, Nick!” Louis shrieks. “Should I just go ahead and call my dealer? I think I still have his number. We should get some pills to top off the bubbly! That’s a great idea! I’ll do that right now—”

“Louis,” Nick grits through his teeth as he looks around the room. “Keep your voice down.”

“Are you serious?” Louis laughs hysterically. “I can’t fucking believe you right now. You’re more worried about people hearing us fight than the fact that you just ordered champagne for your addict boyfriend!”

“You’re not an addict,” Nick says dismissively.

“Is this a joke? You’re joking, right?”

“You’re not though,” Nick says, his brow crinkling with confusion. “You agreed with me before you shipped off to that place! Remember? What happened in there? Did you actually join a cult or
something? Are you seriously telling me that you’re giving up alcohol forever? It’s just a couple of glasses of champagne with dinner, Louis. It’s not going to kill you.”

“Do you even know why I didn’t want to order the fucking beef, Nick?”

“Why?”

“It comes covered in cabernet sauce!”

“You could have gotten it on the side, Louis,” Nick says sarcastically. “Besides, the alcohol cooks out!”

“I know that!” Louis exclaims with frustration. “It’s the principle of the whole thing though! Jesus Christ, don’t you get it? I’m an addict, Nick. That fucking sauce? It may not have had booze in it, but it would have tasted like it. And I don’t know what that would have done to me! I just...I have to pay attention to everything right now. It’s the basis of everything I’ve been learning in rehab. What do you think I’ve been doing for the last three months?”

“I...I don’t know,” Nick says lamely.

“Exactly,” Louis snaps. “You don’t fucking know. You haven’t even asked. Do you even care?”

“I–”

“By the way,” Louis barrels on. “No, I do not want to go to Greg’s party.”

“What? Why?”

“Because it’s at a fucking bar, Nick! A bar I used to get drunk in. A lot. Or have you forgotten all the nights where you literally carried me out of Trinity? Fuck, that’s where we were the night I overdosed. You’re asking me to go back there like it means nothing!”

“So you don’t want to hang out with our friends any more?”

“Why aren’t you listening to me? It’s not that!”

“Then what the fuck is it, Louis? Explain it to me,” Nick says patronizingly, leaning back and crossing his arms.

“Look,” Louis says slowly. He takes a breath, trying to calm himself down. “I don’t know when I’ll be okay with being around people who are drinking. I may never be okay with it. I don’t know, Nick. And that has to be okay.”

“It’s just a party,” Nick reasons. “No one is going to force you to do anything there. I think you’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m being ridiculous?” Louis cries. “I’m being ridiculous?!”

“You are!” Nick exclaims. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What the hell is wrong with me is the fact that you don’t support me!”

“All I fucking do is support you!” Nick snaps. “What do you think I’ve been doing the past three months, Louis? I’ve been supporting you on this whole journey or whatever the fuck it is that you’ve been doing. When have I not supported you?”
“Um, how about right fucking now?” Louis asserts. “I got out of rehab this morning, Nick. Like, not even twelve hours ago. You just ordered a bottle of champagne and you’re pissed that I don’t want to go to a party thrown by our drinking buddies. How is that supporting me?”

“Louis, I–”

“I’ve got to make some serious changes in my life,” Louis interrupts. “If I don’t, I’m going to fall right back into the same patterns. If you want to this relationship to work, you’ve got to meet me halfway here.”

“How am I supposed to meet you halfway when you aren’t even willing to spend time with me and make me a priority?” Nick sneers. “That’s exactly what I wanted to do this weekend, Louis.”

“Yeah, on your terms. I feel like it’s always on your terms!”

“I was just trying to do something nice for you. How fucking selfish of me!”

“You never ask me what I want, Nick! You’re always deciding for me or taking over! Christ, you can’t even let me order my own dinner! Have you always been like this and I just haven’t noticed?”

“What do you want from me, Louis?” Nick asks warily.

“I don’t know,” Louis says honestly. “I don’t fucking know.”

They sit in tense silence for a few moments. Louis drains his water glass, while Nick helps himself to another roll.

“This is crazy,” Nick says with frustration, tossing the roll to his plate.

“I know,” Louis says quietly.

“Why can’t things go back to the way they were? You were fine before you went to that place.”

“What?” Louis asks with shock. “What are you saying?”

“I think you were fine before you went there,” Nick says evenly. “We were fine.”

“Do you mean you actually thought we were fine before?” Louis asks, his voice dangerously low. “We were fine when I was either high or drunk all the time? Jesus Christ, Nick. Do you know what I was thinking when I was getting dressed for tonight? I can’t remember the last time we had sex where I was one hundred percent sober. That’s so fucked up. You think that was fine? Do you think we were fine when you were always helping me deal with a hangover? That was fine? You liked that?”

“I felt like I could take care of you…”

“Oh, that’s right,” Louis says sarcastically. “It made you feel needed right? I’m so glad my addiction could help you feel better about yourself, Nick.”

“You know, at least I knew what to do with you before,” Nick says venomously.

Louis laughs with disbelief.

“Fuck you,” he mutters.

“What did you just say?”

Louis balls up his napkin and tosses it on his plate. He pushes his chair back and stands.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Louis shrieks. “I’m leaving!”

“Leaving!?”

“I’m leaving!”

“How are you going to get anywhere?” Nick jeers. “You don’t have a car!”

“I’ll figure it out. I can take care of myself, thanks,” Louis spits as he walks away.

“Are you crazy?” Nick shouts angrily.

Louis whirls back around, stopping in the middle of the room. He’s suddenly very aware how public this whole disaster has been as he takes in the stunned faces of the entire dining room.

“No,” he laughs, tossing his hands up. “I think I’m seeing things clearly for the first time in a long time. I can’t do this anymore. You and me? We’re through.”

“What?” Nick yelps.

“You fucking heard me. Don’t follow me,” Louis threatens, pointing at Nick. “I mean it.”

Nick says nothing, his handsome face white with shock.

“Show’s over, everyone!” Louis howls as he exits. He immediately slams into their waitress, who had been hovering by the door. “Sorry, oh my God, I’m so sorry…”

“Your appetizers?” She asks timidly, gesturing to the runner standing next to her, his hands full.

“He’ll take care of it,” Louis says apologetically. “I just...I gotta go.”

Louis practically sprints out of the restaurant, dodging other customers the best he can. The cold January air smacks him in the face as soon as he bursts through the doors. His heart is racing, adrenaline buzzing through his veins. He starts walking blindly, just trying to put as much distance between him and the restaurant as quickly as possible.

Fuck, fuck, fuck where do I go?

He spies one of the campus bus stops two blocks away. Wrapping his arms around himself tightly, he makes his way there.

_Oh my God, what did I just do? Holy fucking shit, did that just happen? It did. It did. Oh my God, it did. God, he’s such an asshole. I was better before? What kind of delusional bullshit is that, oh my God, what an asshole._

He arrives at the empty bus stop, gratefully plopping down on the bench. He runs his hands through his hair furiously, effectively destroying his cinnamon roll. Hands shaking, he pats the pockets of his jacket, looking for his cigarettes. He lets out a groan of realization.

_Goddammit, my cigarettes are in my coat. Shit. Mother fuck. Shit. My coat. My coat that’s in coat
check. At the restaurant.

He stands, patting all his other pockets in a panic.


Louis shivers, realizing just how cold it is.

Except it’s fucking freezing. Brilliant move, dickhead. You’re going to freeze to death before the bus gets here. Or starve. God, I’m so fucking hungry. Why did I only eat half a roll, what the fuck? Why the fuck was our reservation so late? Oh, come on. Where’s the fucking bus?

Where am I even going to go?

He hugs himself tightly, trying to hold in every ounce of warmth. It doesn’t work. He feels frozen down to the bone. He pulls out his phone to request a Lyft, cursing when he sees that it’s dead.

Where the fuck am I anyway?

Louis stands and peers at the street sign on the corner. He looks around, suddenly recognizing where he is.

Harry doesn’t live far from here.

Harry.

Harry, Harry, Harry.

I’ll go to Harry’s. Of course, I’ll go to Harry’s. He should be home.

Louis looks back at the bus stop, chewing his lip. The bus will get him closer to Harry’s apartment complex.

If it ever comes.

He sighs, shuffling his feet as he tries to make up his mind.

I could just walk there right? It’s not that far. It’s what? Half a mile from here? A mile? I can walk a mile. Easy. It won’t take me long. At this rate, it’s probably faster than the bus anyway. I’ll walk. It’ll keep me warm? Exercise! Brilliant idea, Louis.

He takes a deep breath and starts walking, barely caring that his shoes are already pinching his heels. All that matters right now is getting to Harry.

Harry, Harry, Harry.

Chapter End Notes

SORRY NOT SORRY FOR THE CLIFFHANGER. Mwah ha ha ha ha. Come yell at me on Tumblr.

Next update: Tuesday, March 20th!
A Tumblr post for the fic can be found here.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

This is one of my favorite chapters in the whole fic. Enjoy!

*Almost there. Never again, holy shit. Why did I think this was a good idea? This was the worst idea ever. God, I’m such an idiot. I should have waited for the goddamn bus. What was I thinking? Jesus Christ, my feet hurt.*

Louis turns the corner and hobbles into Harry’s apartment complex, his heels screaming in pain with every step.

*I’m going to burn these fucking shoes. As soon as I get to Harry’s, it’s bonfire time. I should just take them off. Except it’s fucking January and it’s freezing and I already can’t feel my toes. How long does it take to get frostbite anyway? You know who’d know? Harry.*

He pauses, peering at building numbers and then turns left.

*Almost there. I’m almost there. He just had to live in the last building, didn’t he? Unacceptable. He’s got to move immediately.*

*Oh Jesus, what if he isn’t home? What nights is he working at the library this semester? Shit, I can’t remember. Fuck. Think. He has to be home. He has to be. I mean, I can just use my key, but I really need—*

He slips on a patch of ice, his feet flying out from under him. He faceplants on the cold concrete, the fall completely knocking the breath from his chest.

*Ow, ow, ow, ow, goddammit, ow. Fuuuuuuuuuuuck me.*

He lies completely still, his muscles feeling like they’ve completely locked up.

Louis gingerly rolls over onto his back after a minute and slowly sits up, taking stock of his injuries. There’s an angry red scrape on the heel of his hand. His pants – his *favorite* pair of dress pants – are ripped and his knee is bleeding. He takes a deep breath and just...laughs. He laughs and laughs and laughs, even as tears of pain prick at his eyes.

*“Fuuuuuuuuuuuck!”* He shouts into the night. “Of fucking course!”

He heaves a sigh, feeling a dull ache start to spread from his temples. His knee and hand are stinging. Finally, Louis takes a deep breath and stands, angrily swiping the tears from his cheeks. He limps along the sidewalk, turning another corner.

*Please be home, please be home, please be home.*

Finally, Harry’s building comes into view. Louis sighs in relief when he sees that Olivia is parked in her usual spot; he looks up and sees that Harry’s lights are on too.

*He’s home. Thank fuck, he’s home.*
He grits his teeth as he slowly makes his way up the stairs, grasping the railing tightly. Finally, he finds himself at Harry’s door. He half-heartedly thrusts his fist in the air in victory. 

_I made it._

Louis knocks. He shivers and folds his arms over his chest.

_C’mon, Harry._

Just as he raises his hand to knock again, the door swings open, revealing Harry. He’s in his favorite threadbare Rolling Stones tee and a pair of tapered black sweatpants; his hair in a messy bun, his glasses on. He looks so achingly familiar and comfortable that Louis wants to throw his arms around him and never let go. Instead, he just offers him a weak smile.

Harry’s brow crinkles with confusion. “Louis? What are you–”

“I fell,” Louis says pathetically.

“What?”

“On some ice. I even ripped my pants, look.”

Harry looks down at his knee and his eyes go wide.

“Jesus, Louis, you’re bleeding!”

“I’m aware of that, Haz,” Louis says drily, his teeth chattering. “C-can I come in? P-please?”

Harry shakes himself and blinks. “Sorry, sorry, yeah!” He reaches out and slides his arm around Louis’ shoulders, guiding him into the apartment. “Fuck, you’re freezing,” Harry says, rubbing his hands up and down Louis’ arms vigorously. “Where the hell is your coat?” he asks, leading Louis to the couch.

Louis winces in pain as he limps over with him, bracing himself with an arm around Harry’s waist.

“Christ,” Harry mutters. “Sit.”

Louis sits on Harry’s overstuffed couch, his shoulders slumping with relief as he sinks into the cushions. Harry gently places a blanket around his shoulders and then smooths the hair off Louis’ forehead.

“I’ll be right back,” he says softly, eyes full of concern.

Louis nods. Harry disappears into the bathroom while Louis unties his shoes, whimpering as he wiggles his feet free. He tosses them under the coffee table with a grunt.

_Never again._

He can hear Harry rummaging around in the bathroom, cabinet doors banging. The faucet turns on and Louis chuckles.

“Are you scrubbing in, Dr. Styles?”

“You don’t know where my hands have been,” Harry calls back cheekily.

Louis bites his lip, his cheeks heating slightly.
He hears the faucet shut off and Harry emerges a few moments later clutching a first-aid kit, a bottle of peroxide, and a bottle of Advil. He places them on the coffee table and shoves the small pile of textbooks aside so he can sit. He immediately pops back up.

“Do you want water? You need some water. Shit. Sorry.”

He heads to the kitchen before Louis can say anything. Louis smiles, endeared by Harry going into full doctor mode. Harry returns with a glass of water, handing it to him as he sits.

“Thanks,” Louis says gratefully.

Harry grabs the bottle of Advil and pauses, looking at Louis questioningly.

“You can have this right?”

“Yeah, Haz,” Louis smiles. “It’s fine.”

Harry unscrews the cap and taps out two tablets.

“I usually take three.”

“The recommended dosage is two, Lou,” Harry says sternly.

“But I’m in pain, Hazza,” Louis says feebly.

Harry sighs and taps out a third tablet. He starts to hand them to Louis, but holds his hand back at the last second.

“Have you eaten?”

Louis rolls his eyes.

“One time on an empty stomach won’t kill me.”

Harry hands him the Advil, grumbling something about stomach ulcers under his breath. Louis smiles at him sweetly and then pops the pills in his mouth, taking a giant swig of water.

“Okay,” Harry says, adjusting his glasses. “Let’s see here.”

He gently takes Louis’ calf and props his foot up on his knee, Louis sliding down further into the couch to accommodate the shift. Harry leans over and peers at the angry red blister on his heel.

“Christ, Louis,” he says, gingerly thumbing over the bubbled skin as Louis hisses. “There are these things called socks, you know.”

“Gee, thanks,” Louis says, rolling his eyes fondly. “I’ll keep those things in mind for next time I walk a mile in these shoes. Which will be never, by the way. I’m burning them.”

Harry bites back a grin, his dimple carving a crater in his cheek. He reaches for the first-aid kit and pops it open, plucking out a couple of cushioned blister pads. He tears the wrapper off of one and peels the backing before carefully placing it over the blister and patting it gently; all the while his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth in concentration.

“Switch,” he says, tapping Louis’ knee. Louis smiles and switches legs, resting his foot on Harry’s knee. Harry’s hand gently encircles his ankle as he whistles lowly.
“This one’s worse,” he sighs. “Fuck, Lou. What the hell is going on? What are you doing walking around in this weather?”

Louis doesn’t say anything. He just grimaces as Harry places the bandage.

“Let me see that knee.”

Louis lowers his leg. Harry leans forward over his knee, carefully pulling the fabric away from where it’s sticking to the scrape.

Louisgasps, shying back from him.

“Sorry, sorry,” Harry soothes. “Um. Okay.” Harry sits back, balling his fists. “So...um...I...I can’t...you need...um...you gotta...”

“Spit it out, Haz.”

“You gotta take your pants off,” Harry says quickly, his cheeks turning pink. “It’s either that or I rip them even more?”

“These are my favorite pants,” Louis groans. “Do you...do you think they can be saved?”

“I mean...the rip’s not that bad, you could take them–”

Louis stands, unbuttoning his pants. He shimmies them down his thighs, wincing as he pulls the fabric past his wounded knee. Gingerly hopping on each foot, he uses Harry’s shoulder for balance as he removes one leg, then the other. He tosses the pants over the opposite arm of the couch and then looks down at Harry, who has turned scarlet. His mouth hangs slightly open. Louis tugs his blazer down self consciously.

Right. Tiny tiny underwear. Shit. Too late now.

Harry swallows hard as Louis plops back on the couch. Louis pulls the blanket back over his shoulders and raises his eyebrow challengingly, looking Harry right in his eyes.

“My favorite pair of pants, Harry,” he states.

“O-okay,” Harry says, taking a deep breath. “Right. Yeah. Can’t...can’t ruin those.”

“Right.”

“Okay,” Harry breathes. He scoots his hips back and carefully props Louis’ foot up on the table in between his legs. “Don’t kick me,” Harry mutters, squeezing his bare calf.

Louis huffs a laugh. “I won’t.”

“You say that now,” Harry warns as he grabs several squares of gauze and the bottle of peroxide. He opens the bottle and carefully soaks the gauze. “This is going to sting a little.”

Harry gently presses the gauze over the scrape. Louis jumps back, but Harry keeps a firm grip on him, not allowing him to move.

“A little?” Louis yelps. “Jesus Christ!”

“I just told you it would sting,” Harry says patiently.
“Yeah, you said a little! It stings a lot!” Louis says indignantly. “You need to work on your bedside manner, Dr. Styles.”

“You big baby,” Harry teases.

“Shut up, it really hurts,” Louis whines.

Harry leans forward, blowing softly on his knee, his thumb tracing soothing circles on his ankle. Louis squirms as goosebumps prickle on his arms. He tugs the blanket tighter around his chest.

“Better?” Harry asks quietly, looking up at him through his eyelashes.


Harry smiles and continues to pat his knee carefully.

“So,” Harry says cautiously, setting the gauze aside and grabbing some ointment. “Not that I’m not glad to see you but...what are you doing here, Lou? Aren’t you...aren’t you supposed to be having some big romantic dinner with Nick?”

Louis laughs. It starts as a quiet chuckle, escalating into a full-body laugh. Louis tosses his head cackling as Harry sits and watches, his brow furrowed.

“Louis? What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Louis says, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes as he catches his breath. “It’s just so funny you said that because we just broke up. Well. I broke up with him, really.”

Harry drops the tube of ointment. He looks at Louis, eyes wide behind his glasses, jaw practically on the floor. He stares at Louis, dumbfounded.

“Say something,” Louis says softly after a few moments.

“Something.”

“Haz.”

“I...I don’t know what to say. I’m shocked.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Harry reaches down for the ointment. He uncaps it and starts gently dabbing it on Louis’ knee. Louis winces, gasping softly.

“Aren’t you supposed to...avoid major life changes right now?” Harry asks.

“Really, Harry? You of all people are going to argue that I shouldn’t have broken up with him?”

“I...”

“I’m also supposed to ‘remove myself from situations or relationships that could be triggering,’” Louis counters, looking down at his hands. “That’s what James says anyway. And Nick...okay. So we get all dressed up for dinner and he brings me fucking flowers and I’m like ‘Okay, this is going to be fine,’ and we go to the Ivy Inn of all places—”
“Fancy,” Harry interjects. “Not you though.”

“Yeah, I know,” Louis agrees. “Not me at all. But he just wanted to do something nice, you know? So we get there and we’re already arguing ’cause he planned this trip for the weekend without asking me first and then the waitress gets there and guess what he does, Harry?”

“What?”

“He orders a fucking bottle of champagne.”

Harry looks up, fury flashing in his eyes.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“God, I wish I was,” Louis laughs. “I really wish I was. It was like ‘Welcome back from rehab, Louis! Let’s celebrate your sobriety by falling right off the wagon.’”

Harry shakes his head and then rips open a large bandage.


“You forgot to kiss it better,” Louis says without thinking.

Harry looks at him with surprise, blinking owlishly.

“Um...” Harry starts.

Jesus Christ, did I really just say that? Just go with it. That will make it less weird, right?

“I mean it,” Louis says, tilting his chin up and clicking his tongue. “Gotta work on that bedside manner, Styles. What do I keep telling you? You want to be a pediatrician, right? You’ll get nowhere without kissing all the boo-boos.”

Harry chews his lip in contemplation while Louis looks at him expectantly, almost daring him. Finally, Harry smiles softly and leans forward slowly. He keeps his eyes trained on Louis, almost as if he’s waiting for him to stop him and say he’s just kidding; Louis meets his gaze steadily. Harry ducks his head and presses his lips to Louis’ knee, kissing it tenderly. He lingers ever so slightly and Louis shivers from the butterflies suddenly fluttering in his stomach. Harry sits up and looks at him, his gaze intense.

“How was that?” Harry asks, his voice rough.

“G-good,” Louis stutters, grabbing a throw pillow and hugging it to his middle. “Great.”

“Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“No,” Louis says quickly, hugging the pillow tighter. “Nope. I’m good. All cured. A-plus job, Dr. Styles, you’ll go far.”

“Louis,” Harry says skeptically. “Let me see.”

Harry carefully lowers Louis’ leg to the floor and scoots forward, boxing Louis in with his thighs. He reaches for Louis’ right hand, arching an eyebrow when he sees the scrape on the heel of it.

“It’s fine,” Louis says.
“No, it’s not.”

Harry soaks another pad of gauze with peroxide. He holds Louis’ palm in his large hand, gripping it firmly but gently.

“What’s going on?”

Louis grits his teeth and nods. He hisses the instant the gauze touches his hand.

“Hold. Still.”

“Sorry,” Louis whispers.

Harry starts the whole cleaning process over again. Louis watches him work, the corner of his mouth twitching up in amusement at Harry’s extreme concentration.

“You know what the worst thing was?” Louis finally asks, his voice quiet.

Harry looks at him questioningly.

“He didn’t even think twice about ordering the champagne. Can you believe it?”


“He even said that a few glasses wouldn’t kill me. After...everything.”

Harry bows his head and takes a sharp breath, squeezing Louis’ fingers. “I’m gonna ki–”

“Harry,” Louis says softly.

Harry looks up at him, eyes blazing. Louis gives a small shake of his head and Harry’s face instantly softens. He sighs deeply and presses the bandage on his hand.

“Are you okay?”

“I am now,” Louis replies.

“Fuck, Lou,” Harry breathes. He takes Louis’ hand in both of his, pressing a fervent kiss over the bandage. “I’m just...I’m so sorry.”

Louis shrugs. “It is what it is. And then I – wh-what are you doing?” Louis squeaks as Harry’s hand cups his jaw.

“You have a scrape on your chin.”

“Oh. I...I didn’t even know...okay.”

Harry’s hand slides to Louis’ neck as he gently dabs peroxide-soaked gauze on his chin. Louis gasps and wonders if Harry can feel the way his pulse is racing.

“That must have been some fall,” Harry murmurs. He’s so close that Louis can feel his breath puffing against his skin. Louis closes his eyes and takes a shaky breath.

“Yeah,” Louis says lowly as Harry carefully applies the ointment. “I...wasn’t paying attention. Just...splat.”

Harry hums, tilting Louis’ chin up as he fixes a small Band-Aid over the scrape, carefully
smoothing the ends in place.

“All better,” he murmurs, his thumb brushing Louis’ jaw.

“Thanks,” Louis whispers, his eyes fluttering open and meeting Harry’s. He’s still so close that Louis can see the flecks of gold in Harry’s green eyes. Louis holds his breath.

Is he going to…?

But then Harry withdraws, avoiding Louis’ eyes as he packs up the first-aid kit. Louis exhales, not knowing if he’s relieved or disappointed.

“You were saying?”

“W-what?”

“What happened after the champagne?” Harry asks, his head still bowed.

Suddenly aware of just how long he’s been sitting still, Louis starts to feel twitchy; itching to move. He sets the pillow aside, gingerly pushing himself up. He gives Harry’s shoulder a quick squeeze and starts pacing around the living room, wincing every few steps.

“Right then it was like...everything just came into focus. I realized he was never going to support me the way I need,” Louis explains. “He didn’t get it, you know? Maybe he never did. He didn’t get...me. I lost it, Haz. I caused a huge scene in the middle of the dining room. I was shouting and everyone was staring at me. I told him that it was over and I left. I just...I had to get out of there as fast as I could. That’s why I don’t have my coat. Nick had checked it for me and I ran out, completely forgetting about it until it was too late. And I couldn’t go back there, you know?”

“Oh, Lou,” Harry mutters.

“Nick drove so I just...started walking,” Louis explains. “I wasn’t sure where I was going at first but you...you were the first person I thought of.”

“Louis, why didn’t you call me? I would have come to get you,” Harry says earnestly. “No matter where you were, I would have come.”

Louis picks up his discarded pants and pulls out his phone, holding it up for Harry to see.

“It’s dead. I forgot to charge it.”

Harry stands, extending his hand as he walks towards Louis.

“I waited for the bus,” Louis continues after handing his phone to Harry to plug into his charger. “But I just...I just wanted to get here as fast as I could and the bus didn’t come so...well...you know the rest. Not my brightest idea but...I’m here.”

“I’m glad you are,” Harry says softly.

Louis looks around the room, his eyes falling on the pile of textbooks.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I? I can go if you want me~”

“No!” Harry exclaims suddenly. Louis laughs and Harry blushes, shuffling his feet. “No, I’m just reading ahead for my gender studies class. It’s no big deal.”
“Just a little light reading, huh, Hermione?” Louis teases.

“Yes, Ronald,” Harry replies, rolling his eyes.

They grin at each other. After a moment, Harry comes and wraps his arms around Louis’ shoulders, pulling him into his chest.

“Hey,” Harry mutters in his ear.

“Hey,” Louis parrots, his arms winding around Harry’s middle.

“You are always welcome here. You know that, right?”

Louis smiles into Harry’s shoulder.

“I know, Hazza.”

“You hungry?” Harry asks, rubbing his back.

“I’m so hungry I forgot I was hungry,” Louis mumbles.

“Want to order a pizza?”

“Oh my God,” Louis moans. “Can we please? Can we get breadsticks too? With extra dipping sauce?”

“What’s the point of breadsticks without extra dipping sauce?” Harry laughs as he releases him. “Pepperoni and extra cheese?”

“Mmmmm...talk dirty to me, Haz,” Louis grins.


“Hey, can I borrow some clothes?” Louis asks, tugging at the hem of his t-shirt. “I’m just...I just realized that...I’m very naked right now.”

“I don’t know, Lou,” Harry smirks. “If you answer the door in those briefs, we may get the pizza for free.”

“You’re an asshole,” Louis retorts, blushing furiously.

“An asshole who’s ordering you pizza,” Harry responds with a grin. “Sweatpants are in my bottom drawer.”

Louis flips him off as he heads back towards the bedroom. He flicks on the light and smiles. Harry’s room is neat and cluttered at the same time; books and binders stacked on almost every available surface, a giant bulletin board is mounted over his desk full of photos, ticket stubs, and various mementos. A framed poster from their trip to Bonnaroo hangs in the space above his bed and framed black and white photos of family and friends are hung on either sides of his mirror. It’s all just so...Harry.

Louis grabs a pair of gray sweatpants from the bottom of the dresser and pulls them on. He opens the top drawer and gets a pair of thick socks, then sits on the corner of the bed, gingerly pulling them on over his blisters. Louis shrugs out of his blazer, tossing it on the bed and grabbing the lavender sweater slung over Harry’s desk chair. It’s huge on him; the wide neck exposes his collarbones and the sleeves hang well past his wrists, but it’s snuggly and it smells like Harry.
Louis looks in the mirror, pushing the sleeves up his forearms as he tries to smooth out his messy hair.

*Much better.*

Louis turns to flip the lights off and pauses, smiling softly. He reaches out and traces his fingers over the tiles of the Scrabble painting, which is displayed in the space above the lightswitch. Something about the fact that Harry hung the painting where he would see it every time he left the room makes Louis’ heart flutter in his chest. Pure fondness for the boy waiting for him in the living room almost overwhelms him.

“Lou!” Harry calls excitedly. “Our favorite episode of *Friends* is on!”

“Coming,” Louis replies, running his fingers down the edge of the painting. He smiles again and flips off the light.

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Harry doesn’t know what’s worse: Louis in tiny briefs asking him to kiss his fucking boo-boos or Louis looking soft and small, bundled up in Harry’s sweatpants and the lavender sweater he had worn to class that morning.

Harry leans back and glances at Louis, trying to be subtle as he watches him out of the corner of his eye. He’s slumped against the arm of couch, his legs stretched out on the cushions, toes occasionally brushing Harry’s thigh. His eyes are trained on their fourth episode of *Friends* as he polishes off his third slice of pizza. He laughs softly, wiping his mouth with a napkin as he leans forward and places his plate on the coffee table. He pokes at the empty box that had contained their breadsticks, frowning.

“Did we really eat all the breadsticks, Haz?”

“You did,” Harry says mildly. “I think I had two?”

Louis harrumphs and burrows back into the couch cushions, pulling the sweater sleeves over his hands.

*Comfy and cozy Louis is worse. Definitely worse.*

*Friends* gives way to *Seinfeld* and they watch in comfortable silence. Harry notices that Louis is laughing less and less. Finally, he sighs heavily, pulling his uninjured leg up, wrapping his arms around it and resting his forehead on his knee.

“You okay?” Harry asks, reaching for the remote and muting the television.

Louis doesn’t say anything for a few moments. He just takes a few deep breaths. When he looks up at Harry, tears are sparkling in his blue eyes.

“I was just thinking,” Louis says softly. “That all I really wanted tonight was sweatpants and pizza. And I...I got exactly what I wanted?” He gulps, the tears spilling over. “I just...I never thought it would happen this way. Like...if this had been me and Nick’s plan from the beginning, would everything be fine? Would we be sitting on his couch right now?”

“His couch was uncomfortable,” Harry mumbles.

“It was,” Louis laughs through his tears. “God, it so was. It looked comfortable but there was...no
give to it? It’s a moo point anyway.”

“So you’re confirming he’s a cow then.”

Louis digs his toe into Harry’s thigh.

“Because a night like this never would have been our plan anyway,” Louis sighs. “Fuck. We were on such different pages. I know it’s my fault for not speaking up but...a part of me wishes he had just known that I would have prefered a night in tonight. You would have known.”

Harry’s heart hurts. He suddenly feels like he’s either going to cry or say something he really shouldn’t right now. So he just nods and looks down at his hands. Louis pokes him with his toe again.

“Hey,” he says softly. “I hope you know that it’s not that I’m not happy to be here with you right now. I am.”

“You only love me for my couch,” Harry jokes half-heartedly.

“Not just for your couch, Haz,” Louis says seriously. “The reality’s just setting in, yeah? Jesus. I just...can’t believe it’s over.”

“Do you regret it?” Harry asks reluctantly.

“No,” Louis says emphatically. “No, I don’t. But it still hurts? Like...I was with him almost two years and it’s just...over. It’s over.”

“Lou–”

“And I know you’re the last person who wants to listen to me cry over Nick Grimshaw,” Louis says, wiping his cheeks.

“No, it’s fine–”


“Don’t pick a fight with me, Lou,” Harry says quietly, refusing to take the bait. “I’m not the one you’re mad at.”

Louis doesn’t speak for a while, his soft sobs the only sound in the room.

“I’m sorry, Hazza,” Louis says in a tiny voice. He carefully swings his legs around and scoots closer to Harry, looping his arm through his and resting his head against his shoulder. “You’re right, I was picking a fight. I’m sorry.”

“Do you really think I don’t care that you’re hurting? That I wouldn’t want to listen to you?” Harry asks, leaning his cheek against the top of Louis’ head. “I care, Lou. I’ll always listen to you. You know that.”

“I know,” Louis says, playing with Harry’s fingers.

“Even if it is listening to you crying over Nick fucking Grimshaw,” Harry adds slyly.

“A-ha! I knew it!” Louis exclaims, poking him in the ribs. Harry pokes him back. Louis pokes him harder. Harry grabs his wrists and Louis struggles against him, laughing softly. He yields after a
few moments, tucking himself under Harry’s arm as he sniffles. Harry leans forward and grabs a
napkin and hands it to Louis.
“Thanks,” Louis whispers before blowing his nose. He balls up the napkin and tosses it at the table,
where it lands in the middle of the empty breadsticks box.
“He scores,” Harry mutters.
“Damn right.”
Louis snuggles closer to him, his arm snaking around Harry’s middle.
“I feel like such an idiot,” he confesses quietly.
“Why?”
“How did I get it so wrong? Almost two years, Harry. I just keep playing things over in my head
and there were so many things that I...I don’t know why I stayed with him for so long. Why did I?”
“Yeah, why did you?”
“That was a rhetorical question.”
“But I’m asking you,” Harry states. “Why did you?”
“I mean...he was fun,” Louis muses as he sits up.
“Is that all?”
“I mean, he’s a year older and he seemed to really have his shit together. He’s in a major he loves
and he’s just...really going for it. He...he was always so confident. I liked that. He knew what he
wanted. And he wanted me. Me, Harry. No one ever wanted me before.”
“That’s not true, Louis,” Harry corrects quietly.
“Okay, then no one had wanted to stick around before him. I had never really done the steady
boyfriend thing before. You know that. You were always the one with a boyfriend.”
“...Yeah.”
“We always got along so well. I never had to tone it down with him. He was never embarrassed by
me...until tonight I guess?” Louis pauses. “And the sex was great. Really great.”
Harry makes a sour face without even realizing it.
“You asked.”
Harry smooths out his face and asks the one thing he really wants to know.
“You loved him?”
"Yeah," Louis breathes. "At least...I think I did. Maybe it was just the idea of the whole thing. He
always seemed...I don't know...proud to be with me? We were always going out with his crowd and
he'd compliment me and make sure people knew that I was his boyfriend. All I ever heard from
professors or TAs or from Mark was that I wasn't good enough. No matter how hard I tried, I still
wasn't good enough.”


A single tear rolls down Louis’ cheek. Harry reaches out and gently brushes it away, carefully trailing his fingers down his cheek.

“It wasn't like that with Nick,” Louis continues. “He just made me feel good. Fuck, that sounds pathetic and shallow, doesn’t it?”

“No,” Harry whispers. “It doesn’t.”

“And then...I got...lost.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“When did it start? The pills?”

“You’re not going to like the answer, Haz,” Louis admits, curling into him.

“Tell me anyway,” Harry says, rubbing his back. “I want to know. I’m not going to judge you.”

Louis sighs heavily.

“Almost a year ago. Midterms spring semester. I just...I started having a really hard time keeping up, remember?”

“Yeah,” Harry says sadly. “I remember.”

“It really was just to help me stay up and study at first. No one like...sets out to become an addict, right? I thought I could get through the semester and it would be fine but everything just started getting more and more intense and I just...I started depending on the fucking things. Things with Mark started getting really ugly. I started drinking more and more whenever I would go out ’cause I just wanted to get out of my fucking head. It was a release.”

“Looking back, I knew something was wrong,” Harry chokes out, tears pricking at his eyes. “I didn’t know what but I knew. I should have asked more. Why didn’t I ask more? God, Louis, I’m just...I’m so sorry.”

“I didn’t ask for help, Harry. I didn’t know how. I didn’t want to drag you down; you were already trying to help me so much. I thought I was in control. And Nick...he...he was something easy. It was nice to have something easy. He didn’t make me face my problems. He was always perfectly happy to just go out and party every night. And I...I didn’t see the red flags with Nick, you know? I couldn’t see them.”

Harry nods, wiping his eyes.

“The whole time I was in rehab and getting better, little things just started adding up. I started seeing us more clearly. James helped me realize how fucked my coping mechanisms are and now it’s so obvious that Nick wasn’t supporting me, he was enabling me. Enabling my addiction. And it wasn’t just that. Our dynamic was totally off. I’d never realized how much I had been letting him call the shots. Fuck, do you know that he almost always ordered my dinner for me?”

“He did what now?”

“You heard me.”

Harry barks a laugh.
“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I just...I can’t picture anyone doing anything like that for you and them leaving with their nuts intact.”

“I know!” Louis exclaims. “I know, right? It’s not me. At all. Where the fuck did my spine go?”

“I think it came back tonight,” Harry giggles.

“Thank Christ. Fuck, he was so wrong for me.”

Louis grabs a pillow and puts it in Harry’s lap, resting his head there. Harry gently cards his fingers through Louis’ hair.

“You knew that the whole time, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Harry says softly. “I did.”

Louis rolls over to look at him.

“You never said anything. I mean...I knew you thought so, but you never said.”

“Would you have listened to me?”

“Knowing me, I probably would have just...dug my heels in and dated him even harder just to prove you wrong.”

“Exactly,” Harry chuckles.

“Like I said. I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not,” Harry replies, brushing the hair off Louis’ forehead. “He just...he wasn’t the guy, Lou. That’s all.”

Louis sighs. Harry continues to stroke his hair.

“You cut your hair,” Harry observes.

“I did,” Louis smiles. “Zayn cut it right after you came to visit.”

Harry smirks.

“Oh, did he now?”

Louis laughs. “You like it?”

“I do.”

Louis laughs softly.

“God, I’m such a mess,” he moans, sitting up and scrubbing his hands over his face. “I can’t believe I’ve been out of rehab less than a day. Talk about a rude awakening.”

“This break-up was a long time coming,” Harry says, squeezing his shoulder. “You said so yourself. One day at a time, Lou. This was a bad day. They won’t all be like this.”

“Promise?” Louis asks, his eyes downcast as he picks a piece of lint off of Harry’s knee.

“Promise,” Harry murmurs, tilting Louis’ chin up and meeting his gaze.
Louis smiles at him softly and then tucks himself back into Harry’s side. They sit in silence, watching Jerry and Elaine bicker on the muted television.

“Is it really twelve-thirty?” Louis asks after a few minutes.

“Looks like it,” Harry replies.

“I hate the thought of going back to my empty apartment,” Louis admits, sitting up and stretching his arms above his head. “I was there by myself all day and it just...it weirds me out? Do you think you can help me rearrange it or something this weekend? I know I can’t move or anything, but maybe that will help?”

“Of course I can.”

Louis smiles wanly. “Thanks.”

“Wait a minute. He just left you there this morning?” Harry asks, a hint of outrage creeping into his voice. “Did he even offer to stay and help you unpack?”

“He had things to do,” Louis says in a tiny voice.

“What a selfish prick,” Harry bites. “I swear to God, Lou, I’m gonna–”

“Harry.”

“Sorry,” Harry breathes, wrapping his arms around him, resting his chin on top of his head. “Can’t help it.”

“Try. It’s not worth it.”

“He hurt you,” Harry says softly.

“I’m okay, H,” Louis whispers, snuggling into him. “I’m okay.”

“Just stay here tonight,” Harry murmurs into his hair after a moment.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I can take you home in the morning. Just...stay.”

“Okay,” Louis says softly, his hand resting on Harry’s stomach. “Thanks.” He pokes at the rip in Harry’s t-shirt and fiddles with the safety pins holding it together. His fingers brush bare skin, Harry shivering at the contact.

“I think it’s time to let this shirt go, Haz,” Louis says with amusement.


“What time do you have class tomorrow?” Louis asks, lacing their fingers together.

“Not till eleven,” Harry replies. “It’s my late day.”

“That’s good,” Louis yawns.

“Do you want my bed?” Harry asks, rubbing his back comfortably. “You can have it. It’s been a long day for you.”
“M’good on the couch,” Louis says sleepily. “I really do love your couch. Always have.”

“I’m gonna...I’m gonna go and get you a better pillow, okay?” Harry says, untangling himself from Louis’ embrace.

“’Kay,” Louis replies, stretching like a cat.

“I’ll be...I’ll be right back.”

As soon as Harry gets to his room, he blows out a big breath. He takes his hair out of its bun, running his fingers through it. He paces around his small bedroom, trying to calm his racing heart.

Jesus Christ.

He’s been through a trauma tonight, you dick. This is not about you. But holy fuck, he actually broke up with Nick. And he’s so fucking cuddly, I want to scream. Jesus Christ. Okay, okay, okay, calm the fuck down. Get him a pillow and go the fuck to bed, Harry.

Harry sees Louis’ discarded blazer on his bed and rolls his eyes fondly. He picks it up and folds it neatly over his desk chair, smoothing out the wrinkles. He grabs one of his pillows and returns to the living room to find Louis sitting up, waiting for him patiently. He’s turned the television off and put their leftover pizza in the fridge.

“Here you go,” Harry says softly, handing him the pillow. Louis takes it and places it on the opposite end of the couch. “Do you think that blanket will be warm enough?”

“Yeah. Thanks,” Louis replies, equally soft. He smiles up at him sleepily.

Go to bed, go to bed, go to bed.

“I should go to bed,” Harry says, shuffling his feet. He brushes a quick kiss on top of Louis’ head. “G’night, Lou.”

“Wait,” Louis says, taking his hand. “Could you...could you stay with me? Please? I don’t...I don’t want to be alone.” He takes a deep breath and looks up at Harry, his blue eyes pleading. “Please stay here with me, Haz. Just until I fall asleep?”

Don’t do it. Do not. Go to bed, Harry.

“Yeah,” Harry breathes. “Yeah, of course I’ll stay.”

Louis stands and gestures towards the couch.

“After you,” he says shyly. “I’m little spoon. If that’s okay?”

Harry laughs nervously, butterflies fluttering up a storm in his stomach, his heart pounding. He stretches out on the couch, scooching back into the cushions to leave room for Louis. Louis sits against his stomach and then leans down and removes Harry’s glasses, his fingers brushing his cheek as he does so. Louis smiles softly, his eyes crinkling up at the corners as he gently tugs a curl and folds the glasses up, placing them on the table. Harry blinks several times as his eyes refocus and he opens his arms up for Louis. He lies down next to Harry, tangling their legs together as Harry pulls up the blanket around them.

“Comfy?” Louis asks quietly as he presses back into Harry’s chest. He gently tugs Harry’s arm around him, bringing his hand up to his chest and lacing their fingers.
“Very,” Harry murmurs, hooking his chin over Louis’ shoulder.

Louis hums in contentment.

“I was kidding before.”

“’Bout what?”

“Your bedside manner doesn’t need any work,” he whispers. “Thank you for taking care of me, Doctor Harry.”

Harry’s heart clenches.

“Always.”

“So sleepy.”

“Go to sleep, Lou. I’m here. I won’t leave.”

Louis nuzzles into their pillow. His breathing becomes deep and even after a few minutes. Harry sighs, idly stroking Louis’ forearm. He knows this isn’t real, that things will probably go back to normal in the morning, but tonight? Tonight he’s going to savor the feeling of Louis in his arms. Tonight, Louis is his.

Just for tonight.

Louis stirs, whimpering softly. Harry pulls him closer to his chest, tightening his arms around him. Louis stills instantly, relaxing in his embrace. Harry smiles and presses a gentle kiss on his jaw.

“I love you,” he whispers into his hair as his eyes drift shut.

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The first time Louis wakes up, it’s because he hears a door slam outside the apartment. Eyes fluttering open, he whines softly and burrows back into Harry, nuzzling his cheek against the soft cotton of his t-shirt. It’s not time to get up yet.

Wait. Harry?

Louis blinks several times, lifting his head up slightly to look at him. He smiles, his heart swelling.

Harry’s still here.

They’ve shifted positions during the night; Harry’s almost fully on his back with Louis nestled at his side, clinging to him like a koala, one leg slung over him and one hand resting over Harry’s heart. Harry’s outer arm is wrapped around him, his hand at his waist, keeping him anchored to his side; his other hand rests lightly on Louis’ wrist.

Louis rests his chin on Harry’s chest, taking the opportunity to admire him. His hair is falling across his face; his mouth hangs open slightly, his bottom lip pouting. Peach fuzz dusts his chin, upper lip, and patches of his cheeks. Louis gingerly slides his hand out of Harry’s loose grip. Careful not to wake him, he sweeps the hair off Harry’s face, tucking it behind his ear. He gently strokes the strong line of his jaw and then the slope of his cheeks. Harry scrunches his nose and snuffles; Louis withdraws his hand and holds his breath, fearing that he’s woken him. Harry’s face relaxes a few seconds later and Louis sighs in relief. He continues his exploration, keeping his touch feather-light, gently smoothing out the furrow between Harry’s eyes and tracing the shape of
his brows.

He’s beautiful.

Louis hesitates for a moment, knowing he’s pushing his luck. Finally, he carefully pushes himself up and presses a delicate kiss right by the corner of Harry’s mouth.

“Thank you,” he whispers, smiling down at Harry’s sleeping face. “For staying.”

Louis nestles back into Harry’s side, pillowing his head on his chest and sliding his hand back under his. He lets the rise and fall of Harry’s chest lull him back to sleep.

The second time Louis wakes up, it’s because Harry’s alarm goes off. Harry startles the instant “Party in the U.S.A.” blares from the speakers of his iPhone. He tightens his grip on Louis’ waist as he leans over him, groping for his phone on the coffee table. He grabs it and silences the alarm before he tosses it to the floor.

“Lou,” Harry says softly, shaking him gently.

“Nnnnnghghhhhh,” Louis grumbles into Harry’s chest.


“But I’m comfy,” Louis pouts. “Don’t wanna.”

Harry’s chest rumbles with laughter. He tickles Louis’ side.

“Get up, get up, get up.”

Louis grabs his hand, squeezing his fingers to stop him.

“I hate you,” Louis mumbles, looking up at him. “I hate you so much. You’re such a fucking morning person.”

Harry smiles softly, an expression of awe on his face.

“Hey,” he whispers, bopping Louis on the nose.

“Hey,” Louis whispers back, returning the soft smile.

They smile at each other dopily for a few seconds.

“I can’t believe that’s still your ringtone,” Louis laughs.

Harry shrugs, his dimple emerging. “Why mess with a classic?”

Louis laughs, nuzzling into Harry’s shoulder and closing his eyes.

“Uh-huh, Louis, don’t even think about it,” Harry laughs, poking him in the ribs. “I’ve got to get ready for class.”

“Fiiiiiiiiiiine,” Louis sighs dramatically, sitting up. “I’m up, I’m up.”

Harry sits up as well, running his fingers through his hair.

“Do you need the shower?”
“Nah,” Louis says, standing and stretching his stiff muscles. “You go ahead. I’ll shower at home. You want me to make some coffee?”

“Have we met?”

Louis laughs.

“Coffee, coming right up.”

Harry grins at him and then makes his way back to his bedroom.

Louis goes into Harry’s kitchen, flicking the light on. He flips open the lid of Harry’s fancy ass coffeemaker, smiling fondly at the memory of Harry getting it for graduation.

*What kind of eighteen year old asks for an expensive coffeemaker? Harry.*

Louis grabs the stainless steel canister on the counter, the fragrant aroma of the dark roast filling his nose as soon as he pops the lid. He gets to work making the coffee, scooping out a little extra to make it strong the way Harry likes it and filling the pot to the brim so there will be enough for both of them. He grabs two giant mugs from the cabinet, chuckling at the sheer size of them.

His stomach growls.

Louis ponders heating up their leftover pizza but then crinkles his nose at the thought of pizza and coffee.


Louis opens Harry’s pantry and scans the shelves.

*Of course Harry the Baker doesn’t have any pancake mix. He’d make them from scratch.*

Louis goes and grabs his phone from the living room, googling pancake recipes.

“So I put my hands up they’re playing my song, the butterflies fly away…” Harry sings from the shower.

Louis smiles as he heads back into the kitchen.

“Nodding my head like yeah,” Louis sings under his breath as he pulls ingredients down from the pantry shelves. “Moving my hips like yeah.”

*Okay. Flour. Sugar. Salt. Where the fuck is the baking powder?*

He goes to the fridge, grabbing milk, eggs, butter, and the cream for Harry’s coffee. He spies the box of baking soda and grabs that as well.

*Baking soda is the same thing as baking powder, right? I can totally just use that.*

Louis arranges everything on the counter, studying the recipe.

*Melted butter? Doesn’t butter go on pancakes? Why would it go in the batter? Also who has time for that? What the fuck.*

He searches for a bowl, measuring cups, and a frying pan in Harry’s cabinets, cheering to himself when he finds them easily. Louis measures the ingredients and then unceremoniously dumps them
all in the bowl. He rummages through a drawer and finds a whisk. He frowns at it and then shrugs as he starts mixing everything together.

This is...is it too thick? Why is it so lumpy? Fuck, did I not measure right? I should add more milk.

He splashes more milk into the bowl and continues to stir.

Don’t call for Harry, you’re an adult. You can make some fucking pancakes.

He looks at the recipe again.

Fuck, I need to heat up the pan!

He adds a pat of butter to the cold pan, turns the heat up on high, and then goes back to stirring.

Fuck, now it’s too runny? Goddammit.

Louis adds more flour into the batter until he gets the consistency to what he wants. The butter starts hissing in the pan.

“Shit!” he cries, grabbing the handle of the pan, pulling it off the stove. He tilts the pan, spreading the butter around, placing the pan back on the burner.

Disaster averted. Let’s do this.

He spoons some of the batter on the pan and it starts bubbling immediately.

Look at me making pancakes.

When do I...when do I flip it?

Louis grabs a spatula and eases under the pancake, flipping it. Raw batter splatters, making the pancake a misshapen oval. It’s very pale, but at least it isn’t burned. He hears the bathroom door open.

“Hazza!” Louis looks at the pancake, deciding that he definitely has enough time to make Harry’s coffee before it’s done. He goes to the coffeemaker and pours Harry a cup, adding a splash of cream and a teaspoon of sugar. “Coffee’s ready for you!”

He stirs the coffee and then looks back at the pancake. It’s smoking.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Louis mutters, rushing back to the pan and flipping the pancake to a plate.

Okay, so that one will be mine.

“Are you trying to burn my apartment down?”

Louis jumps about a foot in the air.

“I’m trying–” Louis turns around, and the spatula falls to the counter with a clatter.

Harry is leaning against the doorframe, with only a towel knotted around his narrow hips. Louis’ mouth goes dry as his eyes sweep over the bare expanse of Harry’s chest and broad shoulders. His skin is rosy and damp, his hair twisted up in a towel turban. Louis gulps, his mouth now watering, as he takes in Harry’s toned stomach and the dents of his hips, noting his soft-looking, little love handles.
“I’m trying,” Louis says, his voice high-pitched. He clears his throat and starts over. “I’m trying to be a good houseguest.”

An amused grin quirks Harry’s mouth.

“By burning my apartment down.”

“By making you breakfast, you dick! Help me?”

Harry laughs and comes up behind him. Louis is hit with the fresh smell of his citrusy body wash and feels slightly light-headed.

“First of all,” Harry observes, reaching around Louis, crowding his space a little.

耶稣，是他故意的吗？

“You have the heat on too high.” He turns the knob down. Harry glances at the burned and misshapen pancake, raising an eyebrow.

“It was a test one,” Louis says defensively.

“You flipped it too soon,” Harry murmurs. “Try again.” He hands him a measuring cup. “Use this, yeah?”

“O-okay,” Louis stammers, dipping the cup in the batter and pouring it on the skillet. The edges start bubbling immediately. Louis aims the spatula at the pancake, but Harry stops him, touching his arm lightly.

“Wait until it’s bubbling in the middle.”

I’ll show you bubbling in the middle.

That makes no sense.

“Okay.”

Louis waits a few seconds, fighting the urge to lean back and press himself against Harry.

“Harry, it’s bubbling, now what?”

“Now you flip it,” Harry explains, gently guiding his wrist. “Not too hard! Just...flick your wrist, Ronald.”

He’s definitely doing this on purpose.

“Like that?” Louis asks as they flip the pancake together. He looks through his eyelashes at Harry over his shoulder, giving him a coy smile. “Swish and flick.”

Two can play at this game.

“Just like that,” Harry says evenly, eyes briefly flicking to his mouth. “And then...it’s done.”

Louis slides the spatula under the perfect looking pancake and flips it to the plate. He beams at Harry.
“Got it?”

“Yeah,” Louis replies, tilting his chin. “Coffee’s over there. Nice towel turban, by the way.”

Harry grins, unwinding the towel and shaking out his ringlets. He grabs his coffee mug, blowing on it before lifting it to his lips.

“Did you add–”

“I know how you take your coffee, Haz,” Louis interrupts, mildly offended.

Harry takes a sip, his eyes smiling at him over the brim of the mug.

“You do.”

Louis smiles, biting his bottom lip as he pours another pancake.

“You think you can handle the pancakes now?”

“Yes.”

Brushing Louis’ shoulder, Harry leaves, taking his coffee with him. Louis exhales loudly as he flips his pancake.

*Get a grip. It’s just Harry.*

*Gorgeous practically naked Harry.*

*Stop.*

He continues to make pancakes, none of them quite as good as the one he made with Harry, until he runs out of batter. Turning off the stove, he puts the pan and the bowl in the sink, and then starts putting everything else back where he found it. He rummages around in the fridge, grinning when he finds some syrup. He makes his cup of coffee and then brings everything out to the table.

“Haz! Your breakfast is gonna get cold!”

Harry emerges, wearing black skinny jeans, a tight white henley, and brown boots. He’s clutching his coffee in one hand and a faded pair of sneakers in the other.

“These are for you,” he says, gesturing at the sneakers. “They’ll be too big, but it’s better than putting the other shoes on.”

“I’m never putting those other shoes on again, thanks.”

Harry grins, dropping the shoes to the floor. He sits, pulling his plate towards him.

“These look...great.”

“Shut up, I know they look terrible,” Louis says. “Hopefully they taste better than they look.”

Harry laughs as he reaches for the butter. Louis grabs the syrup.

“Hey can we do our DVR binge tonight?” Louis asks as he pours syrup over his pancakes. “I know it was supposed to be tomorrow but...you know...plans changed. Are you busy?”

Harry looks up at him, smiling softly.
“No,” he replies. “I have class until five. That’s it.”

He slides the butter towards Louis, exchanging it for the syrup.

“I have to go to a meeting at five. I could come over after? Six-thirtyish?”

“Perfect,” Harry says. “I can stop at the store after class. Fajitas sound good?”

“God, yeah,” Louis moans. “Fuck, I love your fajitas. I’ll bring dessert? A pint for each of us?”

Harry’s smile widens.

“Sounds great.”

They both take a bite of pancakes at the same time.

*Oh my God, these are awful. What’s worse than awful? These pancakes.*

Louis looks at Harry, who is chewing thoughtfully. He swallows and then takes a giant gulp of coffee.

“Louis,” he says, eyes twinkling.

“Yes, Harry?” he asks innocently.

“These taste like shit.”

Louis laughs out loud.

“They do, don’t they?”

“Like maybe the worst thing I’ve tasted.”

Louis laughs even harder, Harry joining him.


“McDonald’s?”

“Yeah, please!”

Harry stands, picks up their plates, and heads to the kitchen.

“Go get your stuff. I’ll take care of this.”

Louis goes back and grabs his blazer from Harry’s bedroom and his pants from the living room. He leaves the shoes. He sits back at the table and carefully puts Harry’s shoes on, mindful of his blisters. Harry emerges from the kitchen, clutching his travel mug of coffee.

“Did you want to take any?” Harry asks. “I have an extra travel mug.”

“Nah,” Louis says. “I can get some there.”

Harry wrinkles his nose.

“Snob,” Louis teases.
“Peasant.”

Louis sticks his tongue out at him.

Harry opens his coat closet, handing Louis one of his coats.

“That’s my favorite sweater, Louis,” he says as he tugs a beanie over his curls. “I better get it back.”

“Harold, I’m offended that you would think I would steal from you,” Louis gasps.

“Yeah, okay. Where’s my favorite blue hoodie again?”

“You mean my favorite blue hoodie?”

Harry rolls his eyes, slinging an arm around Louis’ shoulder. He grabs his keys.

“Let’s go, you thief. I’m fucking starving.”
Harry was right, of course.

Louis hums as he checks his mail after getting home from his meeting on Wednesday. He grins when he sees that it’s Us, People, and In Touch day. He practically skips up the flight of stairs to his apartment, eager to read his magazines while he waits for Harry to finish up class.

Not every day was like that first day.

At his first meeting on Thursday, Louis met Steve while they were in line for cookies. Steve laughed when he caught Louis staring at his long hair (“Sorry, it’s just so shiny!”) and they got to talking. During the meeting, Steve spoke about his complicated relationship with his dad and Louis knew that he had just found his sponsor. He went back to Harry’s afterwards; they stuffed their bellies full of fajitas and ice cream as they binged their way through season two of Crazy Ex-Girlfriend. He tried to sleep alone on Harry’s couch but he woke up in the middle of the night shouting, his body drenched in sweat and Harry kneeling by his side, his eyes wide with concern. Once Louis calmed down, Harry climbed onto the couch and pulled him into his chest, murmuring words of comfort and gently stroking his back until they fell asleep wound around each other.

On Friday, he put in an application at the hipster coffeehouse just off campus that Harry loves. (“Indie, Louis! It’s not hipster, it’s indie.” “It’s hipster, Harry. You just want me to work there so you can use my employee discount for your hipster coffee.”) They hired him on the spot. Harry took him out for burgers and milkshakes to celebrate and then they went back Louis’ apartment to watch romantic comedies on Netflix. (But first Louis unceremoniously dumped the wilting red roses from Nick in the trash.) Harry went home around midnight after Louis promised that he would be able to sleep by himself in his own apartment. He slept fitfully on his couch. Baby steps.

Harry came over on Saturday, with Liam in tow, and the three of them completely rearranged Louis’ apartment. They spent the day blasting music and dragging furniture around; they spent the night watching the original Star Wars trilogy, Louis wrapped around Harry on the couch, Liam in the oversized armchair. Harry and Louis fell asleep in the middle of Return of the Jedi and woke up in the early hours of Sunday morning, a post-it from Liam saying “go to bed” stuck on Harry’s forehead. After mumbling about being sick of the couch, Louis sleepily led Harry back to his bedroom. They crawled into his bed and curled around each other, sleeping until after ten on Sunday morning. That was the first time he had managed to sleep in his own bedroom.

Zayn came over for dinner on Sunday night after their meeting. Harry made lasagna, while Louis was in charge of the salad and garlic bread. The three of them sat around Louis’ table talking for hours; Louis secretly pleased by how Zayn quickly came out of his shell around Harry and how well they clicked. Harry divided up the leftovers, sending Zayn home with two meals worth of lasagna, promising him it would be even better the next day. Harry stayed to help him clean up the kitchen, leaving only when Louis assured him that he was okay for the night. Louis slept alone in his bed for the first night since he got home, cuddling Rainbow Bear to him tightly.

Louis’ first day of work was Monday. He spent the afternoon shadowing his new coworker Jesy and they hit it off immediately as she showed him the ropes, including exactly how they brew pour-over coffee. (As far as Louis can tell, it’s just pouring water over coffee grounds but apparently there are people even more particular about their coffee than Harry, so he keeps his mouth shut.) She even lets him try his hand on the bar toward the end of his shift, and he manages to pull a decently timed espresso shot. Louis proudly recounted this to Harry, sitting on the counter as Harry made them a tofu and vegetable stir-fry for dinner. (“Tofu, Haz, really?” “We’ve been
eating like shit, Lou. You’ll like it, I promise.”) They watched the premiere of *The Bachelor* together, Louis eating every last bite of his meal despite his initial protests; Harry half studying/half-watching next to him, grumbling about how the show promoted gender stereotypes.

Louis showed up for his first morning shift on Tuesday a little bleary-eyed, unaccustomed to the early hour. Jesy laughed, shoving a cup of coffee in his hands as she started going over the opening procedures. After work, Louis had a session with James. He was tackled to the ground by Niall the instant he left the office and they caught up over some cookies in the common room. (“You’re my visitor now, Bender!”) He cooked dinner for Harry that night all by himself, ordering him out of the kitchen whenever he tried to hover. Mindful of the pancake disaster, Louis followed the recipe to the letter this time and the chicken stuffed with mozzarella and wrapped in prosciutto turned out perfectly, as did his mashed potatoes. They ate at the table with the television off like proper adults, Harry’s eyes sparkling as he toasted Louis’ efforts in the kitchen with his soda.

Day by day, Louis puts his life back together.

*Everything feels good. Really good.*

Louis unlocks the door to his apartment and pushes it open, hanging his keys on the hook by the door. He kicks off his Vans and shrugs off his coat, flopping on the couch and flipping straight to the “Who Wore It Best?” page in *Us*. He’s in the middle of judging Kim Kardashian against Katy Perry when his phone buzzes in his pocket.

*Are you in the mood for Mr. Wang’s? Cause I am.*

Louis grins as he types out his reply.

*Is that your new pick up line, H? It needs work.*

Harry’s response comes almost immediately.

*You’re an idiot.*

Louis cackles as he responds with a string of rice, chopsticks, and fortune cookie emojis.

*Be there in an hour or so.*

Louis replies with a smiley face and nestles back in the couch, turning the page to “Stars: They’re Just Like US!”

*Yes, Chris Evans is just like me, look at him getting groceries. God, that beard is something else. Look. At. It. Christ, he’s gorgeous. Ooh, maybe Harry and I should watch Winter Soldier tonight? Or no...what’s that rom com where he gets hard while playing basketball in his boxers? We should definitely watch that one. No, but Sebastian Stan in Winter Soldier too. Two for the price of one. I’ll let Harry choose. Which is ridiculous because he’ll definitely pick the rom com, so I should just go ahead and pull that one up—*

He’s startled by a knock on his door.

Louis frowns. He isn’t expecting anyone other than Harry.

*And it’s been like a minute since he texted unless he has a time machine he’s not telling me about.*

Sighing, he sets his magazine aside and gets up off the couch. He strides over to the door and swings it open, freezing when he sees Nick on the other side. He’s in his camel coat, his orange
and charcoal scarf wound around his neck. His hair is swooped up, perfectly styled as usual, but he looks tired, his skin pale and dark circles under his eyes.

“Hi,” Nick says cautiously.

“What are you doing here?” Louis asks, his voice clipped.

He holds out Louis’ black coat.

“You left this at the restaurant.”

Louis takes the coat from him, hugging it to his chest.

“I didn’t expect to see this again.”

“Louis, I wouldn’t have left your coat there. Give me some fucking credit,” Nick sighs.

“So thanks for bringing this, Nick,” Louis says sharply. “See ya.”

He starts to swing the door closed.

“Wait!” Nick exclaims, his hand pushing back on the door. “Can I come in?”

Louis narrows his eyes.

“No.”

He attempts to close the door again but Nick stops him once more.

“Nick, I swear to God,” Louis snaps. “I said no.”

“Louis, please,” Nick says, a hint of desperation in his voice. “We need to talk.”

“Oh, now you want to talk,” Louis laughs bitterly.

“What do you–”

“You just show up out of the blue after a week wanting to talk? Yeah. Okay.”

“But Louis–”

“You never called. You never texted. What did you fucking expect? For me to fall all over you just because you brought me back my coat?”

“I thought–”

“You know what? I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“But I have something to say to you,” Nick implores. “Please. Can I come in?”

Louis looks at him for a long time before finally sighing and holding the door open.

“Thank you,” Nick breathes as he comes inside.

“Whatsoever you have to say, make it quick,” Louis says tersely.

“Louis–” Nick says, stepping into Louis’ space and reaching for him. Louis dodges him.
“Don’t touch me,” he says firmly.

Nick takes a step back, his hands in the air.

“Sorry,” Nick apologizes.

Nick unwinds his long scarf and unbuttons his coat, starting to shrug it off.

“No need to take your coat off,” Louis states. “You’re not staying long.”

“I need to talk to you! What’s the fucking rush?”

“Harry’s on his way over with dinner and I don’t want him to see you here.”

“Really,” Nick says, raising his eyebrows. “Why’s that?”

“Because,” Louis clips. “It will upset him.”

“Can’t upset Boy Scout now, can we?” Nick asks, a taunting edge to his voice.

“He wants to maim you,” Louis adds, glaring at him. “And I won’t stop him. So get on with it.”

Nick looks around the living room, his brow furrowed. “You redecorated.”

“I needed a change.”

Nick frowns as he studies the new pictures on the wall. He wanders over towards the couch and picks up the framed photo of Louis and Harry that now sits on the end table. “Boy Scout’s marking his territory, I see.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Just...he moves fast.”

“Are you here to comment on my decorating choices or did you actually have something to say?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Nick says, shaking his head as he puts the picture down. “Sorry.”

Nick sits on the couch. Louis sits at the table. Nick looks back and forth between them, confused.

“Okay, could you come sit over here please?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I want to sit here,” Louis says stubbornly.

“Jesus, Louis, I’m trying here!” Nick cries in frustration. “Could you cut me a little slack?”

“Why should I?”

“Why are you being like this?”

Louis points towards the door.

“Do you want to leave?”
“No, I have to talk to you!”

“You keep saying that,” Louis says. “And yet you’re not really saying anything.”

“You’re making it difficult,” Nick grumbles.

“If we’re gonna do this, we’re gonna do it on my terms. Got it?”

“Fine,” Nick grits out, pulling out the chair next to him.

“Nope,” Louis says, pointing across the table. “You sit over there.”

Nick sighs heavily as he moves to the seat across from Louis. He takes off his coat, hanging it on the back of his chair and then removing his scarf as well. Louis raises an eyebrow and opens his mouth to protest.

“I’m sweating, Louis,” Nick grits out. “Give me a fucking break. It will take me two seconds to put my coat back on.”

He sits and they stare at each other.

“I’m waiting,” Louis says finally.

Louis leans back in his chair, keeping his steely gaze trained on Nick.

“I went to the ski resort over the weekend,” Nick says. “I took Greg with me.”

“I hope you enjoyed your couples massage,” Louis snarks.

“I wasn’t very good company,” Nick admits. “I barely skied. Skipped most of the spa treatments. Spent most of the weekend getting drunk in the bar, to be honest.”

“Yeah, that would have been a great weekend for me,” Louis says sarcastically.

“I thought about you a lot.”

“And?”

Nick takes a deep breath before he continues.

“I’m sorry about the other night. I really am. I was a stupid asshole. I mean...what was I thinking? Champagne? For someone getting out of rehab? You should have seen Greg’s face when I told him what happened.”

“How do you need Greg to tell you that what you did was—”

“I know, I know,” Nick says quickly, rubbing his temples. “It was stupid. So stupid. It’s so stupid it’s funny.”

Louis crosses his arms and raises his eyebrows, completely unamused.

“C’mon,” Nick says weakly as he takes in Louis’ face. “You gotta laugh, right?”

“No, I don’t,” Louis says sharply. “I can’t believe that’s something I have to tell you.”

“I’m not sure you do, but okay.”

Nick flounders.

“Are we really going to let one stupid fight ruin our entire relationship?”

“It’s not one fight though,” Louis counters.

“We’ve been together almost two years, Louis! We can’t just throw it away like this. We love each other, right?”

“Do we really?” Louis asks.

Nick looks taken aback.

“Well...yeah...sure we do?” Nick asks, confusion written all over his face. “We have fun together, right?”

Louis raises an eyebrow.

“Okay, maybe not so much fun lately, but we did have fun together, Louis. I make you laugh. At least I used to.” He pauses, sighing heavily. “Fuck, Louis, I still want you. Shouldn’t that count for something?”

Louis thinks of all the sessions he’s had with James. “‘He wants me.’ It’s an interesting response considering you’ve been together for a year and a half.” He thinks of Niall on spa night. “That’s the bare minimum. Don’t you want more?” He thinks of the week he’s had with Harry. He just wasn’t the guy for you.

“That’s not good enough,” Louis replies, quiet but definitive.

They fall silent. Nick blows out a big breath and scrubs his hands over his face.

“Why is this so hard? Why can’t I talk to you?”

“Honestly, have we ever been able to talk to each other?” Louis asks. “Other than just shallow stuff?”

“We never were ones for deep talks,” Nick says, a small smile on his face. “We always got...distracted.”

“Nick, be serious.”

“I am,” Nick replies honestly. He looks down at his hands and then back up at Louis. “We’re talking now.”

“Yeah, I guess we are,” Louis says, feeling his shoulders relax. “Don’t you think we were just...I don’t know...spinning our wheels? What were we even doing? I mean...we’ve never talked about the future. You’re graduating in a few months. You’re moving to New York and we...we never talked about how I would factor into that. Not once. Don’t you think there’s something wrong with that? I do.”

“I...I never thought about it that way.”

“Exactly. You never thought about it. And quite frankly, neither did I. It’s not just about what happened last week. It’s not just about the champagne or the ski weekend or the parties. It’s about
us not being on the same page. I need to be with someone who completely supports my sobriety, obviously, but–"

“I can be better about that. I can,” Nick interjects. “I can try.”

“Come on, Nick,” Louis says gently. “Do you really mean that? I don’t think you do. Not really. I’m not saying it to be a dick, I’m just trying to be honest. You even said it yourself at Thanksgiving. You said you didn’t think you were cut out for this. I remember.”

“I did say that, didn’t I?”

“I don’t think it’s even me you want. You just don’t want to be alone.”

“I hate being alone,” Nick admits. “I’m no good at it. Fuck, I couldn’t even go to that resort by myself just to spite you.”

“That’s a pretty fucked up reason for us to stay together, don’t you think?”

“That’s not what I meant–”

“Isn’t it though? I can’t...I can’t be with someone because it’s easier than being alone or because I’m just...there. I’m still figuring a lot of shit out but I do know I want more than that. More than just fun. You should too.”

They sit in silence. It feels...final.

“I guess we always had an expiration date,” Nick says ruefully. “Didn’t we?”

“Yeah,” Louis breathes. “We did. Everything that’s happened in the past few months just...made it get here faster.”

Nick looks down at his hands, taking a shaky breath.

“It’s really over isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Louis replies. “It is.”

“Wow,” Nick says, almost under his breath. “Shit.” He looks up at Louis, his face open and vulnerable. “It wasn’t all bad was it? Am I...was I a terrible boyfriend?”

Louis’ heart clenches a little, in spite of himself.

“No,” Louis says with a soft smile. “You weren’t. You were something good.”

“Promise?”

“We...just...we’re not getting what we need from each other. But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t any good. It doesn’t mean that we didn’t have something.”

“I’m sorry I can’t be what you need,” Nick says sadly.

“I’m sorry, too,” Louis replies. “I’m not what you need either.”

Nick nods, taking a deep breath and standing.

“I should go. I don’t really want to be here when Harry gets here.”
Louis nods.

“Hey, Nick?” Louis calls as Nick opens the door.

Nick looks back at him, leaning against the open door.

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad we talked.”

Nick smiles.

“Me too. Bye, Louis.”

********

Harry pulls into a parking space outside of Louis’ building. He turns off the ignition and takes a deep breath, resting his head against the steering wheel.

*I have to tell him.*

*As soon as I walk through the door.*

Harry turns his head, looking at the big bag of Chinese food sitting in the passenger seat.

*When we’re eating dinner.*

*After dinner.*

*Before we watch anything on Netflix, I’ll tell him.*

He glances at his watch. Six twenty-eight.

*I’ll tell him by eight.*

No.

*Eight twenty-eight. You’re my witness, Olivia. I’ll tell him by eight twenty-eight. Promise.*

Harry nods with a firm resolve. He grabs his messenger bag and the bag of Chinese food and gets out of the car. He slams the door and locks the car, silently repeating his new mantra.

*Eight twenty-eight. Eight twenty-eight. Eight twenty–*

Harry’s eyes fall on a familiar SUV and he freezes, nearly dropping the bag of Chinese.

*What the fuck is he doing here?*

Harry stands rooted in his spot. He glances towards Louis’ windows and then back to the car.

*No. No, no, no, nononono. What is Nick doing here?*

For a moment, Harry feels paralyzed by indecision.

*Do I go in? Do I sit in my car and wait until he leaves? What the fuck is happening? What do I do? Should I text Louis? Call him?*
Finally, Harry starts walking towards the building with determination.


He punches in the code to let himself inside the building and yanks open the door. He takes another steadying breath and turns into the stairwell. He clutches the bag of food to his chest almost as if it were a shield as he starts up the stairs.

He meets Nick on the first landing. Harry sees him first; he looks lost in thought, a sad expression on his face as he wraps his scarf around his neck. The instant he sees Harry, his face hardens.

“Hello, Boy Scout,” he says with a smirk.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Harry blurts out.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here?” Nick asks, approaching him. He pulls at the bag, peeking inside. “Ooooh, Chinese. Louis loves Chinese. Aren’t you the greatest?”

Harry pulls the bag away from him.

“Mind your own business.”

“I bet you got sesame chicken too,” Nick taunts. “Just like a good Boy Scout, always prepared. That’s your motto, right?”

“That doesn’t even make any sense,” Harry snaps. “It’s not a guessing game. I know Louis likes sesame chicken. Why wouldn’t I get what I know he likes?”

“And you always know what he likes, don’t you?”

“Weren’t you just on your way out?”

“Now, now, Boy Scout, haven’t we discussed your hostility before?”

“Look, asshole, I’m no longer under any obligation to be nice to you.”

“I’m crushed.”

“Yeah, I bet you are.” He steps around Nick and starts to continue up the stairs. “Door’s that way.”

“Have you been doing this a lot? Bringing him dinner? Then what? Snuggling on the couch and watching movies?”

Harry stops. He turns back to look at Nick.

“Sometimes I cook,” Harry says, tilting his chin defiantly as he steps toward him. “Last night, Louis cooked and it was amazing. Said it was the first meal he ever properly cooked completely on his own.”

Something flashes in Nick’s eyes.

“Jesus, you swooped right in, didn’t you? You didn’t waste any time. Honestly, Boy Scout, I didn’t give you enough credit.”

“It’s not like that,” Harry says evenly.
“Sure it isn’t, Harry,” Nick says with a bitter laugh. “I’ve been completely purged from that apartment.”

“Louis did that.”

“And I’m sure you were right there helping him.”

“Why are you even here?”

“Oh, we’re back to that, are we?” Nick asks. “I needed to talk to Louis.”

“Why.”

“To see if we could work things out.”

Harry feels a knot forming in the pit of his stomach, his whole body tensing.

“And?”

Nick looks at him calculatingly, clearly enjoying Harry’s unease. Harry hugs the bag of food to his chest, refusing to break his gaze.

“He said it’s over,” Nick says finally.

Harry’s shoulders slump in relief.

“That’s too bad.”

“Cut the shit, Harry. You don’t fool me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Harry says innocently.

“You’re not the least bit sorry that things are over with Louis and me.”

“No, really, I’m devastated,” Harry says sarcastically. “Great talk, Nick, but our dinner’s getting cold. Bye.”

Harry turns away from him and starts up the stairs again. He hears Nick take a few steps and then pause, muttering “Jesus Christ” under his breath.

“It was never going to work with me and Louis anyway,” Nick calls, trotting back up to the landing.

“Why not?” Harry asks over his shoulder.

“Because he’s in love with you.”

Harry trips on the stair, stumbling forward and catching himself on the railing with one hand. The bag of Chinese nearly spills over, Harry lunging at the last second to save it. His heart is pounding, both from his near fall and Nick’s comment. He takes a moment to steady himself and then he whirls around to face Nick, his eyes wide.

“What did you just say?”

“You heard me,” Nick says unflinchingly, looking Harry right in the eyes.

“Did he...did he say that?” Harry asks.
“No,” Nick says simply. “But he is. And we both know that you’re in love with him too, so don’t bother denying it.”

Harry fish mouths.

“I’m not as dumb as you think I am, Boy Scout,” Nick says plainly. “And you aren’t as subtle as you think you are.”

“I–”

“Have you told him?”

“None of your business,” Harry states firmly.

“I said cut the bullshit,” Nick snaps, stepping towards him. “Why haven’t you told him?”

“He...I...we...” Harry stutters.

“I mean, I’m out of the picture. There’s nothing in your way. So what’s stopping you?”

“I’m not talking to you about this.”

“Are you too scared? Is that it?”

“I said I’m not doing this with you, Nick.”

“It’s a simple question, Harry. Have you told him or not?”

“Listen, asshole, just back the fuck off!”

“Answer the fucking question, Boy Scout,” Nick says through clenched teeth. “Yes or no.”

“No!” Harry exclaims. “I haven’t told him!”

Nick grins triumphantly.

“I thought so.”

Harry looks away from him, raking his fingers through his hair. Sweat is beading on his brow, his pulse jackrabbits in his throat. If he doesn’t get out of this stairwell soon, he feels like he’s going to have a nervous breakdown.

“He doesn’t know you love him,” Nick says after a moment.

“Yes, he does.”

“I know you and Louis have this whole soulmate thing going on but I know him in ways you don’t. Whether you want to admit that or not. And I’m telling you, he doesn’t know.”

“Things are different now,” Harry flounders.

“Are you waiting for him to say it? Is that it? Is that what all these dinners and movie nights are about, Harry? Are you hoping that one night that Louis will look up at you and realize that it’s been you all this time? That he’ll thank you for the Chinese food and then confess his undying love and you’ll live happily ever after?”

Harry flinches, Nick’s words cutting a little too close to the bone.
“I never took you for a coward,” Nick says. “At least I had the balls to tell Louis I loved him.”

“You shut the fuck up,” Harry hisses. “You don’t know anything about me. You don’t know anything about us.”

“I know enough.”

“If you know so much about Louis, why are you on your way out the door?”

Nick flinches back now.

“I know you don’t think very much of me, Harry,” Nick says quietly.

Harry grunts in agreement.

“I get it. I do. Frankly, I deserve your opinion of me. I was never...nice to you. I saw the way Louis looked at you and it just made me…”

Nick trails off, shrugging. Harry looks at the floor, his cheeks heating.

“Anyway, I hope you know I loved him. I know you don’t think I did...but I loved him. Maybe it wasn’t always in the way he needed...but it was the only way I knew how.”

Nick sighs, wrapping his scarf all the way around his neck. He straightens his coat and buttons his top button.

“Stop being such a fucking coward. Louis deserves more than that. He deserves to hear the truth. Especially from you, of all people. He expects that from you. And you’re lying to him. You’ve been lying to him for a long time, I’m guessing. It needs to stop.”

Harry shuffles his feet and chews his bottom lip, at a loss for words.

“He’s not going to know until you tell him,” Nick states finally.

Harry looks up at him. Nick fixes him with a hard look and then gives him a brief nod. Harry nods back, dazed.

“Enjoy your dinner.”

Nick turns on his heel and clambers down the stairs, his footfalls echoing in the stairwell. Harry hears the door slam and lets out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

“What the fuck?” he mutters. “What the actual fuck?”

Harry sits on the stairs, placing the Chinese food at his feet. His heart is pounding. He runs his fingers through his hair as he takes a few deep breaths, trying to get his overwhelmed body to calm down.

*Jesus Christ.*

His phone starts buzzing in his pocket. Hands shaking, he fishes it out.

*Did you run away with Mr. Wang?*

Harry honks a laugh as more texts come through.
I always knew you would leave me for him.

Hazza, I’m starvationning.

Where is my food?

A row of skull emojis.

Harry looks at the clock display. It’s almost seven. He takes another deep breath as he locks his phone and slides back into his pocket.

Eight twenty-eight. Gotta tell him.

Harry stands, grabbing the bag of food.

Because he’s in love with you.

What. The. Fuck.

Harry ascends the rest of the steps and then walks down the hall to Louis’ apartment door. He knocks.

“It’s open, Haz,” Louis calls. “Finally! I’m wasting away here.”

Harry balances the bag on his hip, pushing the door open.

Eight twenty-eight.

“Hey,” Harry answers brightly. “Sorry it took me so long.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Something is...off tonight._

Louis helps himself to another piece of crab rangoon, sneaking a peek over at Harry. He’s intensely focused on his lo mein, stabbing at it with his chopsticks almost like he’s mad at it somehow. For as much as he’s picking at it, Harry’s not eating very much; he keeps fidgeting, his eyes darting to the clock display on the cable box every few minutes.

“You’re awfully quiet,” Louis observes. “Everything okay?”

Harry takes a bite of noodles and then sets the carton on the coffee table. He smiles at Louis; the smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes and Louis frowns.

_That’s his fake smile._

“Sorry,” Harry sighs, his fingers brushing Louis’ knee as he sits back. “Long day.”

Louis links his pinky through Harry’s.

“Anything I can do? Wanna talk about it?”

“No...not yet,” Harry says, tangling the rest of their fingers together. “Tell me more about your day first.”

Louis studies him curiously for a few moments, running through the mental checklist of what Harry had going on today that could have possibly upset him.

_Did something happen in gender studies? He’s literally taking that class for fun, it can’t be that. Maybe he had a fight with Liam? That’s ridiculous, they never fight. He said he had a meeting with Dr. Higgins, maybe that’s it? But Harry’s his favorite student, there’s no way anything bad happened there? What happened, Haz?_

Harry offers him another wan smile that still doesn’t reach his eyes, his thumb rubbing gently against Louis’ palm. He looks at Louis expectantly.

Okay, fine. You’re not ready to talk about whatever it is that’s bothering you? Surely this will cheer you up.

“So,” he says dramatically. “In today’s installment of Louis Becomes a Barista—”

Harry laughs softly, his dimple popping as he smiles.

_There we go. Real smile._

“I managed to make a passable cappuccino all by myself,” Louis says proudly, puffing out his chest. “I mean, the foam was still kind of wet but still! After the incident with the steamer yesterday, that’s a pretty fucking great. And dry caps are harder, so. Yeah. Yay me.”

“Yay you.” Harry echoes, his voice warm. He squeezes Louis’ hand and then releases it, reaching for his noodles.
“Zayn wants to come over again for dinner on Sunday,” Louis continues, spearing a piece of sesame chicken with his fork. “I was thinking Sunday night dinners could become a thing, yeah? Especially once Niall gets out next week. Also, Nick was here.”

Louis bites his lip and glances at Harry out of the corner of his eye trying to gauge his reaction.

“I know,” Harry says mildly, taking a bite of lo mein.

“What?”

“I ran into him on my way up here.”

Okay, fuck. That’s why he’s upset.

“Do I need to go check my stairwell for a body?” Louis asks.

“I already moved it,” Harry shrugs as he twirls his chopsticks in the noodles. He looks at Louis and winks. “Why do you think I was late?”

“Good, I’m too pretty to go to jail.”

“Far too pretty.”

“Not that I wouldn’t help you hide a body. I would.”

“I know,” Harry chuckles.

They look at each other for a few moments. Harry still looks troubled, despite their banter.

“Fuck, what did he even say to you, Haz? I’m so sorry,” Louis says hurriedly. “He just showed up here, you know. Just...out of the blue. I had no idea he was coming. He brought me my coat back? I wasn’t even gonna let him in at first ’cause I knew you were on your way over but then it was like we did need to talk so I did let him in and it just lasted longer than–”

“Lou,” Harry interrupts gently.

“Yeah?”

“You know you don’t owe me an explanation, right?”

“No, no, I want to explain though. I don't...I don't want to have any secrets between us. Ever again.”

A pained expression briefly flits over Harry’s features. He takes a deep breath, his eyes flicking to the clock.

“Okay, I–”

“And it ended up being really good,” Louis continues. “Once we talked. Actually talked. It was just...closure. I mean it felt over before, but now it’s like really over, you know? It was weird but it was good and now I feel like...I don’t know...I’ll be able to move on? No questions or doubts. Just. Closure.”

Harry smiles at him softly.

“I’m glad.”
“Yeah, me too,” Louis says. He reaches for the last piece of crab rangoon, peering at Harry. “Do you mind?”

“All yours.”

“Okay, what the fuck is wrong with you?” Louis says suddenly.

Harry looks at him, startled.

“Wh-what?”

Louis looks at him accusingly, holding up the fried wonton.

“These are your favorite. And you’ve basically let me eat all of them. You never do that.” Louis drops the wonton back in the box. “So what’s going on? Why are you being so weird?”

Harry stares at him for a few moments, dumbstruck.

“Also you keep looking at the clock like there’s somewhere you need to be,” Louis adds. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

Harry sighs, wringing his hands together.

“Look, Harry, if you’re having a hard time or going through some shit, I want to know what it is. I want to be here for you like you’ve been here for me. So what’s going on? I know something is.”

“Okay…Jesus…I just…okay…”

“Haz, you’re scaring me. Just tell me. Please.”

“Do you remember my internship in Boston?”

“Of course,” Louis replies, frowning. “Oh, fuck, did it fall through? Did it–”

Harry shakes his head, chewing on his lip.

“No. Actually…I found out that I was their top choice?”

“Harry!” Louis cries, hitting his knee. “See…and you thought you weren’t even going to get it. I told you! Top choice! I’m so proud of you!”

Harry smiles tightly. Louis narrows his eyes.

“So…what’s the problem then? Isn’t this good news, Haz? Why the fuck are you so twitchy and weird?”

“Okay, so they have this program at Boston University. The...um...Early Medical School Selection Program. It’s just what it sounds like. Early med school acceptance. For undergrads. Basically, we start taking graduate courses while we’re finishing up pre-med and we don’t even have to take the MCATs, we just go right into the med school as long as we keep our grades up. It’s supposed to help make the transition easier.”

“We?” Louis asks softly. “As in...you?”

“Yeah,” Harry replies. He reaches for Louis’ hand, squeezing it tightly. “Me. Um. Someone dropped out of the program at the end of last semester, so there’s a spot open. And they want me.
And I...I said yes.”

Louis feels like he’s been doused with ice water.

*Harry’s leaving me.*

“You’re...you’re–” Louis’s voice is thick, his throat constricting. He blinks furiously, tears stinging his eyes.

*He’s leaving me.*

“Moving to Boston,” Harry finishes. He rests his other hand on top of the hand he’s already holding, his thumb tracing soothing patterns on Louis’ wrist.

“Wh-when?”

Harry hesitates.

“Harry,” Louis says firmly, brushing his tears away. “When?”

“End of next week. Classes start on the 23rd.”


“I know it’s really fast but–”

“Wait a goddamn minute. How long have you known about this?”

“Louis–”

“How long?” Louis demands.

Harry winces.

“Dr. Higgins told me about it on Thursday.”

“Thursday?” Louis shrieks, practically leaping to his feet. He whirls around to Harry, who looks at him guiltily. “Jesus Christ, Haz! We have spent every fucking day together this past week. Every day! How could you not tell me?”

“I didn’t know if it was going to actually happen,” Harry cries, his voice panicked. “So much was up in the air! I didn’t know if they were going to be able to transfer all my credits...my scholarship money...everything! I didn’t want to tell you if it ended up not happening.”

“So you thought blindsiding me was better? Honestly, Harry–”

“I wanted to tell you! But I...I didn’t know how to do it. It’s been really hard keeping it from you, especially after this week.”

“How hard is it really? You just say ‘Louis, I’m abandoning you.’ It’s easy, look I just said it.”

“Jesus, I’m not abandoning you,” Harry exclaims. “I want you to–”

“You are though,” Louis accuses, angry tears streaming down his face. “You have a choice here. And you want to go! You’re going!”
“Of course I want to go! It’s my top choice for med school, it’s always been my top choice! And I had to give them an answer right away, okay? They weren’t going to wait! The spot could have gone to someone else. I couldn’t say no!”

“You could have warned me then,” Louis shouts, pacing around the living room. “I can’t believe you didn’t do at least that! I can’t believe you’ve known this for days and didn’t tell me. This isn’t how we do things, Harry! That’s not how this works!”

“And what is this exactly, Lou? I need you to tell me what this is,” Harry interjects.

“When were you going to tell me?” Louis continues hysterically. “When your bags were packed? When you were on the road? ‘Sorry, Lou, I can’t do dinner tonight because I’m moving to fucking Boston.’ What the fuck?”

“No, of course not! Fuck, it all became official today. Today, Lou. I told you as soon as—”

“Don’t say as soon as you knew,” Louis says angrily. “Don’t you dare. That’s bullshit, Harry. You knew this was happening for a week and you didn’t say anything. And now you’re leaving! You’re fucking leaving in a week, Harry!”

“Come with me.”

Louis stops. He turns to Harry, his eyes wide. His heart thuds in his chest.

“What?”

“Come with me,” Harry repeats. “To Boston.”

“I can’t...what...I can’t just leave,” Louis stammers.

Harry crosses over to him and takes Louis’ hands in his. Louis searches his gaze, his pulse fluttering in his throat.

“Why not?” Harry implores, his eyes blazing. “What’s keeping you here? You’re not going back to UVA. You said you weren’t.”

“I still have reasons to stay here without going back to school!”

“Why not...just...start over? With me. In Boston. There are plenty of places you can—”

“I have a life here, Harry!” Louis exclaims, pulling his hands from Harry’s grasp.

“I know that, I do. But—”

“I have a job! That I just started! I may be crappy at it now, but I’m learning. I’m doing it! I have an apartment. I found a sponsor here. Do you realize how huge that was for me? That I found someone I trusted right away? That doesn’t just happen. Not to mention the fact that James is here. I’m not going to find another therapist like him. And then there’s Zayn and Niall...I have a support system here, Harry! I can’t throw that away! I can’t ‘start over’ just like that! It doesn’t work that way!”

“I didn’t think—” Harry protests loudly.

“That’s right, you didn’t think, Harry,” Louis says accusingly. “You just assumed.”

Harry pauses, scrubbing his hands over his face.
“Look, I know I’ve fucked this up,” Harry says quietly. “I know that. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Lou. I didn’t... I didn’t want this to happen this way. I had a whole... and just... this has come out all wrong. Fuck.” He looks at the floor, clenching his hands into fists. “Fuck. I fucked it all up.”

“Then how was it supposed to come out?” Louis asks softly. “What were you going to say?”

“I’m really fucking scared right now, Lou,” Harry confesses. “I didn’t expect any of this either, you know? It’s all happening so fast. I mean... we’ve never lived more than a mile apart our whole lives and now everything’s changing and I’m freaking out!”

“I don’t know what you expect me to say, Harry! I can’t–”

“Come with me,” Harry pleads. “Please. It could be something great. For both of us! Boston has so many schools, Lou, there could be so many opportunities for you to–”

“Haz, I got out of rehab a week ago,” Louis counters. “A week! I can’t make any sort of major life changes right now. You said that yourself. Remember?”

“I know I did but –”

“But what? You know I can’t do this right now, Harry,” Louis cries. “It’s too much for me! So why are you asking?”

“Because I–”

“Do you think you are some sort of exception to the rule or something?”

“I do!” Harry exclaims.

“Why?”

“Because it’s you and me, Louis! Because we’re special,” Harry shouts. “Because I love you!”

“I love you too!” Louis shouts back, throwing his hands in the air. “That doesn’t mean I can just–”

“Louis, no,” Harry interrupts. He stands in front of Louis, resting his hands on his shoulders. Harry crouches just a little, so he can look him directly in his eyes. “I’m in love with you.”

Louis feels like the room is closing in on him, fresh tears welling in his eyes.

“What?” Louis whispers.

“I’m in love with you,” Harry repeats, his voice achingly tender. “Fuck, I’m so in love with you that I feel like I can’t see straight sometimes.”

A sob catches in Louis’ throat.

“H-Harry, please. Don’t do this,” Louis chokes. “Please don’t do this to me.”

“Louis, I’m in love with you and I think you’re in love with me too and I want you to come to Boston with me so we can give this a chance. Give us a chance. I love you. I love–”

Louis shakes his head furiously, grabbing Harry’s wrists and stepping back from him.

“No,” Louis says desperately, his voice rising. “No, I can’t, Harry. I can’t do this. Stop. Just stop. Stop saying that!”
Harry looks at him, eyes wide.

“Louis—”

“What do you expect me to say? What?”

“How about you love me, too?”

“I can’t...fuck...Harry, I broke up with Nick a week ago. A week! I can’t just...jump into something right now.”

“Then what has this week been, Lou?” Harry asks, confusion written all over his face. “What the hell have we been doing?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Are you being deliberately obtuse?” Harry cries, running his hands through his hair. “I’m talking about having dinner together every night. I’m talking about cuddling up on the couch afterwards and watching TV together. I’m talking about why you felt the need to explain seeing your ex-boyfriend to me! Why did you feel the need to do that? Why?”

“Because I thought you should know!”

“Why though?”

“I don’t...I—”

“How about the fact that I’ve slept by your side three nights this week? How about waking up in the morning with you in my arms and it feeling like the most normal thing in the fucking world? Don’t you get it? Hasn’t...hasn’t this week felt like more to you? ’Cause it sure as hell has to me. So I’m just wondering what it’s felt like for you.”

“I’ve needed you this week,” Louis shouts in frustration. “I’ve needed my best friend, Harry. This is about you being here for me when I’ve needed you!”

“So what...am I like some sort of crutch for you? Fuck! Is that what this is?”

“No!” Louis yelps. “Not at all! Jesus Christ, Harry, how could you say that?”

“I don’t know! What the fuck am I to you, Lou? And don’t just say I’m your best friend,” Harry grits, pointing at him. “You know it’s more than that. Friends don’t...friends don’t do what we do, Lou!”

“I...I…” Louis flounders.

“The thing is, Louis, you treat me like your boyfriend. No, more than that even. Boyfriend doesn’t even cover it. You treat me like your partner. How can you not see that? Do you really have no idea?”

“Yeah...well...you treat me that way too!”

“I know I do,” Harry says seriously. “That’s what I’m saying. What are we doing? And you have to admit it’s been this way for a while, you just haven’t seen it. Or you haven’t wanted to. I’m right here, I’ve been right here in front of you this whole time.”

*Because he’s been here, right in front of me the whole time and that scares the fuck out of me*
because how could I not know? How haven't I seen it? It’s ridiculous. No one meets the love of their life at five years old, Niall. This isn’t a fucking movie.

Louis’ heart races as he hears his own words echoed back to him. He squeezes his eyes shut, pressing the heels of his hands over them and tries to just fucking breathe.

“It’s not that simple, Harry! It can’t be!”

“Can’t it though,” Harry challenges. “We’re basically in a relationship already. It’s just that neither of us have been brave enough to say anything about it. So I’m saying something. Right now. I’m in love with you. I want to be with you. So the question is...what do you want, Lou? How do you feel about me? Do you love me?”

“You don’t want me, Harry! I’m such a fuck-up. I don’t know what I’m doing with my life. Jesus, my greatest accomplishment today was making a semi-decent cappuccino. Don’t you see how pathetic that is?”

“Don’t talk about yourself that way!”

“And you! You’re so smart. You’re talented and you’re charming and you’re just...you’re so fucking good, Harry. You’ve got schools fighting over you, you’re going to be an amazing doctor who saves so many lives and just...why would you want me? I’m not good enough for you! I’m an idiot who would just hold you back.”

“How can you say that, Lou?” Harry protests. “How?”

“You don’t want me. Trust me. You only think you do because we spend so much time together and it’s convenient and it’s easy. I’ve been there and I can’t...I can’t do that again, Haz, I can’t.”

“Fuck you, Louis, nothing about loving you is easy,” Harry exclaims. “Do you think it was easy for me to watch you fall for the wrong person? God, that was so fucking hard. You have no idea, do you? Do you think it was easy for me to watch you struggle and not know how to help you? What about when you almost died in my arms? What about these past few months while you’ve been in recovery, Lou? Nothing about this has been easy.”

“See, Harry? You haven’t even been with me and I’m too much trouble. I’m not worth it!”

“No,” Harry says firmly. “That’s where you’re wrong. Because the thing is, yeah, it’s really been fucking hard but none of those things I just said have anything to do with who you are. Do you have any idea what I see when I look at you? God, I look at you and I see your strength. I see your courage. I see how you love with your whole heart. You are smart, Louis. Don’t ever say you’re not. You’re smart and you’re beautiful and you’re kind and you’re loyal. Jesus, everyone falls in love with you as soon as they meet you! Don’t you see that? You’re worth everything.”

“Harry–”

“It’s not just because you’re here or you’re convenient,” Harry says fiercely. “It’s because you’re you. It’s everything about you!”

“I’m too much of a mess right now,” Louis insists. “It won’t work.”

“It can,” Harry counters. “It already is. Don’t you see that? Lou, we can do this. Together. Like we’ve always been. I’ll be there with you every step of the way. Fuck...I...I just want to take care of you!”
“I don’t need to be taken care of,” Louis yells. “I can take care of myself! I know I’m having a shit time right now, but I’m not fucking helpless, Harry!”

“I didn’t say that! You take care of me too, we take care of each other! It’s how relationships work. You don’t understand—”

“I think I do though,” Louis bites. “You know who else said he liked taking care of me? Nick. But he only wanted to take care of me because it made him feel better about himself. The fact that I was a disaster made him feel needed and important. And the thing is I let him do it! I let him take care of me because it was easier and so I completely lost myself. I lived that way for almost two years, Harry. I refuse to make the same mistake again!”

Harry looks at him, horrified.

“Are you saying that we would be a mistake?”

“I’m saying I don’t need another Nick, Harry!”

Harry visibly recoils, the color draining from his face. Louis gasps, covering his mouth. They stare at each other, the silence deafening. Finally, Harry shakes his head, his cheeks reddening.

“I cannot believe you just compared me to him,” he says angrily.

Harry scrubs his hands over his face and looks around the room. He goes to the table, where his messenger bag is resting on one of the chairs and starts furiously throwing all of his stuff in it.

“Where is...where is my phone?” he mutters to himself, paying no attention to Louis as he wanders around the room. “Where did I fucking put it?”

“What are you—” Louis starts, his voice breaking. “What are you doing?”

“What does it fucking look like I’m doing?” Harry snaps, as he digs in the couch cushions searching for his phone. “I’m leaving!”

“But we aren’t finished yet!”

Harry looks up at him, his green eyes blazing.

“Aren’t we though?”

He finds his phone and stuffs it in his back pocket. He strides over to the door and furiously tugs his boots on.

“Harry...Haz...I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Harry says through clenched teeth as he grabs his coat from where it’s slung over the armchair. “I need to go. I have to go—”

“Please...please don’t go like this,” Louis says desperately. “We’re not...we’re not done yet! Please don’t—”

“What else is there to say, Lou?” Harry asks, his eyes bright. “I just poured my fucking heart out to you and you...you can’t even answer a simple question.”

Louis’ brow furrows as he runs his hands through his hair.
“What...what was the question?” he asks weakly.

Harry sighs, dropping his coat back over the chair. He bows his head for a few moments, chewing on his bottom lip. He takes a deep breath and looks up at Louis imploringly.

“Do you love me?”

Louis’ chest aches. He wants to go and wrap his arms around Harry but finds himself unable to move across the room.

“Harry,” he says softly. “Harry, please.”

Harry studies him, something flickering in his eyes as he searches Louis’ face. His face softens, tension visibly loosening in his shoulders. He sweeps his hair back, tucking it behind his ears, a determined expression settling over his features.

“I’m going to ask you again,” he says quietly, taking a step towards him.

Louis crosses his arms across his chest, tears pricking at his eyes.

“Do you love me, Louis?” Harry takes another step.

Louis feels tongue-tied. He purses his lips together, keeping his eyes on Harry as he slowly makes his way across the room. His heart thuds in his chest, butterflies flutter in his stomach.

“I’ve made it clear how I feel,” Harry continues, his voice steady, his eyes never leaving Louis.’

“So the question is, how do you feel? Just...just tell me. Do you love me?”

Louis breaks Harry’s intense gaze as the tears spill over. He looks at the floor and shifts his weight back and forth, his hands on his hips.

“Louis, look at me.”

“I can’t,” Louis whispers, his eyes still on the floor. Harry’s standing directly in front of him now; Louis stares at his scuffed brown boots. He’s so close that Louis can feel the heat radiating from his body.

“Please,” Harry urges quietly. “Lou, look at me.”

Louis tilts his chin up, meeting Harry’s eyes. He takes a shaky breath as Harry gently cups his face in his hands, his thumbs brushing the tears off his cheekbones. Harry studies him intently, as if he’s searching for some sort of answer in Louis’ eyes. His gaze is almost unnerving, but Louis doesn’t back down. Not this time.

“Harry,” Louis breathes, his eyes flicking to his mouth. His tongue darts out to wet his lips as he looks back up at Harry.

“Stop me if you don’t want this,” Harry mutters as he leans in slowly. “You gotta stop me.”

Louis doesn’t stop him.

Harry closes the distance between them, capturing Louis’ lips with his own. Louis startles, goosebumps prickling all over his skin immediately as Harry kisses him, his lips soft and warm, gentle but firm all at the same time. Just the way Louis likes – no loves – to be kissed.

Oh, holy shit.
Harry steps further into his space, one hand moving to Louis’ neck as he tilts Louis’ head to the side, adjusting the angle. Louis sighs and melts into him, returning his kiss, his hands sliding up to Harry’s shoulders. Harry’s movements falter a little, as if he’s surprised that Louis is kissing him back, but he quickly recovers, pulling him to his chest.

“Lou,” he murmurs between fervent kisses. “Christ.”

Louis surges up on his tiptoes to meet him, arms wrapping around his shoulders. He feels like he’s floating, the only thing keeping him anchored to the ground is the feel of Harry’s lips against his.

Harry, Harry, Harry.

Harry’s tongue tentatively presses against his lips, asking. Wanting. Louis outright moans, his lips parting for him, their tongues colliding almost instantly. His hands wind into Harry’s hair and he gently tugs the soft curls as their tongues dance with each other. Harry whimpers, hands skimming down Louis’ rib cage and landing on his hips.

So fucking good.

He grasps Louis’ hips tighter, tugging them flush with his own. Louis gasps as their hips collide, sending sparks jolting through his body. He’s suddenly very aware of just how very interested his cock is in all of this; it twitches in his jeans as Harry subtly grinds against him, his cock hardening as well.

Oh my fucking God.

Louis breaks the kiss, gulping for air, one hand still twisted in Harry’s hair. He groans as Harry presses kisses over his cheekbone and mouths along his jaw, his hands moving to Louis’ ass and squeezing firmly. Louis’ head is spinning. He tries to breathe, but his chest has tightened up.

Too much.

Too fast.

Too much.

“Harry…”

Harry hums, kissing down his throat. Panic washes over Louis, his heart no longer racing in a good way.

Too much, too much, too much.

“Harry! Harry, stop, please stop.”

Harry freezes, dropping his hands and stepping back.


He reaches for Louis, but Louis steps back, shaking his head, his chest heaving as he tries to catch his breath.

“I can’t do this,” Louis gulps.

“No, I mean it,” Louis cries. “I can’t...we can’t do this, Harry. It’s too much!”
“But...but you just...you kissed me back!”
“I shouldn’t...I shouldn’t have. Fuck,” Louis exclaims, pulling at his hair. “Fuck!”
“Louis,” Harry implores, tears welling in his eyes. “You felt it. You did—”
“No,” Louis says firmly. “I can’t. Not with you, Harry. You…you’re...no...I can’t.”

A broken sob escapes Harry’s lips, fat tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Why are you doing this? Please...please don’t push me away. Don’t do this, Lou.”

“I can’t repeat the same patterns that I’ve always fallen into! I just...I’m not ready for this, I’m sorry. No. This can’t happen.”

Harry buries his face in his hands, sobbing. Louis feels like something just shattered between them. He aches to comfort Harry, but he stands still, hugging himself tightly.

Harry’s sobs abate after a few minutes. He looks up at him, his eyes red-rimmed.

“You know this doesn’t change the fact that I’m moving to Boston,” he says quietly, wiping his cheeks.

“Harry,” Louis says brokenly. “You can’t just leave—”

Harry sniffles as he straightens his spine.

“I mean, why shouldn’t I go?” Harry challenges. “It’s what I’ve always wanted. And you...you’ve made it perfectly clear how you feel. You don’t get to do this, Louis, you can’t have it both ways! Fuck, you can’t kiss me like you just did and expect things to go back to normal. Things are...they’re never gonna be the same between us.”

“Why not? It’s all or nothing? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yeah, I guess it is,” Harry says, his shoulders slumping with exhaustion. “Because I can’t do this...whatever it is we’ve been doing...I can’t do it anymore. You’re not being fair to me, Lou. You know how I feel now and we...we can’t just go back. It doesn’t work that way. You’re asking too much of me if you think it can.”

“Then go! I already told you I can’t do this, Harry. I’m asking too much of you? Fuck, you’re asking too much of me! So just go! Leave! Go to Boston. I think it’s best for both of us if you just go.”


They’re both crying. Louis watches as Harry grabs his messenger bag from the table. He rifles through it, looking around the room as if to make sure that he has everything. Harry shrugs on his coat and grabs his scarf, looking back at Louis as he winds it around his neck. He looks at Louis pleadingly, his chin trembling.

“Hey, you’re the one who’s leaving,” Louis says sharply. “Not me.”

Harry’s brow furrows and he tosses his bag to the floor, striding across the room. Louis gasps, his body tensing slightly as Harry stops directly in front of him. He’s close enough to touch, but neither
of them close that distance; Harry just looks at him, his mouth set in a determined line.

“Ask me to stay.”

Louis blinks tears away.

“Harry…”

“I mean it, Lou,” Harry says fiercely. “Ask me to stay. I’d give it all up...if you asked me to. I would do that for you.”

“Which is why you have to go,” Louis says, his voice thick with emotion. “I can’t ask that. You have to go, Harry. I won’t be the reason you don’t take this chance, I can’t be. You’d hate me for it.”

“I wouldn’t,” Harry insists.

“You would,” Louis sobs. “You would, I know you would and I wouldn’t be able to live with myself. I can’t go with you, Harry. And you can’t stay for me.”

“So where does that leave us?” Harry asks tearfully.

“You have to go. Please go.”

Harry nods, biting his lip. He sighs deeply and goes back to the door, picking up his bag and slinging it over his shoulder.

“I’m not coming back,” he says quietly, his head bowed and his back to Louis. “I...I can’t come back. It’s...it’s too hard.”

Louis nods, even though Harry can’t see him.

“Okay,” he whispers.

Harry’s shoulders are shaking. He sniffs and then takes several deep breaths, lifting his head. He opens the door.

“I love you, Louis,” he breathes, the sound barely audible.

The door closes with a soft click as he goes.

Louis lets out an audible sob. He’s shaking, his knees feel like they are going to give out on him at any moment. Every instinct in his body screams for him to run after Harry, to stop him, to throw his arms around him and never let him go.

He stands rooted in his spot.

He stares at the door, hoping that any minute now Harry will burst through it and tell him this is all some cruel joke and that they’re going to be okay.

He doesn’t.

Louis flops on the couch, clutching a pillow to his chest tightly. He surveys the remains of their forgotten dinner, Harry’s chopsticks still sticking out of the carton of noodles, his own sesame chicken half eaten. And he cries. He cries and cries and cries.
HEY HI HELLO PLEASE REMEMBER THIS FIC IS TAGGED AS "HAPPY ENDING," OKAY?

That said, feel free to yell at me here or on tumblr.
Chapter 16

Harry shoves his last suitcase into Olivia’s overstuffed trunk. He frowns and turns to Liam, who is clutching a box in his arms.

“That’s the last one, right?”

“Yep,” Liam replies, his brow furrowed as he studies the trunk. “It’s not gonna fit back here, Haz. Should we try and rearrange things?”

Harry sighs as he adjusts the blue bandana in his hair, sweeping back the sweaty curls that have escaped from it. He pushes the sleeves of his sweatshirt up his forearms.

“I should have just let the movers take that one,” he admits, gesturing to the box. “But it...it has a lot of sentimental things in it. I know it’s stupid but…”

Harry trails off, shrugging helplessly.

“So stupid,” he mutters to himself. “Fuck. I’m so stupid.”

Liam frowns as he shifts the box, the weight clearly growing heavy in his arms. Sighing, he gingerly places the box on the ground, but the box pops open at the movement; Harry is unable to stop the pained noise that escapes from his lips. Liam crouches down, pulling the flaps back so he can fold them properly, revealing the Scrabble painting sitting at the top. Liam looks up at him; Harry juts his chin stubbornly, daring Liam to say something. Liam smiles back sadly.

“I get it, H,” he says understandingly. “Who really trusts movers anyway? They’re the worst.” Liam folds the flaps of the box closed and claps his hands together. “So...let’s repack the car? We can rearrange things. We’ll get it to fit. We will.”

Harry chews his lip as he surveys the car. He knows where the box can go...he was just trying to avoid putting it there. With a sigh, he walks around to the passenger side and pulls the front door open.

“It can go here,” he calls as he shoves his messenger bag to the floor, along with his heavy coat and scarf. He tosses his bag of snacks to the driver’s seat. Liam hands Harry the box and he rests it in the passenger seat, wedging the snacks in the space between the seat and the console. He slams the door with a heavy sigh and then turns to Liam.

“So that’s it then?”

“Yup,” Harry says, crossing his arms and kicking at Olivia’s tires. He looks up at Liam and offers him a tiny smile.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Liam asks earnestly.

Harry pats Olivia’s roof as he leans back against her.

“No room,” he says ruefully. “There’s barely enough room for me.”

“I could follow you,” Liam offers. “Stay a few days to help you get settled. I can blow off class, it’s no big deal.”

Harry claps Liam on the shoulder.
“Absolutely not,” he says fondly. “It’s the start of the semester. No blowing off class for you.”

Liam pulls Harry into a tight hug. Harry makes a surprised noise as he crashes into Liam’s chest, but then huffs a laugh as he returns the hug, wrapping his arms around Liam’s waist and crouching a little so he can bury his head in his shoulder.

“I just don’t want you to be alone,” Liam says fiercely.

“M’not alone,” Harry mutters into his neck. “My parents are meeting me in Boston, remember? They’ll probably beat me there.”

“It’s a ten-hour drive, Haz,” Liam says as he pulls back, his arms still around Harry’s shoulders, warm brown eyes full of concern. “I just worry about you doing it all by yourself.”

“My blood is like 90 percent coffee, remember? I’ll be fine, I promise,” Harry says warmly. “Stop worrying.”

“Okay, okay,” Liam says, his eyes crinkling at the corners, almost shut as he smiles. “I’ll stop.”

They stand in silence for a moment. Harry scuffs his sneaker on the pavement.

“I should get on the road,” Harry says finally. “I want to get there by eight. And I want to try and avoid the traffic around New York if I can, so I need to get on with it…”

“So are you going to address the elephant in the room or should I?” Liam interrupts.

“An elephant?” Harry gasps, widening his eyes as he looks around the parking lot. “Where?”

“Harry,” Liam says sternly. “You need to call him.”

Harry’s face falls.

“No,” he replies quietly.

“Are you...are you just going to leave things like this?” Liam asks incredulously.

“Like how?” Harry pushes back.

“Without saying goodbye? C’mon, H, you have to say goodbye to him.”

“We already said goodbye, Li,” Harry sighs. “That felt pretty fucking final the other night. If he’d changed his mind, he would have called. He hasn’t. He obviously doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“But,” Liam sputters. “But you weren’t supposed to leave until the weekend! It’s Wednesday, Harry. He...he doesn’t know you’re leaving early.”

“He knows I’m leaving though,” Harry says stubbornly. “What difference does a few days make?”

“But you should still call him, Harry. I know it’s hard but you…”

“Liam,” Harry says patiently. “I know Louis. You know how he is too. Nothing’s changed. He’s not going to call. Besides...I can’t hear him say no again. It was hard enough the first time.”

“But Harry what if—”

“Hey, I’m the one who got his heart broken here,” Harry says harshly. “Remember? I put it all out
there and he said no."

Harry pauses, scrubbing his hands over his face and exhaling heavily.

“I’ve got to respect his decision. It’s just...it’s better this way. Clean break, you know? I need to go—”


“You know, everyone keeps saying that,” Harry says with resignation. “Everyone except him.”

“Harry—”

“You didn’t see his face, Liam,” Harry says sadly, shaking his head. “He doesn’t love me. He doesn’t want to be with me. He said no. And he meant it. So that’s that.”

Tears well in Harry’s eyes as he takes a shaky breath, his heart clenching painfully. The tightness hasn’t really left his chest ever since he left Louis’ apartment last week. The pain is a constant ache, sometimes dull, sometimes excruciating. Always there no matter what he does.

“I just,” he sighs. “I just really thought we were there, you know? I genuinely thought we were finally happening.”

“I know, H,” Liam says sympathetically. “I thought so, too.”

“We were different,” Harry chokes, tears spilling. “We were. I’m not making that up, am I?”

“I don’t think you are,” Liam agrees. “I saw it. I did.”

“There was this shift between us? I can’t describe it except to say that it was different,” Harry says tearfully, wiping his nose with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. “He was different. He...he would look at me sometimes...and his face...I was so sure that he saw it. That he felt it. It all just...it felt so real? I keep playing it all in my head over and over. How could I have been so wrong, Liam? How? How did this happen? How did I end up here?”

Liam tugs him into another hug; Harry cries into his shoulder, clinging to him tightly.

“I don’t know, Haz. I don’t know what to say,” Liam says softly as he rubs Harry’s back comfortingly. “I don’t know what’s going on his head. I wish I did. He won’t talk to me. I’ve tried, but he’s not talking. But this isn’t the end for the two of you, it can’t be. You’re Harry and Louis. We’re going to fix it, H. Even if I have to knock some sense into him.”

“No,” Harry sniffles. “No, don’t. It wasn’t his...please don’t. This is all my fault. I...I pushed him too hard. I did this.”

“Don’t do that, Harry,” Liam says fiercely, pulling back so he can look Harry in the eye. “Don’t be a martyr. Don’t let him off the hook; Louis fucked up too. This wasn’t just you.”

“I basically gave him a fucking ultimatum, Li! What the actual fuck was I thinking? It all just...it spiraled out of control...it was like there was nothing that I could do to stop it once it started. Fuck. I mean, I know we’ve gone over this already but...fuck.”

“You both fucked up. Which means you can fix it,” Liam says urgently.

“Liam, I know you mean well,” Harry says. “Believe me, if there was a way I could go back to last Wednesday and take it all back, I would. But I can’t. It’s done. And you’re missing the point.”
Harry pauses, crossing his arms around his chest and shivering slightly in the cold. He looks down at his feet. “Aside from moving to Boston and my bullshit ultimatum, you’re missing the biggest and most important piece of this fucked up puzzle: he doesn’t love me. Not like...not like I love him. I asked him if he did and he just...there’s nothing to be figured out. Going our separate ways is for the best. It is.”

Harry stops, taking a shaky breath, crossing his arms over his chest as he meets Liam’s eyes. He can’t stand how sad they look.

“I have to go,” Harry continues. “I love him. Part of me will probably always love him but I have to...learn how to not be in love with him anymore. I have to do that for me. I have to leave even if it makes me look like an asshole. I know I look like the asshole here. It’s fine. I can live with that. I just have to start taking care of myself, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Liam sighs. “I get it. But for the record, leaving doesn’t make you look like an asshole.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry asks with a half smile. “What does it make me look like then?”


Harry laughs softly as he hugs Liam again.

“Thank you for being here for me this week,” he mumbles. “I really appreciate it, yeah? You’re the best, Liam. My best friend...you know that, right?”

“I do,” Liam replies with a grin. “Now get going,” he says, shoving Harry’s shoulder slightly. “This is getting way too mushy.”

“Definitely too mushy.”

“Call me from the road if you need to. And call when you get there.”

“Okay, mom,” Harry teases. “I will.”

“Shut up, Harry. Don’t make me follow you.”

“I love you, Payno. I really do,” Harry says with a smile as he gets in the car.

“I love you too, you idiot,” Liam replies, gently knocking his fist on Olivia’s roof after Harry pulls the door closed.

Harry fastens his seatbelt and turns on the ignition. He rolls the window down.

“Hey, Liam?”

Liam crouches down to look at him.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t...don’t be too mad at Louis, okay? When you see him...just...go easy on him?”

“I will do nothing of the sort, Haz,” Liam replies.

“Liam,” Harry sighs.

“Can I tell him he’s stupid for letting you go?” Liam asks after a moment, his voice soft.
Harry shakes his head. He takes a deep breath and smiles up at Liam.

“Bye, Li.”

“Bye, Haz. Drive safe. I’ll come visit soon. Maybe spring break?”

“That would be great.”

Harry smiles, waving as he rolls up the window. Liam pounds on the roof again, stepping back as Harry pulls away from the curb. He drives through the apartment complex, stopping at the red light at the exit. As he waits for the light to change, he plugs his phone into the stereo jack and thumbs through his myriad of playlists until he finds his favorite road trip one. He presses shuffle and places the phone in the cup holder as the light turns green.

“Loving you isn’t the right thing to do. How can I ever change things that I feel?”

Harry can’t help the mirthless laugh that bubbles from him as he pulls into traffic.

Why you gotta do me this way, shuffle?

Pressing the gas pedal, he starts drumming on his steering wheel as the music picks up. He feels the song in the marrow of his bones, the insistent guitar riffs buzzing through his veins.

“You can go your own waaaaaaaaay,” Lindsey Buckingham sings from the speakers. Harry turns the volume up and resumes his drumming as he makes his way towards the interstate. “Go your own way. You can call it another lonely day…”

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“Do you want cream and sugar?” Louis calls from the kitchen.

“Please,” Zayn replies from the living room. “Just one sugar. Hey, we’re still on for Sunday dinner right? To celebrate Niall getting out?”

Louis falters as he grabs the cream from the fridge, his heart aching.

Harry was gonna make Niall cookies.

“Of course,” Louis replies, his voice strained. He bites his lip as he stirs the cream and sugar into both of their mugs. “We’ll...ah...we’ll have to order in. You know I’m worthless in the kitchen. I can only make one meal, and I…”

And I’m not making that.

“Maybe Chinese?” Zayn ponders.

Louis’ stomach twists as he puts the cream back.

Definitely not Chinese.

“Pizza was the first thing I wanted when I got home,” Louis suggests. “And it’s better for sharing.”

“You’re right,” Zayn says agreeably. “Pizza it is.”

Louis tosses the spoon into the sink and takes a steadying breath. He pads into his living room, clutching the two mugs of coffee.
“I can’t believe you’ve got me serving you coffee on my day off,” Louis jokes, smiling tightly as he hands Zayn his coffee.

Zayn looks at him quizzically as he takes the mug, his eyebrows knitting together as he frowns. Louis looks at him pleadingly.

“Just giving you extra practice,” Zayn quips after a moment. “You are still learning, after all.” He blows on the coffee and then takes a sip, his eyebrows shooting up as he does so. “Hey, this is good, Lou.”

“It’s one of our signature blends,” Louis says as he sits next to Zayn. “Roasted in house at the store on Preston Avenue. Gotta put that employee discount to good use, right?”

“We’re gonna have to start trading shampoo discounts for coffee discounts,” Zayn comments as he takes another sip. “Because I love this.”

“It’s…it’s our darkest roast,” Louis confesses, his cheeks heating as he remembers picking it out for Harry. He picks at the blanket draped over the back of the couch. “It’s the West Coast French roast.”

*Never even got a chance to make it for him. Whatever. It’s fine. Gotta drink it, right?*

Louis’ heart pangs in his chest as he exhales loudly. Zayn looks at him sympathetically while Louis tries to school his face into a neutral expression.

“Have you talked to him yet?” Zayn asks softly.

“So do we want to start with *Iron Man*? Any good Marvel marathon should start with the first one, yeah?”

“Louis.”

“I don’t want to talk about it today, okay?” Louis sighs. “Can we just zone out and watch hot superheroes save the world? Please?”

Zayn rakes his fingers through his silvery-blue hair.

“If you really want to go in chronological order,” he says finally. “We should start with the first Captain America movie.”

“Good point,” Louis says gratefully. “Steve Rogers it is.”

Louis leans back into the couch cushions, scrolling through Netflix as he sips from his own cup of coffee.

Someone knocks on the door.

Louis’ eyes go wide as he looks at Zayn, whose expression mirrors his.

“Who–”

“Do you think it’s–” Zayn asks, his voice hushed.

“I don’t know? I mean who else could–” Louis replies, his heart rate picking up.

*Harry, Harry, Harry.*
“Are you going to get it?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Louis gulps. He sets his mug on the coffee table and smooths his sweater down his chest as he gets up. “Yeah, of course.”

A second knock.

“Coming,” Louis croaks.

He takes a deep breath and looks over at Zayn, who smiles encouragingly, craning around to look at the door. Louis smiles back tentatively. He swings the door open and his heart sinks.

Because it’s not Harry, it’s Liam.

Liam who he’s been dodging all week. Liam who he knows has been with Harry all week. Liam who has got his angry mama bear face on, his arms crossed and one eyebrow raised as he looks Louis up and down appraisingly.

“Hey,” Liam clips.

“Liam!” Louis exclaims loudly for Zayn’s benefit. He pastes on a too bright smile as he gestures for Liam to come in. “Come in, come in. This is Zayn; he was my roommate at Cedar Springs. Zayn, Liam. Liam, Zayn.”

Liam looks over to Zayn, who offers a small smile and an awkward wave, his eyes darting over to Louis.

“You have perfect timing, Li,” Louis babbles nervously, as he shuts the door behind Liam and heads towards the kitchen. “Zayn and I are having a Marvel marathon today and we were just about to start Captain America. Wanna join us? You love the Marvel movies, you should join us. I also have a pretty full pot of coffee brewed. Do you want some? Plenty to share. It’s the good stuff from the shop—”

“I just saw Harry off to Boston,” Liam says bluntly.

Louis freezes in his tracks and goes very still, heart pounding in his chest.

Fuck. He left, he really left. Fuck.

“He...he wasn’t supposed to leave until the—” Louis stammers, turning to face Liam. “Fuck. He didn’t...he didn’t even say goodbye?”

“Well, you didn’t give him a reason to,” Liam says accusingly. “Did you?”

Louis bows his head and rubs his temples.

He’s right.

“How...how is he?”

“How do you think he is?”
Louis flinches, clenching his fists, his fingernails digging into his palms.

“I don’t–”

“He’s heartbroken,” Liam spits. “He’s trying really hard to put a brave face on but he’s fucking devastated, Louis. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so miserable, so great job.”

“I didn’t–”

“How could you do that to him? How?”

“What do you–”

“Are you really going to act like you don’t know what I’m talking about? That’s rich, Louis,” Liam says sharply. He runs a hand through his hair, shaking his head. “You know what? It’ll be good for him to get away from here.”

“From me, you mean,” Louis states, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You said it, I didn’t.”

“Spare me the bullshit,” Louis snaps. “You clearly have something to say to me, so just say it. Let’s go.”

“What the fuck, Louis?” Liam explodes. “How could you do this? Jesus Christ, what were you thinking–”

“What was I thinking? What about what he was thinking?” Louis cries incredulously. “This is not my fault! He sprung all this on me out of nowhere–”

“Are you shitting me? Out of nowhere? Seriously?”

“Yes, I’m serious! He’d never talked about moving to Boston before! At least not right away anyway. And then all of the sudden it was like ‘Okay, gotta go!’ What was I supposed to do–”

“I’m not talking about the move,” Liam says firmly. “I’m talking about the way Harry feels about you. You can’t possibly say that came out of nowhere!”

“You know what? This is none of your business, Liam. This is between me and Harry,” Louis snarls. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, so don’t get involved.”

“Too late, I already am. I got involved the moment Harry showed up sobbing on my doorstep last week. Frankly, I’ve been involved even longer than that.”

“What...what do you mean?” Louis sputters.

Liam rolls his eyes.

“Oh, please. You can’t tell me you didn’t know how Harry felt about you,” Liam says with exasperation. “He’s been in love with you for ages! How did you not see it? It was so fucking obvious, Louis. Why do you think he and Nick never got along?”

“They just...their personalities clashed–” Louis starts.

“I mean, Jesus, Louis, even Nick knew. Why the fuck do you think he always picked on Harry? None of your other friends. Just Harry. Think about it.”
“I–”

“Did you notice that Harry hasn’t even looked at another guy in over a year?”

“He...he was focusing on school,” Louis gulps, trying to think back to the last time Harry dated anyone. “He just...he wasn’t...he said nobody interested him–”

“Yeah, because the only guy he was interested in was you .”

Louis takes a step back, reeling. Liam’s statement feels a bit like a smack across the face and, at the same time, like another piece of the puzzle he’s been trying to solve for the past week slotting into place.

“I didn’t know that Liam,” Louis insists desperately, combing his fingers through his hair. “Jesus, he never said anything! I’m...I’m not a mind reader! Besides, I had a boyfriend!”

“Like that stopped you. Like you didn’t encourage it, Louis,” Liam sneers. “Come on.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Louis shrieks.

“I mean the constant touching...you’re always playing his hair and climbing all over him. You’re just...you flirt with him all the time, Louis! All the fucking time, it’s ridiculous.”

“He did it too!” Louis protests lamely.

“Gee, I wonder why?” Liam says sarcastically. “Christ. It’s like if Harry is in the room God forbid anyone else have his full attention other than you! It’s like...you just have to have Harry on the hook, right? How in the hell don’t you see it?”

“I don’t...it’s not...we’re just...it’s how we…” Louis stammers, floundering for an explanation.

“And what about that whole week after you and Nick broke up? Fuck...what about the night you broke up with him and showed up at Harry’s and pulled that whole ‘don’t leave me, I don’t want to be alone’ shit? What the fuck was that?”

“He...he told you about that?”

“Of course he did,” Liam says, throwing his arms in the air in frustration. “Harry tells me practically everything. I’ve listened to Harry microanalyze almost every single thing about the two of you for the past two years–”

“Two years?” Louis yelps.

“But the thing is he didn’t have to tell me, I fucking saw it with my own eyes. That day we spent rearranging the apartment and watching Star Wars? It was like I was the third wheel. You were fucking spooning! And you were the one who initiated it, Louis. You. So if you don’t have feelings for him, then what the fuck were you doing?”

“I–”

“Did you just need a warm body? Was that it?” Liam accuses. “If that was the case, you could have found anyone, Louis. Why Harry? Of all people? Harry who has done nothing but love you and support you and you used him. You have never considered his feelings. Not once. God, you’re so fucking selfish, you don’t deserve him–”

“That’s enough!” Zayn exclaims from the couch.
Louis whips his head around, eyes wide. He’d forgotten Zayn was even there.

“Jesus, you’re acting like Harry doesn’t have any sort of responsibility here!” Zayn cries, his eyes blazing as he focuses on Liam. “He’s an adult; he made his own choices. He could have said something ages ago and he didn’t! That’s not Louis’ fault, that’s all on Harry! Harry fucked up here too, you know!”

“Harry knows he fucked up though,” Liam counters angrily. “That’s the difference.”

“Do you think Louis doesn’t know that he fucked up?” Zayn asks furiously, his face reddening. “Stop assuming what he’s thinking or feeling, you don’t know shit. You weren’t there! This is hard enough without you unloading on him!”

“Don’t assume that I don’t know how hard this is but he still needs to –”

“I mean, fuck, do you even realize what Harry was asking from him?” Zayn asserts, getting to his feet and striding over to Liam. “He was asking him to give up his entire support system and move to a new city and start a serious relationship! A week after he got out of rehab! At this point in his recovery, do you have any idea how disastrous that could be? You can’t fuck around in the first ninety days, dude! Trust me, I know.”

Louis frantically looks between Zayn and Liam, who are now in each other’s faces; his heart is racing and his throat feels tight. He’s never seen unflappable Zayn get so fired up, nor has he seen Liam this furious.

“This is all my fault.

“Look, I like Harry a lot; he’s a great guy, but he was way out of line,” Zayn continues. “Louis is making life or death choices here, don’t you get it? Louis has to choose the best thing for him and you need to mind your own fucking business and let them–”

“No offense but I’ve known Harry and Louis much longer than you–”

“And I know what Louis is going through right now–”

“This has been going on for ages, you don’t know the whole story–”

“Neither do you!”

Stop, stop, stop.

“Harry is my friend,” Liam spits. “My best friend. And as his friend–”

“I thought Louis was your friend too? Way to choose sides, man!”

“Stop it!” Louis shouts, tears streaming down his face. “Just fucking stop! You’re not helping! Either of you!”

He hadn’t even realized he was crying. Louis crosses over to the couch, sinking down and burying his head in his hands, sobs wracking his body. After a few minutes, he hears Zayn clear his throat. He looks up to see them engaging in a silent conversation, Zayn gesturing to Liam, whose face has gone pale. Louis hiccupps and then gasps loudly, which startles them into action. Zayn wedges in next to him, pulling him close to his chest and murmuring apologies into his hair. Liam shrugs off his coat, depositing it on the armchair and then walking over to sit on Louis’ other side. His mouth is downturned and his eyes full of concern as he gently pats Louis’ knee. He grabs the mostly
empty tissue box from the coffee table and holds it out to Louis, who takes a couple gratefully.

“That box has gotten a workout this week,” Louis says after blowing his nose and crumpling up the tissues in his fist and tossing them on the coffee table. “Fuck, I’m tired of crying.”

“I’m sorry, Lou,” Liam says quietly. “I shouldn’t have just stormed in here guns blazing, yeah? That wasn’t…I didn’t think you…fuck…I’m so sorry. I just…can you tell me what happened? I mean I know what happened from Harry’s perspective. I’ve been trying to talk to you all week but you’ve—”

“H-Harry needed you,” Louis says tearfully. “And I…I didn’t…I don’t…”

“Zayn’s right though. You’re my friend too, so just…try to explain it to me…if you can? Only if you want to.”

“It all happened so fast,” Louis says, hiccuping again. He takes a few deep breaths, pressing a hand to his diaphragm. “It was like…boom! I’m leaving. Boom! Come with me. Boom! I’m in love with you…and then we were kissing and it was like…holy shit, you know? Like, Jesus Christ, it was…”

“Good?” Liam asks.

Louis nods, plucking another tissue from the box and dabbing at his eyes. Zayn gently plays with his hair, scratching his scalp comfortingly.

“It was sensory overload. My brain felt like it was short-circuiting or something. I just…I got overwhelmed. It was too much…too fast…and I didn’t know what to do? I just…I couldn’t handle it.”

“I always thought you were in love with him,” Liam says quietly. “It seemed so obvious to me.”

Louis glances over his shoulder at Zayn questioningly.

“You know what I think, Lou,” Zayn says cautiously. “We’ve talked about it. You light up around Harry. That doesn’t mean you should just throw away your recovery process for him,” Zayn adds, giving Liam a pointed look. “But, yeah…it was pretty obvious to me that you loved him too.”

“Well, it wasn’t to me,” Louis admits, plucking lint off the knee of his sweatpants. “At all.”

“So you’re saying you do lo—” Liam starts, his eyes widening.

“I’m saying it’s fucking complicated, Li,” Louis emphasizes. “I don’t want you to think that I don’t feel anything, okay? Like…that whole week with Harry? It was amazing. It felt good. We were good. I do feel things for him but…I’m confused. And I’m scared. This is all so new to me! I’m only just becoming aware of what our relationship is…was…like. I would never go there with Harry unless I was sure, yeah? We’ve been friends for fifteen years…that’s a lot to put at stake if you’re not sure! I was afraid of losing him!”

“But you lost him anyway,” Liam interjects.

“Yeah, I know I fucking did, Liam,” Louis says sharply. “Thanks for the reminder.”

“So why not at least be honest—”

“There’s…so much right now that I’m trying to deal with. It’s not the right time for us! I mean, Jesus, I just got out of a relationship! I could never…fuck…I could never have Harry be the rebound
guy, you know? Not Harry.”

“Did you tell him any of this?” Liam asks gently.

“Not exactly,” Louis says, shaking his head. “No.”

“Why not?”

“I told you! It happened so fast. Shit. I tried to tell him! It just...I didn’t know how to put it into words! What I just told you? That’s the product of two very lengthy and very hard sessions with my therapist this week! Like...I’m still learning how to process it all.”

“It’s just...Jesus, Louis...he thinks you don’t love him! At all. This...this changes everything! Fuck.”

Louis’ heart clenches painfully as he scrubs his hands over his face.

“He didn’t give me any time to think! And now it’s just over. He left! I can’t believe he actually left.”

“You didn’t ask him to stay!” Liam exclaims. “Louis, oh my God!”

“How could I ask him to stay, Li? How? ‘Hey, I think I may have feelings for you too. I’m not sure though, please give up the medical school of your dreams and wait for me to figure it out!’ Yeah, okay.”

“I mean–”

“Absolutely fucking not. Now that...like you called me selfish before, right? That would have been fucking selfish of me. I had to let him go,” Louis says definitively. “It was the right thing to do. No matter how much it hurt.”

Liam gapes at him.

“I have to figure my shit out,” Louis continues. “And it’s something I need to do on my own. I’m never going to be okay unless I do that, you know? I have to choose me. I can’t be with anyone right now.”

“Louis–” Liam says

“And Harry...he...he’ll be fine. He will. He’s gonna...he’s gonna be amazing. I know he will. So...this is the best thing. It is. It has to be.”

Louis isn’t sure if he’s trying to convince Liam or convince himself. Liam shakes his head.

“Well, if you really think that, then I can’t help you. God, you’re both so fucking stubborn,” Liam sighs, looking at his watch and frowning. “I should...I should go.”

“Okay,” Louis says in a tiny voice. “I mean...you’re welcome to stay. If you want? You love Captain America. You are Captain America. We...we haven’t watched together in forever.”

“I know but I really should go,” Liam says reluctantly, grabbing his coat and putting it on. “I have class this afternoon and I’m behind on the reading for it. Otherwise...”

Louis nods.
“Please...please don’t tell Harry what I said, yeah? Just...just leave it alone. It really is for the best.”

“If you say so, Lou,” Liam says heavily. “I think you’re wrong, but that’s just me. I’ll see you around, yeah? I’ll swing by the coffeehouse tomorrow.”

“I’m working in the afternoon.”

“Cool. Nice meeting you, Zayn. I’m...I’m sorry for yelling at you.”

Zayn nods, tightening his arms around Louis.

“Same,” he replies.

Liam smiles sadly and goes, the door clicking shut quietly. Louis sighs, snuggling closer to Zayn and sniffling.

“So much for not talking about it today, huh?” Zayn says quietly, carding his fingers through Louis’ hair.

“He left, Zee. He...he really left,” Louis mutters, wiping his nose.

“I know, Lou,” Zayn says soothingly. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“I mean, I knew he would but at the same time it’s just...fuck...I can’t...I can’t believe this is real. Fuck.”

They sit in silence; Louis clings to Zayn while Zayn continues to gently stroke his hair. It reminds Louis of so many nights together in their old room.

“Do you still want to watch the movie?” Zayn asks tentatively. “What are you up for? What can I do?”

“Movie, please,” Louis mumbles. “And maybe some pizza in a little bit? I just...can we forget for a while? Just a little while. At least until our meeting later.”

“We can do that,” Zayn replies, grabbing the remote and pressing play. “We can definitely do that.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Some triggers for the second half of this chapter that aren't in my main tags: Homophobic Language/Slurs, Small Town Homophobia, Hate Crime, Forced Outing, All-Around Shitty Parenting. It is all talked about in the past tense. Please proceed with caution if those are upsetting/triggering for you, and always, feel free to hit me up with any questions.

It sounds weird to say enjoy the chapter after that, but please, do enjoy it. I'm proud of this one.

“Do you want to take a cooking class?”

“Why hello to you too, Neil,” Louis quips. He presses the speaker button, tossing the phone on the bed as he peels off his skinny jeans. Sighing with relief, he grabs his favorite pair of sweatpants from the floor and tugs them over his legs.

“Hi, Louis, hello,” Niall chirps. “Do you want to take a cooking class with me?”

Louis guffaws as he pulls the green hoodie Niall got him for his birthday over his head.

“A cooking class? Seriously? You do talk some shit, Neil,” Louis replies, grabbing the phone and switching off speaker mode as he pads down the hall to his kitchen.

“Oh, come on!” Niall says excitedly. “There’s a school downtown that’s offering a two-for-one Groupon for a six-week beginners’ course. We should do it!”

“I don’t know,” Louis says, opening up his pantry. “That sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

“Har, har,” Niall says drily. “You think you’re so clever, Bender. Now tell me this: What did you have for dinner last night?”

“Ramen,” Louis replies.

“And tonight?”

Louis crinkles his nose at the mostly empty pantry, plucking a blue box off the middle shelf. “Mac and cheese?”

“Man cannot live on noodles alone,” Niall says sagely.

“I don’t just eat noodles. I eat—”

“Take-out doesn’t count, Lou.”

Louis sighs, grabbing a pot from the cabinet and setting it on the stove. It’s a little early for dinner, but he’s starving after working an 8-hour shift at the coffeehouse.

“Harry always cooked,” Louis admits ruefully.
“Which is why you should do this class with me,” Niall says gently. “C’mon, Lou. Let’s better ourselves. It’ll be fun!”

“You’re right,” Louis chuckles. “What the hell? Let me know what I owe you, okay? First one who makes a total mess of things buys the other dinner?”

“That’s the spirit,” Niall cackles. “You’re on. I look forward to you treating me to burgers at Citizen after our first class.”


He’s interrupted by a knock at the door. Louis frowns.

“Why the fuck do people keep showing up unannounced?” Louis mutters under his breath.

“Huh?”

“Do people ever call before just coming over anymore, Niall?” Louis asks irritably. “What the fuck.”

“What are you talking about, Bender?” Niall asks with confusion. Louis can picture his brow crinkling.

“Someone’s here,” Louis explains as he makes his way to the door. “And I’m not expecting anyone. People keep doing this to me. Honestly.”

“Do you have time to talk about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ today, sir?” Niall jokes.

“Fuck no,” Louis laughs. “I just want to eat my mac and cheese and zone out to trash TV.”

He opens the door and his heart drops to his stomach as he sees his parents standing on his doorstep.

“Hi, baby,” his mother says with a big smile. “Surprise!”

“Mom! Mark!” Louis exclaims.

“Oh shit,” Niall says on the other end of the line.


“Yeah, yeah, okay. What–”

Louis hangs up before Niall can finish his thought and shoves the phone in the pocket of his hoodie.

“Sorry! Hi!” he says with a forced brightness. “Come in, come in. What are you–”

Jay pulls him in for a hug before he can finish, squeezing him tightly. Louis wraps his arms around her waist and hugs her back, crouching so he can bury his head in her neck. He breathes in his mother’s comforting scent as he tries to calm his racing heart.

*What are they doing here? I’m not ready for this yet.*

“You look so good, baby,” Jay whispers, swaying them slightly. “So, so, so good.”

They hold each other for a long time before Jay pulls back, cupping Louis’ face and pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“You just...you look great, Boo. I’m so happy to see you.”

“I’m happy to see you too,” Louis sighs. He means it, despite the way his heart is pounding in his chest.

Mark clears his throat, shuffling his weight awkwardly as he takes off his coat, hanging it in the closet by the door. He’s dressed up in nice khakis, a crisp button down, and a sport coat. Louis quickly glances down at his comfy clothes and suddenly feels self-conscious, cursing his tendency to change into sweats as soon as he gets home from work. He tugs at the bottom of the hoodie, straightening out the folds of fabric over his hips.

“Your mother’s right, son,” Mark says. “It’s good to see you looking back to yourself.”

Louis releases Jay and gives Mark a stiff hug, patting his back a few times as Mark does the same.

“Thank you, sir,” Louis replies with a smile. “That means a lot to me.” He looks between his parents, clapping his hands together. “So,” he says, trying to keep his voice neutral. “Not that I’m not happy to see you guys but...what are you doing here? I didn’t forget about something, did I?”

“Your father has an alumni reception at the medical school tonight,” Jay says as Mark takes her coat, revealing her simple but elegant blue dress. “So we thought we would surprise you and take you out to dinner before we head over there. And then we can stay for a few days, we never did celebrate your birthday after all, so I thought...” She trails off, noticing Louis’ discomfort. Her face crumples slightly. “Was...was that a bad idea? Is this not a good time?”

“No, no, it’s not that,” Louis assures. “I mean, yes...I wish I had known you guys were coming. I’m not really dressed to go out? I just got home from work; I did a long shift today and I’m pretty wiped but, I can change.”

“How’s work going?” Mark asks. “You’re...at a coffeehouse?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Louis says, shuffling further into the living room. “It’s going well. I was a bit of a disaster at first, but I’ve gotten the hang of it. Everyone who works there has been really great. You guys should come by tomorrow, see me in action. I can make a mean cappuccino now.”

Jay smiles encouragingly, while Mark frowns.

“I mean,” Louis says a little lamely, feeling Mark’s eyes on him. “I know it’s not like saving lives or anything but it’s work and I enjoy it and I’m getting to be good at it. It’s enough...for now, anyway.”

“What about school?” Mark asks as he follows Louis.

“What about it?” Louis snaps defensively. “The semester’s already started. James and I both agreed that me going back to school right away was a bad idea. I...I thought I had been clear with you guys that I needed this time? I have a lot I need to think about.”

Louis raises his eyebrows questioningly at his mother; she nods back at him kindly.

“Have a seat, Louis,” Mark says brusquely, settling down on the couch and gesturing to the
“We need to have a talk.”

“What about?” Louis asks suspiciously.

Jay gives Mark a look as she sits next to him. “Honey, is this really the time to do this—”

“What about your plans, son,” Mark continues.

“My plans,” Louis parrots as he sits.

“Your plans for school,” Mark barrels on. “You’re going to be a year behind now, you need to make that time up.”

Louis takes a few deep breaths, willing the discussions he and James have had about this very topic to come to mind. He’s known this conversation has been coming, of course he has. He just didn’t know it was going to come so soon.

I can do this. I can.

“I’m aware of that, sir,” Louis says, clenching his fists but trying to stay calm. “I’m going to make up that time but I don’t think—”

“I’ve already made some calls about summer school—”

“Summer school?” Louis yelps. “But I don’t—”

“Mark, honey, don’t you think—” Jay starts.

“If you attend both sessions, that’s a full semester’s worth of work. You’d almost be on track from all the time you missed—”

“You mean the time I missed while I was in rehab?” Louis interjects. “I’m not just screwing around, sir. It’s not like I just decided to stop going to school. I was in rehab! For drug and alcohol abuse. Can you at least acknowledge that?”

“You can still take the MCAT in the fall if you work hard. There’s plenty of time to study and you can still get your applications in on time—”

“Mark!” Louis exclaims. “Stop! You’re not listening to me! I don’t want to do that. And I’m not going to let you bulldoze me into doing this. Not again.”

Mark finally stops, looking Louis right in the eye, his mouth set in a firm line. “Excuse me, son?”

Louis takes another deep breath, straightening his spine and sitting tall in his chair.

“I’m not going back to pre-med. I’m not going to go to medical school. I don’t...I don’t want to be a doctor.”

“What do you mean?” Mark asks, shock evident in his voice.

“Exactly what I said,” Louis says firmly. “I’m not going back to pre-med. I can’t go back to pre-med.”

“What do you intend to do then?” Mark challenges, leaning back into the couch and crossing his arms.
“I...I don’t know yet,” Louis says honestly. “I’ve been discussing that with James–”

“That’s not good enough,” Mark clips.

“Nothing ever is for you, sir,” Louis snaps.

“Okay, you two, let’s be kind to each other,” Jay interjects.

“You can’t support yourself working a few days a week at a coffeehouse, Louis,” Mark points out. “You need an education; you need a career.”

“I know that!” Louis insists. “Don’t you think I know that? But I need some time! I need time to figure out what it is that I want to do.”

“You’ve come so far in your education,” Mark states. “You can’t just quit. Not when you’re so close!”

“I’m not quitting! Just...changing directions.”

“You don’t even know what direction you’re going, Louis. You can’t just float along until a good idea comes to you. You have to be willing to put in the work. You’re going to medical school and that’s final. That’s what we’ve been working towards all this time and you will see it through, son.”

Louis’ chest feels tight; he feels like the room is closing in on him. His pulse jackrabbits in his throat. He digs his fingers in his thighs, the slight pinch through his sweatpants grounding him.

“No,” Louis says through clenched teeth. “I won’t do it. I can’t do it. Please just listen to me–”

“Mark,” Jay says calmly. “I think Louis has earned the right to speak. You have your reasons, don’t you, baby?”

Louis nods, looking at his mother gratefully.

“Can you explain them to us?” Jay asks gently. “I think your father will understand once you do. Come on, you can do it. I know you can.”

Louis swallows hard, desperately trying to collect his thoughts into something coherent.

“I’m waiting,” Mark says impatiently.

“Mark,” Jay practically growls. “Enough.”

“Pre-med was killing me,” Louis says quietly, looking at his hands. “I couldn’t...I couldn’t handle it.”

“You were doing fine before your problem,” Mark interrupts.

“That’s not true and you know it,” Louis corrects, looking up at him. “I was drowning. I couldn’t keep up with the work. And I tried. I don’t want you to think that I didn’t try. God, I started up on the drugs because someone offered them to me as a way to stay up so I could study. And even then I could barely manage to get Cs. And in this program? A C may as well be an F, you know?”

“If you would just apply yourself, Louis–”

“Jesus! I did apply myself!” Louis yelps, feeling tears sting at his eyes. “I worked so hard. Harry...” Louis tries to ignore the way his heart clenches as the tears spill over. “Harry would try
to tutor me. But I...it was just like...my brain couldn’t get it? I would stay up all night studying and then I would take more pills just so I could stay awake in class so I wouldn’t fall further behind. Then the whole vicious cycle would start over again. And just...it really did a number on me. All the professors were so hard on me. Always calling me into conferences, telling me that I needed to keep up or drop the program. As if I didn’t know that. I began to hate myself; I felt just so...stupid. Worthless. I just...I never felt good about myself. I felt like a failure.”

A pained whimper escapes Jay’s lips.

“That’s when the drinking started,” Louis honestly, turning his attention to his mother. “I would just drink myself into a stupor every weekend...and then it started to be weeknights too...just so I could forget myself for a while. That’s how I’ve been living for the past year. I can’t do it again.”

Louis trembles as he wipes his face with the sleeve of his hoodie.

“But you’re fine now,” Mark insists.

“I’m sober now,” Louis says, his voice thick. “It doesn’t mean I’m fine. There’s a difference.”

“Okay, you’re sober now,” Mark says firmly. “So, it won’t be like that again.”

“Are you even listening to me?” Louis exclaims, a slight edge of hysteria creeping into his voice.

He stops and scrubs his hands over his face as he takes a calming breath. Then another. He can’t do this if he’s hysterical. He needs to be calm. Rational. He knows that Mark is more likely to listen to rational and concrete statements. Louis takes a third breath and then continues.

“One of the first things I learned in recovery is that I have to change my behavior. I can’t put myself in a situation that could drive me to use again. You can write off my addiction as a passing thing, something that was easily cured, that’s fine. You can pretend that it never happened, but I can’t. I’m going to have to be aware of it for the rest of my life. And if I go back...I’m scared it will kill me. I can’t—”

“So you’re just going to let two and a half years of education go to waste? After everything I’ve sacrificed to send you to one of the best—”

“Mark,” Jay says urgently, her hand on his arm. “Can you try and look at things from Louis’ perspective? Please? Let him figure out what it is he needs—”

“He needs to be pushed,” Mark says, turning to Jay. “He needs—”

“Why?” Louis chokes. “Why do you need to push me so hard? God, it’s been like this my whole life! And I’ve tried...I’ve tried to make you proud of me but I can’t keep doing this! I can’t keep trying to make you happy! Are you going to push me until I break? Is that it?” Louis shoves the sleeve of his hoodie up his forearm, revealing the jagged pink scar from his accident. “Well, guess what, Mark? This is it! I broke! Are you satisfied?”

Mark casts his eyes to the floor, paling slightly.

“No,” Louis says, his voice firm even as he trembles slightly. “No, sir. Look at me! Look at me while I say this. Please!”

Mark looks up, the tears welling in his eyes belying his stoic expression.
“When did my becoming a doctor start to mean more to you than my happiness?”

“Louis–”

“Can’t you accept me for who I am? I’m begging you to,” Louis pleads. “I want you to be proud of
me. It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“And I want you to be the best that you can be!”

“Why does that mean being just like you?” Louis asks desperately. “Why does that mean
following in your footsteps instead of being my own person? I’m not like you, why can’t you see
that?”

“I don’t want you to be like me! What I want for you is what every parent wants for their child. I
want better for you, Louis!”

“How is this 'better' though? It’s not better!”

“I want more for you than what I’ve had,” Mark says fervently. “I want you to do more.
Accomplish more. Because you can!”

“Not like this though! I can’t like this. You...you have all these unrealistic expectations and for so
many years I’ve been trying so hard to meet them. But it’s like you’re setting me up to fail,” Louis’
voice breaks as the tears flow freely now, years of pain and self doubt pouring out of him. “I’ve
been trying to be the perfect son for you, Mark. But I can’t do it anymore. I can’t.”

“That’s not what I–”

“I wish...I wish you could just love me for who I am and not for who you want me to be. Why
can’t you do that? Why do you push me so fucking hard? Why don’t you just love me? I mean...do
you even love me? Have I been that horrible of a son that you can’t even do that? Am I that much
of a disappointment?”

“Louis,” Jay gasps, her gaze flicking between him and Mark. “How could you even think–”

“Of course I love you, Louis,” Mark declares urgently, his eyes wide. “Why do you think I push
you so hard? It’s because I love you! I love you, Louis. You’re my son. I may not have given you
life, but you’re my son. And I love you. Don’t ever say that I don’t love you.”

“Dad–” Louis croaks through a sob as he feels something come loose in his chest. “Then
why...why do you–”

“I push you because that’s what I’ve thought you needed from me,” Mark states simply. “It’s
how...with my father...he...”

Mark trails off and looks down at the floor, clearing his throat. He’s silent for several moments as
he gathers his thoughts. When he looks back up at him, Louis can that he’s reined in his emotions,
despite his softer expression.

“I just want the best for you,” Mark continues quietly. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted. You have so
much potential and I don’t want you to waste it–”

“But...shouldn’t I be able to explore that potential for myself?” Louis sniffs. “Can’t I make my
own choices instead of having them dictated to me?”
“You’re so smart,” Mark says plainly. “You’re good with people. You’ve always been good with people, son. You’ve always wanted to help them and I...I’ve always admired that about you. You could be a brilliant doctor; I thought that’s what you wanted. You never said any different.”

“I thought it was what I wanted too,” Louis agrees. “But...it’s not. Not anymore. It’s not for me. It’s too hard.”

“It’s supposed to be hard, Louis,” Mark says sincerely.

“Not this hard,” Louis says, his voice hushed. “It...it only made me hurt myself, Dad. It made me hate myself.”

Mark exhales loudly, leaning back into the couch cushions. Jay pats his thigh and then laces her fingers through his, squeezing tightly.

“Where do we go from here?”

“I don’t know,” Louis says honestly, swiping at his face once more. “I just...I need your support. I...I know I’ve gotten a little...a lot...lost but I’m...I’m finding my way now. I’m asking for some patience from you while I’m still figuring things out. From both of you,” he adds, looking at his mother. “Can you...can you do that?”

“You’ve been quiet,” Mark says, turning to Jay. “What do you think? I need to hear what you think about all of this.”

Jay looks at Louis, pride sparkling in her eyes, even as she delicately wipes a few tears away.

“I think we should trust our son,” she says decisively. “I think his instincts are good and I think we need to let him choose what’s best for him.”

The three of them sit in silence for a few minutes. Louis feels relieved and undone all at the same time as he toys with the sleeves of his hoodie.

“You need to go back to school,” Mark says finally. “You need to.”

“I know,” Louis says solemnly. “I know I do. I’m just asking for this semester, sir. That’s all. Please.”


Louis looks up at him, a small smile quirking the corner of his mouth. “Okay?”

Mark nods. “Okay.”

“You two are more alike than you realize,” Jay says softly, a serene smile on her face.

Louis and Mark both look at her, taken aback.

“You are,” she insists, huffing a gentle laugh. “You’re both passionate. Determined. Fiercely protective. A little emotionally stunted. You’re both stubborn...pig-headed even. It’s why you butt heads so much. And you’re both the best men I know. You could learn so much from each other, if you would just let yourselves.”

Both men look at the floor, fidgeting.

“I know there’s a lot the three of us still need to talk about,” Jay continues. “But I think that’s
enough for tonight, don’t you? We should get going if we want to grab a bite before the reception, Mark.”

She gets up and heads for the coat closet, brushing the hair off Louis’ forehead as she passes him.

“Are you sure we should...” Mark asks reluctantly, looking at Louis.


“Can we take you out to dinner tomorrow, baby?” Jay asks, shrugging her coat on. “I know we just kind of barged in here; I should have checked with you first–”

“Dinner would be great,” Louis says as he gets up, his legs slightly unsteady. He hugs his mother tightly and then kissing her cheek. “I have a meeting at 5. You could pick me up after. Or you could...you could come if you want and then we could go? Anyone is welcome.”

“We would love that,” Jay beams. “Wouldn’t we, Mark?”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Mark replies, only slightly awkward. “Whatever you want.”

“It’s a lot of feelings talk,” Louis says, smiling weakly.

Mark chuckles even as a small grimace crosses his face.

“Duly noted,” he says gruffly, taking his coat from Jay and pulling it on. He turns to Louis and they stand there for a few moments before Mark tugs him to his side, squeezing his shoulder tightly as he hugs him awkwardly. “I love you, son.”

Louis inhales sharply as he squeezes him back.

“I love you too, Dad,” he mutters. “Talk tomorrow, yeah?”

Mark claps him on the back once as he withdraws.

“Yes. See you then.”

He opens the door, sliding his arm around Jay’s waist as he guides her out. Jay looks back at Louis over her shoulder.

“Proud of you,” she mouths as they go, giving him a secret smile which Louis returns. “Love you.”

The door clicks shut. Louis heaves a giant sigh of relief, feeling slightly boneless as adrenaline suddenly courses through his veins. Hands shaking slightly, Louis cards his fingers through his hair as he leans back against the door.

*I need a fucking cigarette.*

He’s been trying to quit. He really has. He had finished his last pack two days ago, making up his mind that it would be the last one. He’s been doing fine without them so far...but now? Now he really fucking needs a cigarette. Several actually.

Louis exhales loudly, banging his head against the door. He flexes his hands in an effort to stop their shaking as he ponders his options. He can go to the gas station just down the street. But surely he has an emergency pack stashed somewhere? He flings his coat closet door open, surveying his myriad of coats and jackets.
I’ve got to have some somewhere.

Louis starts shoving his hands in pockets, starting with the coats that hang in the middle; the ones he wears the most. Letting out a frustrated growl when he comes up empty, Louis pushes the coats aside in an effort to get to the ones on the far ends of the closet. He picks up his pace, frantically searching every pocket in the closet.

Come onnnnnnnnn.

Louis reaches the last jacket, a jean jacket he had been obsessed with last spring, left forgotten until this moment. He digs his hand into one pocket and hoots victoriously when he finds a lighter.

“Jackpot,” he mutters as he fumbles around for the other pocket. “I knew I had to have some.”

Louis thrusts his hand into the other pocket. His fingers brush smooth rounded plastic rather than cardboard. His blood instantly runs cold.

Oh fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

His fingers close around the vial and he pulls it out of the pocket, his heart pounding painfully in his chest. He holds the orange bottle up, examining it in the light. Louis shakes it, the familiar rattle of pills seemingly echoing through the apartment. The bottle is almost completely full.

Jesus Christ.

Sweat starts to bead at Louis’ hairline almost immediately. His breath comes in shallow gasps; his palms feel clammy as he clutches the bottle to his chest, squeezing his eyes shut.

What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?

He rolls the bottle in between his palms, the rattle of the pills somehow both soothing and unsettling as he desperately tries to center himself. That itch, the familiar itch that he has been working so hard to control, that itch that has been lying dormant now roars to life in his brain. Louis lets out a strangled moan.

Throw them away.

One wouldn’t hurt though. Just to take the edge off.

Throw. Them. Away. Just flush them down the toilet, you’re fine. You can do this.

It’s only one though. Just one. One is no big deal.

It is a big deal though.

No one has to know.

I would know.

Just...just do it. You know you want to. You’ll feel better.

I feel fine. I don’t need them.

Sure you don’t.

Louis scurries back to his bathroom, his hand clamped so tightly around the bottle that his fist
hurts. He flips on the light, blinking several times as spots explode behind his eyelids at the sudden brightness. His pulse continues to pound; he feels it in his throat, in his chest, in his temples. Carefully placing the bottle on the edge of the counter, Louis turns on the faucet, his hands shaking. He splashes cold water on his face several times, pressing the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. He shuts off the faucet, pressing a towel to his face as he continues to breathe shallowly; his internal battle rages on, the itch threatening to overwhelm him.

_Goddamnit._

He picks up the bottle, holding it up out in front of him. Chewing on his bottom lip, he drags his thumb over the tiny ridges of the lid.

_You’re better than this, Louis._

_No, you’re not._

He presses his thumb over the lid and twists, feeling it give underneath the pressure.

_That’s it._

His phone buzzes in his pocket, startling him. Louis gasps, clenching the bottle in his fist as he fishes his phone out of the hoodie, pressing the call button.

“Yeah?” Louis croaks.

“Are they gone?”

“Niall, I told you I would call you back,” Louis says tersely, squeezing his fist tight, the plastic digging into his palm.

“Yeah, I know,” Niall replies, his voice warm on the opposite end of the line. “But just...it had been a while and I got worried. I probably should have texted, but–”

“No,” Louis says, exhaling a shaky breath and blinking back tears. “No, I’m glad you called.”

“How’d it go?”

“It went okay, actually?”

“Why did they just–”

“Hey, can you come over?” Louis asks suddenly, his voice tight. “Like right now?”

“Sure? Did you get to eat your dinner? Should I stop for food? Ice cream?”

“No,” Louis says firmly, gritting his teeth. “Can you just...can you just get here as soon as you can?”

“Louis, what’s wrong?” Niall asks, all semblance of humor leaving his voice.

“I...ah...fuck–” Louis gulps, pressing the fist clutching the bottle to his forehead. “I found some pills. I was...I wasn’t looking for them. I was looking for some cigarettes and I just...I found them in a coat pocket, Niall. They were just there. Fuck.”

“Jesus Christ,” Niall breathes. “Shit. Yeah, yeah, okay, I’m coming. I’ll be right there, Lou.”
Louis hears rustling on the other end of the line. He leans against the wall and slides down to the floor, feeling the tightness in his chest start to loosen. A single tear slides down his cheek.

“Can you hurry?” Louis whispers.

Louis hears a door slam.

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes,” Niall says quickly. “Maybe faster if I hit all the lights.”

“Okay,” Louis whispers as he hears another door slam and the car starting. “Don’t...don’t hang up, yeah?”

“Never,” Niall replies. “I’m switching to speakerphone so I can drive, okay? I’m not going anywhere.”

“Okay.”

“You didn’t...you didn’t take any did you?” Niall asks cautiously. “I mean, we’ll deal with it if you di–”

“No,” Louis answers, looking down at the bottle. “I didn’t. I thought about it but...I haven’t.”


“Can you like...can you tell me a story or something?” Louis asks, pulling his knees up to his chest, his grip still firm on the bottle.

“A story?”

“Yeah,” Louis says softly. “Just...talk to me. Please.”

“I never told you how I ended up in rehab, did I?” Niall says after a moment.

Louis smiles in spite of himself.

“You didn’t. How did we spend three months together there and you never tell me? I know...vague details? But not the full story.”

“I don’t like talking about it,” Niall admits. “I know that goes against like all the principles that we’ve been taught–”

“You don’t have to,” Louis says.

“No,” Niall says firmly. “It’s something James and I have been working on. I want to tell you.”

“Okay,” Louis murmurs.

“My dad left when I was ten,” Niall starts. “He had an affair with his secretary. He just...up and left. Moved across the country. Started a whole new family. You know, all that typical clichéd bullshit.”

“Do you see him at all?” Louis asks quietly, thinking of his own biological father.

“Nah,” Niall replies. “Birthday and Christmas cards only. Sometimes there’s a check in there. Usually not. He’s...he’s not a very good person. At least to me.”
“Yeah,” Louis breathes. “I get that.”

“My mom was a wreck,” Niall continues. “He just...he yanked the rug out from under us, you know? She had to work a lot of hours just to make ends meet. I became a pretty typical latchkey kid; I spent a lot of time fending for myself after school and such. It’s why you can’t possibly get any sort of pop culture reference by me, Bender.”

Louis huffs a laugh.

“My mom drank. A lot. She was never sloppy about it really, but she would always fix a Seven and Seven first thing when she got home from work. It got to the point where I would have it made and waiting for her when she got home.”

“Jesus, Niall. That’s fucked up.”

“Yeah, I know,” he says ruefully. “I didn’t know there was something wrong with that, you know? I grew up with it; it was totally normal. We never talked about it; she just had her drinks, ’cause she never stopped at just the first one. I would watch TV in my room. And like I said it was never like...it was never like she was blitzed. Or if she was it didn’t show. I mean yeah, she would get a little glassy-eyed and sad but I never really equated it with being drunk, you know? And she always got up the next morning and went to work, so I didn’t think anything of it. Of course now I know that she was...is...a high-functioning alcoholic. And that made me genetically predisposed to it.”

Louis rests his head back against the wall, heaving a sigh. He gently taps his fist against his knee.

“She met Dave when I was fourteen. She convinced herself it was some sort of fairytale romance and they were married within a year. Mom quit working ’cause he wanted her to be at home. He’s the man, he’s the breadwinner, that kind of bullshit. She should be at home taking care of the house...if that gives you any idea of what kind of man he is.”

“Yikes,” Louis cringes.

“Yeah, he’s super conservative. Like your textbook definition of a rural good ole boy. Fox News on every morning. Beer and SEC football every Saturday. Church every Sunday morning followed by whatever NFL game was on while my mom cooked for him. The first time I ever met him, he brought me a football; he was always saying ‘This is what men do, son,’ or some other shit like that. And me? I wasn’t built for football. I was this scrawny artsy kid who just loved to listen to old records and watch movies and wanted guitar lessons. Guitar lessons he wouldn’t pay for.”

“Oh, Niall,” Louis sighs.

“But at the same time, I...I’m sure you know how it is. You’ve been there. I didn’t want to screw things up for my mom. She had been so sad and Dave made her happy and maybe she would only have one cocktail a night instead of the three or four that she would normally have, so I really didn’t want to fuck things up. So while I couldn’t play football, I did play soccer. I ran track. I taught myself to play guitar and played it for youth group at church. And I made sure that I was the best at everything. All of it. It wasn’t quite good enough for him, but I was able to get by. I played the part, you know?”

A tear rolls down Louis’ cheek. “I know.”

“Dave was also pretty casually – or not so casually – homophobic. Faggot was a pretty common word in his vocabulary. I was really into Glee when it first came out although I tried not to show it too much.”
Louis groans.

“Oh come on,” Niall laughs. “Glee was fucking awesome!”

“It was,” Louis agrees. “For the first season anyway. It totally went off the rails after that! Like, come on Ryan Murphy, pick a story and stick to it. It’s not hard!”

“Yeah, that’s true. But come on, Lou. No matter what you thought about the story, you have to admit that the arrangements and the mash-ups were sick, right?”

“They were,” Louis says. “I downloaded them every week.”

“Anyway, Dave knew I still played guitar at youth group, so I could always pass off watching it as being obsessed with the music. But seeing people like me on TV...it just meant a lot. Do you remember when it aired after the Super Bowl? I was fifteen. And I was just...I was so excited to watch it that I sat through that whole stupid football game with Dave just so I could watch Glee after. And any time Kurt was on screen or when the football players all joined the glee club, he scoffed. ‘Why are you watching this gay shit, son?’ He called it disgusting. Said that all gay people were sinners who were going to hell. Which, you know, not so great considering I had already figured out that I was gay.”

Louis exhales a shaky breath, his stomach twisting.

“There was this boy. Jacob. He didn’t go to my school; he went to the private school across town, but his family went to our church. He was always pretty flamboyant. Like it was obvious to everyone that he was gay. As we got older, he got more vocal. He never hid who he was. He tried to found a chapter for a Gay/Straight Alliance for both the schools in town. Jacob...ah...he got cornered after a football game one night. He ended up in the hospital; he was practically beaten to death. And just...nobody did anything? Not the school, not the cops...I’ll...I’ll never understand it, Lou. Everyone knew why it happened but they didn’t really talk about it, you know? Not publicly anyway. It was all whispers behind closed doors. My mom and Dave were talking about it over dinner one night and you want to know what he said?”

“I can guess,” Louis says acidly.

“‘Well, what else did they expect would happen to that little faggot? He had it coming.’”

“Jesus Christ, Niall.”

“Uh-huh. The family quietly left town not long after that. So I knew. I knew I could never come out. Not while I lived in that town, and certainly not with Dave as my stepfather.”

“What did you do?” Louis asks in a tiny voice even though he’s pretty certain he knows the answer.

“I drank. I mean, it was a small town. There wasn’t much else to do but have parties and get hammered, yeah? But I drank to numb myself. To shut down what I was feeling. I did my best to ignore it. I took out girls. I dated around. Never anything too serious, but like just enough to convince people. Dave loved it. Was always telling me that’s what I should do. Sow my oats. He’d clap me on the back and tell me I was too young to settle down anyway.” Niall laughs sadly and then pauses. “I’m almost there Lou, but there’s a little bit of traffic, okay?”

“Okay,” Louis replies, swallowing hard and then licking his lips. “Keep going.”

“So I get to UVA and you know how the party scene is~”
“I still can’t believe we never met,” Louis interjects.

“We weren’t ready for each other,” Niall laughs.

“True.”

“I was like a kid in a candy store. I went a bit wild. It was like I had been repressing myself for so long that I didn’t know what to do with myself once I got a taste of what I thought was freedom. I lost my virginity to a random guy on my hall my first semester. I was drunk. I was always drunk when I hooked up with guys. And there were a lot of guys. I think I was like...trying to give myself some sort of loophole. That little bit of deniability I could have because I was drunk. Everyone does stupid shit while they’re drunk, you know? And like...I should have been happy, right? But all I felt was empty. I mean I would feel good while it was happening. I was always in the moment when I was with those guys and I would get off and I thought I was having fun. I thought it was what I wanted. The next morning I would always feel like shit. Physically and emotionally.”

“I get that,” Louis utters.

“It just really started to fuck with my head. I craved closeness...emotional intimacy as James would say but I just kept...I kept looking for it in all the wrong places. I went home for the summer after freshman year, and after three months of trying to stuff myself back in that box at home, it was even worse when I came back sophomore year. And I was like my mom. I could get wasted but still function and go to class and keep my grades up. So it was like I could always tell myself that I was in control, that I was fine.”

Niall is quiet for a few moments. Louis listens to his steady breathing over the line.

“There was a big party towards the end of sophomore year,” Niall says, his voice detached and matter of fact. “Right before finals. It was a rager. I was so smashed that I didn’t realize there were people taking pictures. Or maybe I knew and I just didn’t care or I didn’t remember. Anyway, there were pictures. And they wound up on Facebook and I got tagged in them. I had no idea they were up on my wall.”

Louis feels his blood turn to ice.

“No,” he says with horror.

“You know what you said earlier? About people just showing up at your apartment unannounced?”

“Yeah?” Louis asks.

“I promise for as long as you know me I will never do that to you, Lou. Nothing good ever comes of it.”

“Oh, Niall.”

“The morning after that party, I woke up to Dave pounding on my door at the dorm. My mom was with him. The guy who I had taken home was still there. I don’t...I don’t even remember his name. Isn’t that funny? Nothing was happening at the time but...like...obviously they knew. They didn’t even need to see Party Guy to know. My mom had seen the pictures. Party Guy really gave Usain Bolt a run for his money that morning.”

“Wh-what happened next?”

“Exactly what you think,” Niall says, his voice getting thick. “Dave called me a faggot. Told me
that I was going to hell. That no son of his could be a faggot. My mom was devastated. She was
crying. She kept asking me where she had gone wrong in raising me. As if I had a choice in the
matter. There was a lot of screaming. A lot of crying. Dave said he was cutting off all my financial
support, that if I wanted to stay in school, I would have to figure it out for myself. Said I didn’t
deserve his money. Said I was no longer a part of their family. That I was no longer welcome in
their home. And my mom, she just...she went along with it.”

“What the fuck?” Louis cries.

“A week later, I tried to swipe my card for a meal in the student union and it was declined. I went
to the Bursar’s Office to try and find out what was happening and...Dave had made good on his
threats. I could finish out the last two weeks of the semester but after that I had nothing. Nowhere
to live. No way to register for Junior year unless I coughed up tuition money. Which I didn’t have.
I didn’t have anything. I couldn’t go home. I didn’t have a home anymore.”

“Jesus Christ. How could...how could a parent actually do that? To their kid? My mother would
never—”

“I don’t know,” Niall says sadly. “Not everyone is like your mom, Lou. You...you’re lucky.”

“Yeah,” Louis says softly.

“I never thought they would actually follow through with it. I thought it would all blow over. I was
in complete denial. I...I never thought my mother would allow that to happen to me. Like I was
always scared of Dave. I was scared he’d throw me out if he found out about me but my mom? I
never thought that she would turn her back on me. On her own son. But. She did. She chose him.”

“What did you do?”

“You’ve heard me talk about my best friend Bressie before, yeah? He’s in grad school here. We
went to high school together. He was a senior when I was a freshman and we played soccer
together. He was the team captain and he kinda just took me under his wing back then. He’s the big
brother I never had. He was always looking out for me, you know? And just...never judgmental,
even when I was at my worst. Anyway, he has an apartment off campus and he took me in. No
questions asked.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah,” Niall says. “I...I owe him everything. Things were really really bad that summer. I wasn’t
a functioning alcoholic anymore, I was basically drinking myself to death. I just felt so...hopeless.
Bressie tried to take care of me; he tried to get me to call my biological father but I refused. I don’t
want to owe that man anything. I knew my gran would probably help me; she’s always been the
rebel of the family, but I was scared to call her. I was scared she would turn her back on me too. It
finally hit a breaking point when Bressie came home and found me unconscious with a empty
bottle of vodka in my hands. I wasn’t...he...he couldn’t get me to wake up, so he called 911. I woke
up in the hospital with no memory of what had happened.”

“Alcohol poisoning?” Louis asks, a chill running down his spine at the familiarity of the story.

“Yeah,” Niall confirms.

“How long were you out? Did they put you in a coma too?”

“No,” Niall says. “It wasn’t like it was with you, Lou. I mean, obviously I have no memory of what
happened, but I wasn’t out that long. Bressie told me they pumped my stomach. Gave me a shit-ton
of fluids. He was there when I woke up. So was my gran. He’d called her and she...she dropped everything and came right away. They both told me I needed help. I mean...fuck..I knew I needed help. I was still scared about money, but my gran...she paid for everything. She didn’t hesitate. She was actually angry that I hadn’t called her earlier. I checked into Cedar Springs a few days later.”

“And your parents?”

“I haven’t spoken to them since. They know what happened. James had me write them a letter after I had been there for a month. They didn’t answer. I’m not their son anymore.”

Louis hears the car door slam.

“Hey, Neil?”

“Yes, Bender?”

“How are you the way you are?”

Niall lets out a cackle that warms Louis to his very core.

“I mean it,” Louis says earnestly. “Like...hearing that story...I can’t imagine how you manage to get out of bed every morning. How are you so fucking positive all the time? How were you the resident prankster in rehab? How are you just...fuck...how are you just this...this ball of sunshine?”

“Are you coming on to me, Louis?”

“Shut the fuck up, I’m serious. How do you do it?”

“When I got to rehab and starting having sessions with James and going to group, it was like for the first time I had all this emotional support I never realized I was missing, you know? No one cared that I was gay. People liked when I strummed my guitar and they didn’t bat an eye if I’d rather watch a movie than football. I felt accepted. But I also learned that even though that’s important, and everyone deserves that, I’ve got to be the first one in line to accept myself. To love myself. If you don’t have that, what have you got?”

Louis hears a knock.

“That’s me,” Niall says.

“Door’s open,” Louis replies. “I’m back in the bathroom.”

“If I can love myself, then I can stop letting the fear run my life,” Niall says. Louis hears his voice both over the phone and in the hallway. “I don’t have to be afraid of who’s going to leave me because I’m not going to leave me. And I won’t let what happened to me define me, it’s just something that happened to me. I’m still working on talking about it more, but I’m not hiding from it or from anyone. I’m just me.”

Louis looks up as Niall appears in the doorway. His eyes are slightly red-rimmed but he offers Louis a gentle smile. They hang up their phones at the same time.

“And I’m pretty awesome, you know?”

Louis scrambles to his feet and throws his arms around Niall’s neck, squeezing him tightly.

“You are,” Louis mumbles into his neck. “You fucking are.”
“So are you,” Niall replies. “So are you, Lou. You know that right?”

Niall smacks a kiss on his cheek and then pulls back, looking Louis in the eye.

“You ready to flush those?” Niall asks, gesturing down to the bottle of pills still clenched in Louis’ fist.

He’d almost forgotten they were there.


Niall squeezes his hand as Louis pops the cap off the bottle and upends it over the toilet. Louis takes a cleansing breath as the pills splash in the water. He flushes the toilet and turns to Niall who beams at him as he tugs him into another hug.

“Good job, Lou.”

“Thanks for coming,” Louis says, swiping a tear from his eyes. “Thank you so much. For sharing your story with me...for being my friend...just...thank you.”

“Always,” Niall replies, patting his cheek and grinning.

Louis takes a deep breath and tosses the empty bottle in the garbage can.

“So,” Niall says. “I could use a meeting after that. Talking about what happened always fucks me up, you know? Care to join me? We can go grab some dinner first.”

Louis looks at him gratefully, knowing exactly what Niall’s doing.

“Of course I will. You wanna drive? I need to call Steve on our way there.”

“You just like being driven around,” Niall says, linking his arm through Louis’ and guiding him out of the bathroom. “Admit it.”

“You’ve got me all figured out, don’t you?” Louis laughs as he grabs his coat, keys, and wallet from where they are slung on his table.

“That I do, Bender. That I do.”
February

Louis sighs as he pads into his kitchen, clutching his empty cereal bowl and coffee mug. He places the bowl in the sink and then fixes himself a second cup of coffee. A boom of thunder sounds as he pours a generous splash of milk, startling him slightly.

*It would storm like this today. It’s fitting really.*

Louis swallows hard around the lump in his throat as he adds a spoonful of sugar. He stirs it in, temporarily mesmerized by the sound of the spoon clinking against the mug. With another heavy sigh, he tosses the spoon into the sink, the clatter echoing through the quiet apartment. Gripping the mug by the handle, Louis trudges back into the living room and settles back into the nest of blankets he’s created on the couch. He blows on his coffee, staring blankly at last night’s episode of *Bones* paused on his TV. Rain spatters against the windows and another clap of thunder resounds. Louis takes a few sips, feeling the rich brew warm him from the inside out. Carefully placing the mug on the table, he grabs the remote and clicks the television off. He doesn’t have the heart for Booth and Brennan’s affectionate banter right now. He pinches the bridge of his nose and then massages his temples gently, trying to stave off the tension headache that’s been building since the thunder woke him up this morning.

It’s Harry’s twenty-first birthday.

He hasn’t missed Harry’s birthday in fifteen years.

His bowl of Cocoa Puffs sits in his stomach like a rock.

*I should be having pancakes with Harry right now.*

Their birthday pancake breakfast tradition had started on Harry’s sixteenth birthday. Harry had been worked up all week about his driving test (“My parallel parking is shit, Lou.”) so Louis did what he always did whenever Harry got too much in his head about something: He took Harry on an adventure.

********

*Louis gingerly opens the back door to Harry’s house after replacing the spare key under the flower pot. Careful not to make any noise, he slowly pulls the door shut. The house is silent, which is to be expected at five forty-five in the morning.*

*Weak gray light streams through the kitchen windows as night slowly starts to give way to morning. Louis leaves a scrawled note, explaining Harry’s whereabouts to Anne and Robin and leaves it by the coffeemaker before tiptoeing up the stairs, mindful of the creaky third step. He pads down the hall to Harry’s bedroom and turns the knob, pushing the door open ever so slowly. The door squeaks as he closes it and Louis holds his breath, freezing in place. He sighs in relief when there’s no sound from Harry.*

*Louis leans against the door, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness of the bedroom, only a small sliver of morning light showing through the slats of the blinds. He smiles when he sees Harry*
starfished in the middle of his bed, his comforter pooled around his waist. Harry lets out a light snuffle and Louis’ smile broadens into an evil grin. With a soft whoop, he catapults onto the bed, landing directly on Harry’s middle with a plop.

“Ahhhhhhh!” Harry yelps. “What the–”

Louis clamps a hand over Harry’s mouth as his best friend startles awake, instantly pushing against his attacker.

“Shhhh, shhhh! It’s me!” Louis says with a giggle, grabbing at Harry’s flailing arm with his free hand. “Don’t wake up your parents!”

Harry’s body relaxes as his eyes widen in confusion.

“What the fuck, Louis?” Harry gasps, his voice gravelly with sleep. “Are you trying to kill me?”

Louis laughs as Harry flops back into his pillow, pulling Louis with him. Louis rests his chin on his chest, grinning up at him.

“Happy birthday, Hazza.”

Harry beams, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“You scared the shit out of me,” Harry grumbles fondly, poking Louis in the ribs several times. “What are you doing here? What time is it?”

“Almost six,” Louis replies.

“How are you even up right now? Is the world ending?”

“Not today,” Louis quips. “It’s your birthday, Harold. Get dressed,” Louis grins, patting Harry’s stomach before he gets up. “We have somewhere to be.”

Harry sits up and yawns, his curls a wild halo around his head, making him look like a confused lion. He’s Louis’ favorite person in the whole world.

“What? Where?”

“Don’t ask questions,” Louis orders as he pulls open Harry’s dresser drawers, tossing him a pair of jeans and a sweater. “Just think about what kind of pancakes you want.”

“Pancakes?” Harry squeaks, grabbing the clothes and climbing out of bed. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Louis says with a soft smile. “I hear they’re the best breakfast you can have before a driving test.”

“Looooou,” Harry drawls, a blush coloring his cheeks as he pauses on his way to the bathroom. “Thank you.”

“Only the best for you, H,” Louis says simply, perching on the edge of Harry’s desk. “Now get a move on, I’m fucking starving.”

********

Harry aced his driver’s test, just like Louis knew he would. Every year after that, Louis would wake Harry up at the crack of dawn by jumping in his bed and then they would go out for
pancakes, just the two of them. It was the only morning of the year that Louis willingly got up before the sun did. Because if there’s one thing in the world that Harry Styles loves, it’s a tradition.

Louis blinks tears away as he takes another sip of coffee. He thinks of Harry all alone in a new city on his birthday. Has he made friends? Does anyone there know it’s his birthday? Does anyone there know how amazing he is and how much he deserves something special today?

Louis misses him so much his chest aches.

Everything feels so wrong.

Louis grabs his phone and the first thing he sees is a calendar notification on his lock screen reminding him of the Spielberg marathon at the Paramount this weekend. His shoulders slump.

Yeah, I fucking know.

For the past few years, Louis and Harry had made it a point to have an adventure together for their birthdays. Bonnaroo. A weekend in D.C. to see The Script for Harry’s 19th birthday. Tickets to see the national tour of The Book of Mormon for Louis’ twentieth. Louis hadn’t had much time to scheme a good birthday present for Harry this year but on his second day at work he had seen a flyer for a Best of Steven Spielberg marathon that the historic movie theatre downtown was doing to benefit their restoration fund. He promptly bought them VIP tickets that included prime seats, unlimited snacks, and a year-long membership to the special events program. He knew it wasn’t as extravagant as years past, but he also knew Harry would love it because they would have been together. That’s all that ever mattered to him.

Fuck.

Louis sighs, swiping the tears from his cheeks.

I can give Niall the membership. No sense in wasting it. He’ll get good use out of it.

Louis sniffles, burrowing deeper into his blankets.

He can’t not acknowledge Harry’s birthday, even with how fucked up things are between them. Harry’s his best friend. His favorite person. The person who knows him best. Someone’s got to break this stalemate; they’ve both always been so fucking stubborn when they argue. Usually it’s Harry who breaks first, but Louis knows it has to be him this time. It has to be.

Louis clutches his phone, nerves jittering in his stomach. He takes a deep breath.

I’ll just...I’ll send him a text. Happy birthday, Haz. Birthday cake and confetti emojis. Simple. Easy.

Louis scrolls through his text messages finding his thread with Harry. Tears swim in his eyes as he reads the last messages they exchanged.

You’re an idiot. Be there in an hour or so.

Did you run away with Mr. Wang?

I always knew you would leave me for him.

Hazza, I’m starrrrrrrrrrvinnnnnnggg.
Where is my food?

A row of skull emojis.

Louis feels like his phone is mocking him as he lets out a miserable laugh.

“Goddammit,” he says aloud.

He drops his phone in his lap and grabs his mug, gulping his coffee as he stares at the black television screen.

I’m such an asshole.

I can’t send him a fucking text message after the way we left things.

Harry deserves more than that.

Just call him. Right now. Before you lose your fucking nerve.

Louis drains the rest of his coffee and sets the mug down. He fumbles in the blankets for his phone, immediately thumbing to his favorites and pressing Harry’s contact before he can think too much about it.

The phone rings once.

What the fuck am I going to say?

Twice.

He’s probably in class. Maybe I can just leave a message. Then the ball’s in his court. Come on voicemail.

Louis hears a click and straightens his spine immediately.

“Harry, don’t hang up—”

“We’re sorry,” an automated voice comes on. “The number you have reached has been disconnected.”

A chill runs down Louis’ spine. He can feel the blood draining from his face.

What?

“If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please check the number and try your call again. Goodbye.”

That...that can’t be right? No. It’s gotta be a mistake.

Louis dials Harry’s number manually this time, his fingers shaking, dread pooling in his stomach.

“C’mon, Haz,” Louis says tensely as the phone rings once, then twice. “Don’t do this.”

“We’re sorry. The number you have reached—”

Louis hangs up, throwing his phone to the other end of the couch in frustration.

Harry changed his number.
Holy shit.

Louis runs his fingers through his hair and then scrubs his hands down his face. He exhales loudly, the shock settling in his bones.

He...he actually changed his number? He’s had that number since we first got phones. Why...why would he do that?

A terrible thought crosses his mind.

Has he blocked me everywhere?

Louis grabs his phone, frantically clicking on the Facebook icon and typing Harry’s name in the search bar. He slumps in relief when he sees that they are still friends.

Not that he can put too much stock in that. Harry hardly uses Facebook anymore. Louis scans Harry’s profile trying to glean any sort of information from it and rolls his eyes. Nothing.

Of course Harry's on a not saying things for the sake of saying things kick when I’m just trying to see how he's doing.

Fine. When I’m doing some social media stalking. I can say it.

You’re also the guy who used to tweet the word hamburgers for no reason, don't tell me you hate saying things just for the sake of saying them, Haz.

There are a few changes on his page though. Harry’s updated his location and he’s changed his profile and cover photos. The cover photo is a shot of downtown Boston. Louis frowns, clicking on the profile picture. Harry’s in a snuggly looking brown sweater and he’s looking down, a half smile on his face, his dimple popping ever so slightly. It’s a very recent picture, going by the length of his hair, the ends just long enough to barely brush his shoulders, the majority of his curls hidden under a beanie. Louis can see that his arm is around someone, he just can’t tell who it is because of how the picture is cropped.

Who the fuck is he with? He looks happy? How does he look happy? Shouldn’t he be miserable?

Louis clicks the arrow on the corner of the picture, clicking back to Harry’s previous profile picture.

Oh.

It’s a picture from Liam’s birthday party last summer. Harry’s arm is slung around Louis, his face in profile as he looks down at him. He’s sporting a massive grin, dimple on full display, his tongue peeking through his lips. Louis is turned into Harry, his arm around his waist and his head tipped against Harry’s shoulder. He’s laughing so hard his eyes are completely crinkled shut.

Louis swallows hard.

No wonder he changed it.

We look like we’re in love.

Okay, so maybe he is miserable?

Louis closes the photo window and scrolls down Harry’s page; there’s just a slew of posts wishing him a happy birthday, including a ridiculous Star Wars meme from Liam. He clicks on the box at
the top of the page, the cursor blinking at him, daring him to write a post.

*I can’t write a Facebook post. He changed his fucking number. He doesn’t want to talk to me.*

He closes the app and pulls up Harry’s Twitter. It’s also sparse, only one tweet in the past three weeks, posted on the day Harry left.

**@Harry_Styles** *So many things I would have done but clouds got in my way.*

Louis frowns, knowing Harry’s propensity for tweeting song lyrics; he doesn’t recognize these though. He closes Twitter and pulls up Google, typing in “clouds got in my way.” He sighs heavily when the search results pop up, a video of Emma Thompson in *Love Actually* sitting at the top of the page. He recognizes it immediately.

*Oh shit.*

Louis immediately taps on the link to the lyrics of “Both Sides Now,” and his chest tightens up as he reads them.

“I’ve looked at love from both sides now, from give and take and still somehow it’s love’s illusions I recall. I really don’t know love at all.”

*Jesus Christ, Harry.*

Louis closes the window and tosses his phone aside. He pinches the bridge of his nose again, leaning back into the couch cushions.

*I need to stop. Nothing good is going to come of this.*

Grabbing his mug, he gets up and goes into the kitchen, rinsing it out in the sink and then pulling the dishwasher open and placing the mug on the top rack. He adds his cereal bowl and the dishes from last night’s dinner as well, snapping the dishwasher door shut. He shuffles back into the living room and paces around for a bit before plopping back on the couch, eyeing his phone.

**His Instagram. He uses Instagram the most. Just get it over with.**

Louis leans over and grabs his phone, opening Instagram and typing in Harry’s username. The search bar tells him that Harry has five new posts.

Harry’s always stuck to a pretty specific Instagram aesthetic, mainly black-and-white artsy shots, often with punny captions. Louis always gives him so much shit about it, threatening to steal his phone and post ridiculous selfies just to fuck with him.

The new posts are more of the same, offering him very little insight. A shot of someone running along the snowy banks of the Charles River captioned “Braver than me” with a snowflake emoji. A photo captioned “First Day,” showing the outside of what Louis assumes is the BU science building. A picture of Harry and Anne, in which Louis notices that Harry is wearing the same sweater as in his new Facebook picture.

He tries to explain away the relief he feels at knowing that it’s Harry’s mom that got cropped out of the profile picture. He can’t.

Louis smiles at the picture of the giant Wawa coffee and half-eaten donut (captioned “Heaven on Earth”) knowing that Harry must have stopped there as soon as he crossed into Pennsylvania on the drive to Boston. Wawa coffee has always been coffee-snob Harry’s guilty pleasure.
The last new picture is a shot of his empty apartment in Charlottesville, a single box sitting in the middle of the living room. He captioned it “A house is not a home.”

Ouch.

A pained whimper escapes Louis’ lips as he looks at the next picture in Harry’s feed. It’s one of him from the night he cooked Harry dinner. He’s bent over the stove, spatula in hand, intensely focused on flipping the chicken. Harry had captioned it “Louis’ first ever cooking experience” and Louis had no idea that Harry posted it until they were on the couch watching TV after dinner. Louis had squawked in protest (“I’ve cooked before, you jerk!”) and Harry had giggled, saying the moment had needed to be preserved for all eternity.

We were so fucking happy.

Louis keeps scrolling through Harry’s profile. There’s a picture of their feet tangled together in the middle of Harry’s couch. A picture of two milkshakes from the night Harry took him out after getting the job at the coffeehouse; another of the chocolate chip cookie batter that became his birthday cookies. A picture of the Scrabble painting. A throwback picture of the two of them and Liam from their freshman year. Louis is everywhere; the truth there in literal black and white.

How did I miss it? How did I get it so wrong?

Louis hits the home button, no longer able to look at Harry’s photos. He mindlessly starts scrolling through his feed to distract himself, liking random pictures. He gasps when he comes across a new picture that Harry posted only sixty seconds ago.

It’s a plate of pancakes and an almost empty cup of coffee. No caption.

Rage burns white-hot in Louis’ veins for a few seconds before it gives way to a deep and painful sense of betrayal and sadness.

He went and got pancakes. Without me. I’m sitting here missing him and he’s fucking eating pancakes. Right now. Without me.

Louis drops his phone, feeling as if it had burned him. He furiously wipes at the hot tears that have sprung to his eyes.

How could he? How is he fine when I feel like my heart’s been yanked out of my chest?

Louis furiously punches at one of his end pillows to fluff it up before snuggling down in his blankets, pulling them up around his shoulders. He knows he’s going to have to get up eventually; he’s got a meeting at five and he promised Zayn and Niall that he would go out to dinner with them afterwards.

But he’s going to let himself have a good wallow until then. And then he’s going to get the fuck on with his life.

Because Harry certainly has.

*******

It’s snowing. For the third time since he’s moved here.

Harry had known that the winters would be drastically different in Boston than they were in Charlottesville. He even knew they would be worse than they were growing up outside of
Philadelphia. But he couldn’t have prepared himself for how brutal February in Massachusetts could be. The city has barely had time to clear the streets this month before a new blanket of snow is dumped on them.

Harry shivers as he waits for the shuttle bus that runs between the medical school campus and BU’s main campus. He has class over here twice a week as a part of his accelerated program and he quickly learned that the shuttle is the way to go, not only because it’s free but because the T is a shitshow whenever it snows like this.

Harry scans the crowded shuttle stop for any familiar faces. There are none; it appears that all of his classmates caught the previous shuttle after their Intro to Anatomy class. Harry had hung back after class to go over some questions he had about the test they got back today. That B-minus is making him nuts. He’s better than that.

He sighs heavily.

*Alone again. It’s fine. Totally fine.*

Harry leans back against the edge of the small alcove, doing his best to shelter himself from the snow that’s whipping around furiously. Wrapping the long ends of his scarf around his neck, Harry sputters as a blast of wind blows snow in his face. He swipes his glove-encased hands over his cheeks and pulls his beanie down lower over his forehead. He wiggles his toes in his snow boots, his feet feeling like blocks of ice.

*God, this wind. It’s fucking freezing. Why did I think it was a good idea to move here again?*

He adjusts his messenger bag, the weight of the heavy textbooks causing the strap to dig into his left shoulder even through the the layers of his coat and sweater. He really needs to get a proper backpack before he fucks up his shoulder.

*I love what I’m doing. I do. I love it. Even when I’ve got to spend several hours in the library before I can go home. Gotta make up for that grade. But I love it. I do, I do, I do.*

Finally, the bus pulls up to the curb. Harry shuffles into line, snow pelting him in the face. He’s met by a welcome burst of heat as soon as he boards the bus, the snow melting instantly, dripping from his chin. He heads toward the back of the bus, passing a guy about his age clutching a massive bouquet of roses, a girl with a red teddy bear holding a pink heart perched in her lap, and a couple making out.

*Fucking Valentine’s Day.*

Harry finds an empty window seat near the back of the bus. The guy sitting in the aisle seat is intensely focused on his phone; tinny music rings out from his headphones and his legs are spread wide. Harry clears his throat, tapping his foot. The guy looks up and Harry gestures towards the empty seat. The guy gives Harry a little glare and sighs heavily as he rearranges his legs to allow Harry some room to climb over him.

*Too fucking bad, bro. I’m not standing for a half hour unless I have to.*

“Thanks,” Harry says pointedly, wedging himself in and putting his messenger bag on his lap. He rolls his aching shoulder and presses hard on the tight muscle with his opposite hand, sighing with relief as he feels some of the tension start to give way.

The guy rolls his eyes and turns back to his phone, still encroaching on Harry’s space. Harry barely resists the urge to elbow the guy in the ribs; instead he presses closer to the window, resting his
head against the foggy glass. He pulls off his gloves, resting them on the top of his bag, and then fishes his phone out of his pocket, unlocking it and scrolling to the recent calls screen. He taps on his most recent call.

Liam answers on the second ring.

“Hey, Haz! What’s–”

“I failed my anatomy test.”

“What?”

“I failed my anatomy test, Li,” Harry moans dramatically, pulling his beanie off and raking his hands through his damp hair.

Liam doesn’t respond.

“Liammmmmmmm,” Harry whines. “This is a disaster!”

“Okay,” Liam says, fondness in his voice. “Did you fail fail or did you Harry fail?”

Harry pauses, chewing on his bottom lip.

“I got a B-minus,” he mumbles.

“Harry,” Liam soothes. “A B-minus isn’t failing. You know it’s not.”

Harry sighs, squeezing his eyes shut.

“I know,” he says quietly. “M’just used to getting As though. I’m used to being at the top of the class. Especially in these classes. Like we’re not back in that stupid English class, this is my major, Liam. It’s what I want to do with my life. It’s never been this hard for me before. I just...I just feel like my focus has been shit since I got here. And I don’t want to fall behind, yeah? The program is super competitive and it’s going to get harder and I don’t–”

“Breathe, Harry,” Liam says calmly. “It’s one test. It’s not going to derail your medical career. You’re not failing.”

“I want to do well, Liam,” Harry says quietly. He exhales shakily. “I...I have to. I need to know that it was...worth it. Leaving.”

“Oh, Haz,” Liam breathes. “You’re in a new program. The teaching styles are probably different from what you’re used to and these courses are designed to challenge you. And then with the move and...everything...of course it’s going to take some time to get back normal, yeah? You’re going to be fine, Haz. I promise. You’re where you’re supposed to be.”

“Still working on that psych paper, huh?” Harry jokes weakly.

Liam laughs.

“Chipping away at it. It’s due on Monday. That class is still driving me crazy though.”

“Ironic,” Harry quips.

“I just don’t see what psychology has to do with wanting to teach literature,” Liam grumbles. “Can’t I just be like ‘Here, read The Great Gatsby and let’s talk about why Daisy Buchanan is the
“She is the worst,” Harry agrees.

“Thank you. I don’t need a psych class to know that.”

“You gotta know how those young minds work,” Harry says after a moment. “Gotta be able to talk them down from B-minus induced meltdowns after all. I think you understand psychology more than you think.”

“Thanks, Haz.”

They sit in silence for a moment. Harry draws half a heart in the condensation on the window.

“How are you? Really?”

“Are you looking for more material for your paper?”

“Harry. I’m serious.”

“Sorry,” Harry sighs.

“I’m just worried about you,” Liam says gently. “Are things any better?”

“My lab partner Jade is really nice. We’ve studied together a couple of times. But we’re not...friends yet. We haven’t hung out outside of class or the library, you know? It’s just really hard ’cause everyone’s been together for two and a half years, you know? They all know each other already and have their groups and it’s just...it’s hard to break in.”

Harry pauses, a tear rolling down his cheek suddenly. He pinches the bridge of his nose in an effort to keep himself from crying openly.

“Nobody’s...mean or anything,” he continues softly. “But they’re not you. They’re not...Louis.”

*Louis always made everything easier.*

“I’ve always...been better when I had a wingman. You know that. And I don’t have one now. I’m all alone. And it’s fucking Valentine’s Day, Liam. There’s this guy a few rows ahead of me with the biggest fucking bouquet of roses I’ve ever seen. People are in love everywhere. And I’m...I’m on my way to the library for a few hours to study because what else would I be doing today? I’m just...I’m lonely. I’m sad and I’m so fucking lonely.”

“Oh, Haz,” Liam says sympathetically. “I’m so sorry. What can I do?”

“You’ll be my Valentine, right?”

“Duh. Just don’t tell Sophia.”

Harry laughs wetly.

“Never. It’s our secret. Do you have big plans for tonight? First Valentine’s Day and all...”

“Harry, you don’t have to—”

“Shut the fuck up, Liam, I want to know. Just because I’m miserable doesn’t mean I don’t want to know about you.”
“Okay, so her roommate helped me pick out a necklace for her–”

“Consulting with roommates, excellent call.”

“I mean, it’s jewelry, I didn’t want to get her something she’d hate, you know? And then I got us reservations at that French place downtown.”

“Classic. Romantic. Fancy but not over the top. Good choice.”

“The only problem is I could only get a 5:30 or a 10:00 reservation. They were booked otherwise. So I went with the 5:30. Is that dumb? Should I have gone somewhere else?” Liam frets.

Harry smiles fondly, drawing a squiggle on the window.

“I really like her, Harry,” Liam admits, a hint of insecurity in his voice. “I don’t want to screw this up. Will she think it’s lame? It will be us and all the early bird old people.”

“You mean it will be you two and a bunch of people who have been in love their whole lives? I think it’s lovely.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Harry affirms. “And early dinner means you have time to do something after. It’ll be great. She’ll love it.”

“Good,” Liam sighs with relief.

“Mostly because she’ll be with you, you know? That’s the most important thing, Li.”

“Right. You’re right.”

Harry draws another half heart on the window.

“How’s Louis?” Harry asks quietly.

“Good,” Liam replies, a hint of reluctance in his voice. “He seems really good.”

“Seems?”

“Haz, you know I only really see him at the coffeehouse when I go there to study. I’ve told you that. We make small talk and it’s nice and he seems like he’s doing great.”

Liam pauses. Harry picks at a hangnail on his thumb.

“He’s happy, I think. Back to his old self. But we don’t...we haven’t...we haven’t really hung out since you left. Things are weird with us right now.”

“Liam–” Harry sighs.

“He keeps inviting me over for dinner, though. Apparently he does dinner with his friends from rehab every Sunday?”

“Zayn and Niall,” Harry supplies, his heart clenching painfully.

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, Louis has invited me a few times but I haven’t gone. It just...well...Zayn and I didn’t really get off on the right foot. And it just feels like...fuck...it feels weird going without you
there. Like I’m picking a side or something?”

“Don’t say that, Li. Don’t. It’s…it’s not about that. You’re his friend too. Don’t stop being friends with him because of me. Please? Louis needs people right now.”

“So do you, H,” Liam says earnestly. “You need people too.”

“Zayn and Niall are great. Really great. You’ll like them. Niall’s like…you’ll be his best friend instantly. Zayn’s more reserved but just…give him time. He’ll come around. You should go. Promise me you’ll go. For me.”

“Okay,” Liam concedes after a moment. “I’ll go. Next time he asks, I’ll go.”

“Good,” Harry says with satisfaction. “I’m glad.”

Harry rips the hangnail off with his teeth, wincing as he does so. He sucks lightly on the side of his thumb, the slight hint of blood metallic on his tongue. He takes a deep breath.

“Does he…” Harry asks tentatively. “Has he asked about me at all?”

“Harry, I just told you we don’t talk very much,” Liam answers. “We talk about TV; he told me how to fill out my Oscar ballot. Just awkward small talk, that’s it. I don’t think he’d–”

“You don’t have to protect me, Liam,” Harry says softly. “Just say it. He doesn’t, does he?”

“No,” Liam admits after a long pause. “He’s never asked me about you.”

Harry swallows hard, another tear slipping down his cheek.

*It’s one thing to know but it’s an entirely different thing to hear it.*

“Well, that’s that then,” Harry says thickly. He can’t help the quiet sob that rips from him. The guy sitting next to him turns to look at him, his eyebrows knitted in obvious concern. Harry pulls his coat around him tighter and turns towards the window, hiding his face.

“Harry,” Liam says urgently. “Harry, I’m sorry. Like I said, we–”

“No, no…it’s fine. But just…fuck…I keep…I know it’s stupid but a big part of me is just waiting for him to just show up on my doorstep, you know? Or at least call me…”

“You changed your number, H,” Liam reminds him gently.


“Just because he hasn’t said anything to me doesn’t mean–”

“No, he would have said something to you if he wanted to know,” Harry says, swiping the tears from his cheeks. “I mean who else would he ask? So…it’s…it’s good to know. Louis has moved on. I should too. I should stop waiting for him. I need to let him go. I have to.”

“Harry–”

“Anyway,” Harry says with a sniffle. “I’m almost back to campus. And you have a romantic dinner to get ready for. I should let you go.”
“Will you be okay? I don’t have to go yet.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry replies, doing his best to sound convincing even as fresh tears start streaming down his face. “I’ll be fine. I’m fine.”

“What are you going to do tonight?”

“I’m gonna go to the library for a few hours. And then I’ll just...I don’t know...I’ll go home and search romantic comedies on Netflix and just...see what I find.”

“Haz…”

“I’m fine, Li,” Harry insists. “Have fun tonight, yeah?”


“You’re going to be okay, H.”


“Bye.”

Harry hangs up, his hands shaking slightly.

“Goddammit,” he whispers, wiping his face with the edges of his scarf.

He looks at the half hearts he’s drawn on the window. They’ve almost faded away completely. He snaps a picture and thumbs over to Instagram. He chooses a black and white filter and posts it without a caption.

The bus shudders to a stop. Harry sighs deeply as he pulls his beanie back over his head. He’s putting his gloves back on when the guy sitting next to him elbows him gently. Harry looks over at him questioningly and is surprised to see that he’s removed his earbuds and is extending some tissues towards him.

“Sorry I was a dick earlier,” the guy apologizes.

Harry blinks, accepting the tissues. He blows his nose noisily and then offers the guy a rueful smile.

“I could have been nicer too.”

“Today fucking sucks, am I right?”

“Yeah, it does,” Harry replies. He shyly holds up the crumpled tissues in his hand. “Thanks again.”

“No problem,” the guy says as he makes his way down the aisle.

Harry sighs, his heart feeling slightly lighter, warmed by the simple interaction with a stranger. He pulls out his phone again, this time going to Twitter.

@Harry_Styles Treat people with kindness.

The bus has nearly emptied. Harry looks around to make sure he has everything and then gets up,
shuffling towards the exit.

*I’m going to be okay. Starting tomorrow.*

*******

**March**

“Niall, what the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Niall looks at Louis, his blue eyes wide as he clutches a baking sheet with four plain boneless chicken breasts on it.

“Putting the chicken in the oven, Bender. What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Without anything on it?” Louis squawks.

“Aren’t we trying to be healthy tonight?” Niall questions.

“Well...yeah...but we still need to season the fucking chicken, Neil. We can’t just put it in the oven plain. Do you pay any attention in class? Or are you too busy daydreaming about your wedding to Chef Michael?”

Zayn snorts from his station at the counter chopping broccoli.

“He is a very handsome man, Louis, I can’t help it.”

Louis wrinkles his nose as he finishes peeling a potato.

“He’s not my type.”

“Rocco DiSpirito’s long-lost twin isn’t your type?” Niall asks incredulously, placing the baking sheet on the counter with a clatter.

“Too beefy,” Louis says definitively.

“Says the man who’s obsessed with Chris Evans,” Zayn quips.

“Excuse you,” Louis says indignantly as he dumps the pile of potato peels in the garbage. “Chris Evans is the exception to that rule. Any rule. Every rule.”

“Whatever you say, Bender,” Niall shrugs. “More Chef Michael for me. I think we’ll be very happy together.”

Louis rolls his eyes.

“You’re officially off chicken duty, Romeo,” Louis says, elbowing him gently. He glances at the pot of water on the stove, just on the verge of starting to boil. “Chop up the potatoes and get ’em in the water.”

“Yes sir,” Niall salutes, trading places with Louis.

Louis leans over the baking sheet, listening to Niall and Zayn chattering as he drizzles olive oil over the four chicken breasts. He sprinkles garlic salt, paprika, and onion powder on them and then flips the chicken, repeating the process.
Maybe Liam will show tonight.

He’s been inviting Liam to Sunday dinners for a month now, bringing it up when he stops by the coffeehouse to study after his psychology class. Liam has yet to come, even though he always says he’ll try to make it. He’ll send an apology text at the last minute, claiming he needs to study or he’s spending time with Sophia. Louis tries his best not to let it sting. Too much, anyway. He knows Liam will come around eventually, so he always makes sure to have enough food for four. Just in case.

If not, then I have lunch for tomorrow. Win-win situation, really.

I’d prefer that Liam actually showed up though.

Louis glances at the clock display on his phone.

No text yet, so that’s promising.

Niall hip-checks him as he dumps the chopped potatoes in the now boiling water.

“Still with us, Bender?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Louis says quickly. “Sorry, zoned out for a second. What were you guys saying?”

“We were trying to decide what to watch tonight,” Zayn says, handing him the broccoli, which has been neatly wrapped in a packet of aluminum foil. “What are you up for?”

Louis pulls open the oven door, carefully placing the packet of broccoli on the lower rack. He grabs the baking sheet and slides it onto the top rack, closing the oven and setting the timer.

“They just added Jurassic Park to Netflix,” Louis states, giving the potatoes a quick stir before turning to head out of the kitchen.

“Ooooooh,” Niall squeals excitedly, following him into the living room. “Yes! Dinosaurs! I haven’t seen that in forever, let’s do that.”

Zayn lets out a quiet whimper, hanging back behind them.

“Don’t like Jurassic Park, Zaynie?” Niall asks, turning to him.

“You’re going to make fun of me,” Zayn says, his cheeks turning pink.


“Right,” Niall nods.

“I’m kind of...scared of dinosaurs?” Zayn mutters.

Niall bursts out laughing. Zayn’s blush deepens as he scuffs his socked feet on the carpet.

“Niall! You just said you wouldn’t make fun!” Louis scolds, swatting him.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Niall laughs, pulling Zayn close and ruffling his hair. “I just wasn’t expecting that! Scared of dinosaurs? Really?”

“Listen. I saw Jurassic Park when I was seven,” Zayn says defensively. “Our babysitter Shannon had the DVD and apparently thought that was totally acceptable viewing material for kids. That
scene with the T-Rex attacking the kids in the car? Scared the shit out of me. I had nightmares for weeks. Been afraid of ’em ever since.”

“Aw, Zee,” Louis soothes, smacking a kiss on his cheek. “It’s a very scary scene. It is.”

“We don’t have to watch if you don’t want to,” Niall says solemnly, leading them to the couch. They collapse together, legs and arms tangled as Louis digs in the cushions for the remote.

“No, no,” Zayn says with a deep breath. “I’m an adult. I can do this. It’ll be like immersion therapy, yeah?”

“We’ll protect you,” Niall promises as he tucks his arm around Zayn.

“You better,” Zayn grumbles. “I’ll need lots of cuddles.”

“Like we don’t ever give lots of cuddles,” Louis laughs as he presses play on the next episode of *Friends* in his queue. “Honestly, Zayn.”

“I love this one!” Niall cries as “The One where Ross Got High” starts. “I love Jacques Cousteau!”

“I wasn’t supposed to put beef in the trifle!” Louis adds with a giggle.

About halfway through the episode, there’s a knock at the door. Zayn and Niall raise their eyebrows simultaneously as Louis disentangles himself from them to go answer the door. Louis feels his stomach swoop as he swings the door open, revealing Liam, who smiles at him shyly.

“Sorry I’m late,” Liam says, holding up a plastic grocery bag. “I didn’t want to show up empty-handed, so I stopped at Kroger’s. I know how much you like their brownies and they had just put out fre– oof!”

Louis cuts Liam off by throwing himself at him, hugging him fiercely, practically knocking the breath out of him. The hug is slightly awkward with Liam clutching the grocery bag in one hand, but Louis doesn’t care. He just squeezes tighter.

“You’re here,” Louis mumbles happily into his neck. “You came.”

“I should have come weeks ago,” Liam replies ruefully. “I’ve been an asshole, Lou. I’m sorry.”

“You have,” Louis says playfully, clapping Liam on the back a few times before pulling away. “But you’re here now. That’s what matters. Come on in! Dinner’s still cooking, so we’re–”

“Did I hear someone say brownies?” Niall inquires eagerly, getting up off the couch, Zayn following. Niall makes grabby hands towards the grocery bag, which Liam promptly hands over with a bemused expression.

“Oh my God, are these Kroger brownies?” Niall asks with delight, peeking inside the bag. “They are, holy shit. I fucking love Kroger brownies. We should bust into these right now. Can we?”

“Sure?” Liam asks, his eyes flitting between Niall and Louis.


“I’m Niall and I love brownies,” Niall says with a cheeky grin. “And you’re Liam, purveyor of gossip magazines and junk food. Nice to meet ya at last. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Only good things, I hope,” Liam smiles.
Niall winks at him, cracking open the container of brownies and plucking out a corner piece.

“Neil, we’re about to eat,” Louis groans. “Seriously?”

“It’s called an amuse bouche, Lou,” Niall says through a mouthful. “Don’t you pay attention in class?”

Louis rolls his eyes and then walks over to Zayn, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“Li, you remember Zayn, right?” Louis asks.

“Yeah, hi,” Liam says, offering him a tentative smile. “Good to see you again.”

“You too,” Zayn replies softly, but with a definite edge to his voice. “Glad you could make it. Finally.”

Liam looks abashed, his cheeks coloring. Louis squeezes Zayn’s shoulder quickly, shaking his head ever so slightly when their eyes meet.

“Liam, I have a question for you,” Niall says seriously, brushing the brownie crumbs from his fingers. He hands the brownies to Zayn and then turns to face Liam directly, taking him by the shoulders. “Now think carefully because your answer will determine the entire course of our friendship, okay?”

Liam nods, glancing at Louis quickly, his eyes wide. Louis nods, biting back a grin.

“Okay,” Liam states.

Niall takes a dramatic pause, his head bowed.

“How do you feel about the Ewoks?”

Liam barks out a laugh. Niall furrows his brows, trying to maintain a serious expression even as his eyes sparkle with mirth. He clears his throat.

“Sorry, sorry,” Liam says, regaining his composure and focusing in on Niall.

“Your answer, please?”

“To quote Marshall Eriksen,” Liam says solemnly. “I don’t get why people are cynical about Ewoks. The rebellion would have failed without the Ewoks.”

Niall cackles, pulling Liam into an embrace.

“Good man,” he says brightly, ruffling Liam’s hair. “We’ll get along just fine.”

“Thank Christ,” Liam breathes, wiping his brow with exaggeration. He shrugs off his jacket and tosses it over the back of the armchair. “But seriously...who in the hell has a problem with Ewoks? They’re cute and cuddly but they’ll kick your ass if they need to. Come on, it’s not like they’re Jar Jar Binks!”

Zayn laughs suddenly, surprising everyone.

“God, Jar Jar Binks. What a fucking joke.”

“I mean, I prefer to think those movies don’t exist,” Liam adds, his eyes hopeful.
“Same,” Zayn nods with a gentle smile.

“Guys, it’s the best part of the episode!” Niall cries suddenly, turning his attention to the TV. He heads back to the couch, dragging Liam along behind him.

“I love this one!” Liam exclaims as he settles next to Niall, Zayn sitting on his other side. Louis perches on the back of the armchair, anticipating that dinner’s almost ready. “I wanna goooooo!”

The buzzer goes off in the kitchen.

“I’ll get dinner ready,” Louis announces. “Anyone want to help?”

The boys ignore him, caught up in the episode.

“Great, thanks lads!” he says dramatically over his shoulder as he heads into the kitchen.

“You’re the best, Lou!” Niall calls. “You don’t want me helping anyway!”

“You’re right, I don’t!” Louis laughs.

Louis gives the potatoes a final stir, clicking the burner off. Grabbing a potholder, he pulls the oven door open and slides out the baking sheet, placing it on the other half of the stove. The chicken is perfectly golden, Louis notes with satisfaction. He grabs the broccoli and sets the packet down on the counter. He closes the oven door and clicks it off, then gingerly opens the broccoli packet, allowing the steam to escape.

Laughter echoes from the living room. Louis smiles as he hears Niall reciting the lines along with the show. He pauses, reveling in the sound of his friends bonding. His heart pangs when he realizes that he’s waiting for the sound of Harry’s honking laugh.

It never comes.

Fuck, Harry would love this.

I wish he was here.

He should be here.

Sighing, Louis hoists the pot of potatoes off the stove, carefully pouring them into the colander waiting in the sink. He shakes the excess water out, puts the potatoes back in the pot, and goes to the fridge to grab the milk, butter, and sour cream. He tosses the stick of butter in the potatoes and chews his lip as he ponders how much milk he needs.

“Need any help?” Liam asks, leaning against the doorframe.

Louis startles, milk splashing on the counter.

“Jesus, you scared me,” Louis laughs. He adds a generous pour of milk to the potatoes and then extends the container to Liam, who takes it. “Put this back in the fridge? There’s soda and iced tea in there too, help yourself.”

Liam replaces the milk in the fridge, as well as the sour cream after Louis adds a large dollop. He grabs a can of Dr. Pepper, cracking it open as he surveys the kitchen.

“Wow, this is like a proper dinner, Lou.”
Louis beams as he adds salt and pepper to the pot.

“When you kept asking me to come over for dinner, I was just expecting that we’d get pizza or something,” Liam admits.

“Yeah, well, we do that too,” Louis says, wiping his hands on a towel and then plugging in his hand mixer. “But Niall and I are taking a cooking class, so it’s like...homework almost? Plus it’s sorta fun.”

“You? In a cooking class?” Liam asks incredulously.

“I know, right? Didn’t think I had it in me, did ya?” Louis replies, arching an eyebrow.

“Your version of cooking for as long as I’ve known you has been Easy Mac,” Liam says teasingly. “So this is a plot twist.”

“Expect the unexpected,” Louis says sagely, turning the mixer on high. Excess milk splatters everywhere and a chunk of potato flies out and hits Louis in the face. He sputters as Liam bursts out laughing. “Shit,” Louis chuckles, grabbing the towel and wiping his face and the counter. “As you can see, I’m still learning.”

“I think it’s great, Lou,” Liam says seriously. “And this looks amazing. I’m starving.”

“Hopefully it’ll taste great, too,” Louis says, turning the mixer back on, at a lower speed this time. “I followed all the instructions. Hey, you remember where plates are, yeah? Can you grab ’em?”

Liam nods, opening a cabinet and getting four plates as Louis whips the potatoes.

“What do you think,” Louis asks, turning off the mixer and tilting the pot towards Liam. “They look pretty lumpy, but I like ’em that way.”

“I think just a little more milk?” Liam asks. “Since you lost some and all.”

“Shut the fuck up, Lime,” Louis says fondly. “I’m doing my best.”

“You are.”

“Pass me the milk, then.”

Liam passes him the carton and Louis adds a splash, getting the potatoes to a texture that he and Liam deem acceptable. He unplugs the mixer, tossing the beaters in the sink.

“Okay, you lazy asses, dinner’s ready,” Louis shouts into the living room. “Come and get it!”

Niall and Zayn scurry into the kitchen. They all fill their plates and then take their seats at the table.

“To surviving another week, boys,” Niall says, toasting them with his soda. “To Liam, for finally joining us and for bringing brownies. To Louis, for paying way more attention in class than I do, so we can all have this delicious dinner together.”

“Here, here,” Liam says, clinking his can with Niall’s.

“And to Zayn,” Niall continues slyly. “For being willing to face his fear of dinosaurs so we can watch *Jurassic Park* tonight after dinner.”
“We’re watching *Jurassic Park*?” Liam asks excitedly. “I love that movie, even though the whole T-Rex attacking the car sequence gave me nightmares for weeks when I was a kid.”

“Great,” Niall says drily, gesturing to Zayn and Liam, knife in hand. “Now we have two scaredy-cats on our hands. You two will have to sit in the middle so Lou and I can protect you.”

“Fine with me,” Liam says. “I love a good cuddle pile. Only way to watch a movie in my opinion.”

Niall takes a bite of chicken and groans appreciatively.

“This is amazing, Bender.”

“I told you it needed seasoning,” Louis teases.

“I stand corrected.”

“This one tried to put the chicken in the oven without anything on it,” Louis says to Liam.

Niall immediately launches into a diatribe defending his choices to Liam. Louis laughs, taking his own bite of chicken. Niall’s right. It’s delicious. He sighs peacefully, looking around the table at his little family of friends.

*This feels perfect.*

*Well. Almost.*

*There’s still one person missing.*

******

“What are you up to tonight?” Jade asks as she claps her chemistry textbook shut at the end of their afternoon study session. “Do you have any plans?”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve got big plans,” Harry replies drily, leaning back in his chair and stretching his arms above his head. “I’ve got plans with my couch, some leftover Thai, and my DVR. Jealous?”

Jade frowns as she pulls the pencil holding her bun in place out of her hair.

“No,” she says definitively, shaking out her long caramel colored waves. “Absolutely not. I won’t allow it.

“Wh-what?”

“Have you had any fun since you got here, Harry?” Jade asks, eyeing him appraisingly. “I haven’t seen you at any parties–”

“I–” Harry starts.

“Haven’t seen you at any of the bar nights either,” Jade continues. “So what gives?”

Harry feels his cheeks heating up.

“I…it’s just…no one’s actually invited me to anything,” he says quietly. “And I… I mean, yeah I heard about things but I… felt weird just showing up by myself…I’m not very…”

Jade smiles at him softly.
“I know it’s lame,” Harry continues, looking down at the floor, embarrassed. “But I...I’m not very good at that sort of thing, you know? It’s...intimidating and it’s...it’s easier when I have someone with me? So I...just haven’t--”

“Well, I’m inviting you now,” Jade says, pulling out her phone and tapping away. “It’s karaoke night over at Castle. Have you been before?”

Harry shakes his head.

“I thought not. Texting you the address now. Be there at 8. No excuses.”

Harry’s phone pings. He looks at Jade, eyes wide, as she grins back at him.

“I love karaoke,” Harry says eagerly.

“Good,” Jade says. “It’s my girlfriend and a bunch of her friends from Berklee. Music nerds, all of them. I could use a good duet partner and wingman that doesn’t speak exclusively in music theory. You have to come, Harry. I’m desperate. Say you’ll be there.”

Harry smiles, knowing that Jade is exaggerating for his benefit. His heart clenches briefly when he realizes it’s exactly something Louis would have done for him.

“Yeah,” Harry says, sliding his textbook into his new backpack and then slinging it on. “I’ll be there.”

“Awesome,” Jade says easily as they make their way out of the library. “Start thinking of a song for us.”

********

Harry stands on the sidewalk outside Castle, scuffing his boots on the pavement. He looks at the clock display on his phone and sighs.

8:02.

Of course the one time I try to be late is the one time the T runs perfectly and I get here right on time.

He pulls his coat around him tighter because, even in mid-March, Boston still feels like a fucking tundra and ponders walking around the block to kill some time. He shakes his head and takes a determined breath.

Get over yourself. You’re a fucking adult, you can wait at the fucking bar if they aren’t here yet.

He shows his ID to the bouncer waiting at the door and then steps inside. Castle is, predictably, decorated like the interior of a medieval castle, with stone and exposed wood beam walls. A small stage is set up at the far end of the room for karaoke, festooned in twinkle lights that go completely against the theme of the bar yet somehow add to the atmosphere. The bar is full, but not overwhelmingly so. Harry scans the crowd, trying to spot Jade.

“Harry! We’re over here!” Jade calls from the end of one of the communal tables near the front of the room. Jade’s standing next to a gorgeous girl with warm brown skin and a guy with bright orange hair and a sleeve of tattoos.

Harry grins and waves, feeling both relief that Jade is here already and nervous in anticipation of
meeting new people. He weaves his way through the crowd, making his way to the table.

“You made it!” Jade exclaims, giving him a quick hug. “This is my girlfriend Leigh-Anne. And this is Ed. Guys, this is Harry, my new lab partner.”

“Nice to meet you guys,” Harry says, shaking their hands. “Thanks for letting me crash karaoke night.”

“Glad you could come. The more, the merrier,” Ed says easily. “Okay, first pitcher’s on me. You in for margaritas, Harry?”

“Margaritas?” Harry asks with bemusement, taking in the decor of the bar. “Shouldn’t we like...be drinking mead or something?”

“I know, ridiculous, right?” Ed laughs. “But they’re the house specialty. You’ll like them. Six of us, right?” He asks, looking at Leigh-Anne.

“Yup,” she replies. “Shawn is already putting songs in and Hailee should be here any minute.”

“Cool. Be right back,” Ed calls over his shoulder as he turns towards the bar. Harry shrugs off his coat and adds it to the small pile accumulating on the end of one of the benches.

“Wow,” Jade whistles appreciatively. “You clean up nice, Harry Styles.”

Harry blushes, rolling up the sleeves of the new black and white animal print blouse that he’d paired with super skinny black jeans and his black chelsea boots. He’d changed his shirt three times before landing on it.

“Yeah? It’s not too much?”

“Not at all, you look amazing!”

“So do you,” Harry replies with a grin.

Jade does a little twirl in her red mini-dress, sparkly tights, and knee-high boots.

“Thank you, thank you.”

“You’re both hot,” Leigh-Anne states as adjusts the plunging neckline of her black jumpsuit, the thin gold pinstripes sparkling in the low light.

“I like your jumpsuit,” Harry offers a little shyly. “Very 60s.”

Leigh-Anne preens, ruffling her mass of curls.

“I was going for Diana Ross tonight.”

“You succeeded,” Harry says earnestly.

“You can stay,” Leigh-Anne grins as she sits on the bench, Jade sliding in next to her. “Now sit down, we have some serious matters to discuss.” She grabs two books from a neighboring table. “What are we singing tonight?”

“You came,” Jade says happily, squeezing Harry’s shoulder as he sits on her other side. “I was worried you might bail.”
“I was trying to be late,” Harry admits. “I was worried I’d be the first one here. I’m always the first one anywhere. Perpetually early.”

“No wonder Jade likes you,” Leigh-Anne says, looking up from the songbook and arching a perfectly shaped brow. “We’re always fifteen minutes early thanks to her.”

“You would be lost without me,” Jade says affectionately.

“I would,” she replies, pecking Jade on the lips.

“How long have you two been together?” Harry asks.

“Two years,” Jade replies, threading her fingers through Leigh-Anne’s. “She picked me up at this very bar, actually.”

“Excuse me, I believe you picked me up,” Leigh-Anne laughs. “She got up and sang and made eyes at me the whole time.”

“But you came and talked to me first!”

“How I could I resist after that performance of “Baby One More Time,” though? It was like you were singing it just for me!”

“I was,” Jade says winking at Harry. Harry laughs.

“How about you, Harry?” Leigh-Anne asks. “Are you seeing anyone?”

“Oh...um...I just—” Harry stammers, pondering if he even wants to open up the can of worms that is Louis tonight. Both Jade and Leigh-Anne turn to him, interested expressions on their faces. Harry takes a deep breath and smiles tightly. “No,” he says finally. “No boyfriend for me.”

Jade smiles softly and opens her mouth to say something but is interrupted by Ed’s arrival at the table. He’s clutching a massive pitcher of slushy margarita with a wooden spoon in it, followed closely by a girl holding a stack of glasses and a carafe of water and a boy balancing a tray of full shot glasses and a small plate of limes and salt shakers.

“Found Shawn and Hailee,” Ed says as he places the pitcher on the table. “Guys, this is Jade’s friend, Harry.”

Shawn and Hailee smile brightly at Harry, welcoming him.

“Also got us a round of shots to start,” Ed says as Shawn passes the shot glasses out. Ed settles across from Harry, licking the top of his hand and sprinkling salt on it before passing the shaker to Harry, who does the same. “Bottoms up, everyone!”

Everyone cheers, licking the salt from their hands and downing their shots. Harry knocks his back, the tequila burning his throat on the way down. He squeezes his eyes shut, trying not to cough as he grabs a wedge of lime and sucks it between his teeth. He feels the shot almost immediately, not having drank all that much since Louis went into treatment. Reaching for the carafe of water, he pours himself a glass, thinking he should probably take it slow tonight.

A few minutes later, Hailee lets out a loud whoop as Shawn is called up to the stage. They all cheer as he launches into a Dave Matthews song.
“What are we singing, Harry?” Jade asks, thumbing through the songbook. “Oooh! ‘Summer Nights’ is a fun one! We should do that! What do you think?”

Harry feels his throat constrict. His stomach flips as memories of doing that song with Louis race through his mind.

*Louis always made me sing Sandy’s part.*

“Um,” he croaks, gripping his glass. “Not that.” Harry shakes his head, wiping his forehead where beads of sweat have suddenly appeared.

*Fuck...am I really having a nervous breakdown over a song? Pull it together.*

“I can’t sing that one. I...I’m sorry. I’m not used to singing Danny’s part anyway,” Harry says quietly, willing Jade to understand and drop it. His cheeks feel hot.

“Oh,” she says, looking at him with concern. “Okay. Yeah, we don’t have to sing that. It’s overdone anyway. Think outside the box! What do you usually sing, Harry?”

“Um...I’m really good at ‘Endless Love?’”

“You should sing that with Leigh! Since she’s dressed like Diana Ross and all,” Jade says sweetly. “Up for it, Leigh?”

“Fuck yeah,” Leigh-Anne says. “Will you sing it with me, Harry?”

“Are you sure?” Harry asks, looking between the two girls.

“We’ll think of something else for us,” Jade says, patting his shoulder. “Go put it in, will ya, Leigh?”

Leigh-Anne nods, scribbling it on a piece of paper. She gets up and heads over to the DJ.

“Sorry,” Harry says thickly. “It’s just–”

“It’s okay,” Jade says quickly. “You’re okay.”

Harry nods, taking a gulp of water.

“Where’re ya from, Harry?” Ed asks, sliding a margarita towards him.

“Just outside of Philly,” Harry answers, accepting the glass.

“He just transferred here this semester from UVA,” Jade offers helpfully, her hand a comforting weight on his shoulder.

“Oh, really? How’re you liking Boston so far?”

*How am I liking Boston so far?*

*I miss Louis so much it physically hurts.*

*I’ve been so fucking lonely that I’ve wondered every day if I made the right call coming here.*

*Please like me.*

“It’s fucking cold,” Harry replies, huffing a small laugh. “Tell me it gets better, I’m dying here.”
“I’m from California, bro, I’m still not used to it,” Ed laughs. “We’re almost through it though.”

“What are you majoring in at Berklee?” Harry asks, taking a small sip of his margarita. He raises his eyebrows. “Oh shit, this is good!”

“They’re lethal,” Ed warns, topping off his own glass and Jade’s with the last of the pitcher. “Don’t let how sweet they are fool you, they have a lot of tequila in them. I learned that the hard way.”

“Duly noted.”

“Oh, and I’m double majoring in guitar and vocal performance.”

“That’s awesome,” Harry says, taking another sip of his drink.

“Ed plays at an open mic night every month,” Hailee pipes up, setting her phone down on the table. “He’s really good. When’s the next one?”

“Next Friday,” he replies. “You should come, Harry, it’s always a fun show. I won’t brag about myself—”

“He’s amazing,” Hailee interjects.

Ed beams.

“People do covers and originals. I can put you on my list so you don’t have to pay the cover at the door.”

“Thanks, man,” Harry says. “I appreciate it, I’ll definitely be there.”

“Next up we have,” the DJ’s voice booms over the loudspeaker. “Leigh-Anne and Harry!”

Harry’s eyes widen.

“Fuck, that was fast,” Harry says.

“Leigh is friends with the DJ,” Jade grins. “Occasionally he plays favorites. Go on, go on!”

“I haven’t had nearly enough to drink,” Harry says drily, taking a gulp of his margarita and wincing at the instant brain freeze. “Here goes nothing.”

He makes his way to the small stage, where Leigh-Anne stands, holding out a microphone to him.

“You ready, Lionel?”

“Ready, Diana. As I’ll ever be.”

“Just focus on me,” she whispers, her eyes sparkling. “We’ll give ’em a good show.”

Harry nods, taking a deep breath as the intro starts.

“My love...there’s only you in my life,” Harry sings. “The only thing that’s bright.”

“My first love,” Leigh-Anne chimes in with a sweet-sounding soprano. “You’re every breath that I take. You’re every step I make.”

They hit the harmony, their voices blending seamlessly. Harry hears Jade and Ed shouting for them
from their table and grins. Leigh-Anne winks at him, pulling him close once they hit the bridge.

“And I’ll giiiiiiiiiiiiive it all to you,” Harry howls dramatically, clutching his chest, much to the delight of the crowd. “My love!”

“My love, my love,” Leigh-Anne echoes, a hand on his cheek; Harry mirroring the gesture.

They take the last breath in unison, looking at each other smiling brightly.

“My endless looooonnvee.”

The crowd cheers and Leigh-Anne hugs him.

“Well done, Harry,” she says as they head back to the table. “You sure you shouldn’t be at Berklee?”

“No, no,” Harry laughs, feeling lighter than he has in ages. “This is strictly for karaoke night only.”

Their group greets them with raucous applause, a fresh pitcher of margaritas on the table. Jade refills his glass, sliding it to him with a grin.

“You’ve been holding out on me, Styles. You act all shy and quiet and shit, but you’re actually a rock star, aren’t you?”

“It’s just one of my specialty songs,” Harry says bashfully, slurping his drink. “We had a karaoke machine at home and ‘Endless Love’ was one of the songs that came with it, so it was one of the first ones we learned.”

Harry pauses, momentarily lost in the memory.

“Thanks for asking me to come, Jade. It means a lot to me.”

“You’re very welcome,” she replies, elbowing him gently. “Honestly, we should have done this ages ago.”

“You’re right,” Harry says honestly. “It’s...it hasn’t been easy for me. Adjusting.”

Jade nods as a group of girls is called to the stage. The song starts, horns blaring.

“Let’s go girls,” Harry and Jade speak in unison and then burst out laughing.

“Gotta love Shania,” Jade quips. “Always a classic.”

“She’s the best,” Harry says easily. “My favorite is ‘Still the One.’”

Jade studies him for a few moments, toying with her straw.

“Is he worth it?”

“Who?”

“Whoever it is that you’re clearly pining for,” Jade says simply.

Harry stills. He takes a big sip of his drink and sighs.

“Is it that obvious?”
“I mean…pretty much, yeah. You talked about we when you mentioned ‘Endless Love’ and the karaoke machine. I don’t know if you even noticed that? ‘Still the One’ is your favorite Shania song. And you…you used to sing ‘Summer Nights’ with him, didn’t you?”

Harry nods.

“He played Danny our senior year of high school.”

“So is he worth it?” Jade presses gently.

“He…he’s everything to me,” Harry admits. “He has been for a long time. Things just got…things got really fucked up and we’re…not speaking. And I don’t know how to…” Harry trails off, stirring his straw through the slush of his drink. “But yeah. He’s worth it.”

“What’s his name?”


“I’d like that,” Jade nods.

They both sip their drinks, watching the group of girls flounce their way through the song.

“Harry,” Jade says carefully. “I’m not saying that you should be over him because I don’t know what happened between you two. But I do know that closing yourself off and making yourself miserable won’t help anything. You still need to live your life, you know? And you...haven’t being doing that, have you?”

Harry gapes at her.

“Fuck. Sorry. That was rude. It’s none of my business.”

“No, you’re right,” Harry says, nudging her shoulder with his. “I haven’t been. I haven’t really...known how. Without him.”

He grabs the songbook and a slip of paper, flipping through it. He finds the song he wants and scribbles the number down on the paper.

“But no time like the present, right?” he asks, getting up to take his song up to the DJ.

“What are you singing?” Jade squeals.

“Not telling,” Harry smirks. “It’s another one of my signatures, though.”

Harry feels himself relax more and more the longer the night goes on. Jade’s friends—his friends—are welcoming and easy to talk to. They’re also hams, all taking turns at the mic, trying to one up each other, saying they need to win karaoke night. Jade recreates her infamous “Baby One More Time” performance “for Harry’s benefit.” (“It’s for their benefit,” Ed whispers to Harry in the middle of it. “She does it like every other time we come here.”) Hailee sings “Since You’ve Been Gone” while Leigh-Anne does a rather impressive version of “Love On Top.” Ed leads the whole bar in a sing-along of “Wonderwall.” Harry gets perfectly tipsy, alternating between the margaritas and water. He sings along with the crowd, he laughs, and he joins in with the light-hearted banter bouncing between the group.

Finally, the DJ calls him up to the stage.

“What are you singing?” Jade shouts as Harry makes his way up.
“Wait and see!” Harry calls back, grinning.

Harry grips the mic, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath as the dramatic piano intro starts.

“There were nights when the wind was so cold,” he belts. “That my body froze in bed if I just listened to it right outside the window.”

“Ohhhhh shiiiiiiit!” Harry hears one of his group yell. “He’s doing Celine!”

Harry opens his eyes and smirks at his new friends as he continues the verse. Jade’s jaw is practically on the floor.

“I finished crying in the instant that you left,” he growls, shaking out his curls. “And I can’t remember where or when or hooooooow. And I banished every memory you and I had ever maaaaaade.”

“Get it, Harry!” Jade shouts.

Harry holds up his finger, pretending to shush her dramatically. The crowd bursts with laughter.

“But when you touch me like this,” Harry sings, his voice hushed and coy. “And you hold me like that... I just have to admit that it’s all coming back to me. When I touch you like this and I hold you like that, it’s so hard to believe but it’s all coming back to me…”

“It’s all coming back, it’s all coming back to me now,” the bar sings with him.

Harry grins, losing himself in the song, upping the dramatics with every verse and chorus. He falls to his knees at one point, belting out “Baby, baby, babyyyyyyyy…” Half the bar is lit by phone flashlights as the crowd waves them back and forth, singing along with him. Harry feels like he’s buzzing in the best way, adrenaline and tequila fizzing in his veins, making him giddy.

“And if we…” he whispers, finishing the song with his arm thrown out to his side.

The bar roars their approval. Harry outright giggles, handing the mic back to the DJ and taking a bow. He weaves his way back to his friends, collapsing on the bench.

“I should have thought more before submitting a six-minute song,” Harry wheezes, gratefully accepting his drink from Ed. “Fuck, I’m exhausted.”

“Oh my god,” Jade shrieks, punching his bicep affectionately. “You’re such a dark horse, Harry Styles. You just fucking won karaoke night! He won, didn’t he guys?”

Everyone agrees enthusiastically.

“What does that even mean?” Harry laughs. “You’ve been talking about winning all night! Do I get a trophy or something?”

“Sadly no,” Ed chimes in, clapping him on the back. “Means the first round’s on you next week! Congrats!”

“What?” Harry sputters. “How is that winning?”

“That’s just how it works, Hazza,” Jade says, slinging her arm around his shoulders. “Don’t question it. Welcome to the group.”

Harry smiles, his heart clenching at the nickname that has always been exclusively Louis.
“Thanks for having me.”

********

April

“So what is this movie about again?” Niall asks as he takes his ticket from cashier. “All I know is that it has Chris Evans in it.”

“Chris Evans with a beard,” Louis says, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet.

Niall raises an eyebrow at him.

“I dunno,” Louis says, rolling his eyes. “I think he’s like a single dad? And his daughter is gifted apparently?”

“Yeah, I kind of guessed that from the title, Bender,” Niall quips.

“And Jenny Slate is the daughter’s teacher,” Louis continues. “People want to take his daughter away and it’s all very dramatic and Chris has a beard, Neil,” Louis emphasizes. “And he wears very tight t-shirts. That’s all that matters.”

“Fair enough,” Niall laughs. “His pecs are very important. Hey, we’re coming here to see Guardians of the Galaxy 2 next week, right?”

“I am Groot,” Louis replies.

“So that’s a yes?”


“Louis?” A voice says to his right.

Louis stops, turning towards the voice. Nick is leaning against the wall, looking effortlessly put together in skinny black jeans, a black and white striped t-shirt, a simple gray blazer, and converse. He pockets his phone, heading over towards them. Niall slings an arm around Louis’ shoulder.


“Guess I shouldn’t be too surprised,” Nick smirks. “Since you guys see everything. Where’s–”

“I’m nothing if not predictable,” Louis interrupts, scuffing the toe of his sneaker on the floor. “The question is what are you doing here? You hate going to the movies.”

“Aimee dragged me,” Nick replies. He gestures over to the ladies room, where Louis spots a familiar head of rose-gold hair atop her signature animal print near the back of the line. “I mean, there are worse things than sitting through two hours of Chris Evans with a beard, right?”

Niall snorts.

“Nick, you remember Niall right?”

“Yeah, hey.” Nick says, giving Niall an awkward wave. “I hope you brought tissues ’cause this one here is going to cry buckets in this movie.”
“There’s nothing wrong with crying in a movie,” Niall huffs defensively, narrowing his eyes at Nick.

“I didn’t say—” Nick starts, frowning.

“Niall,” Louis says, elbowing him gently. He reaches for his wallet, opening it and handing Niall a twenty. “There’s a long line at concessions and you know I hate missing previews. Snacks are on me today. Get me get me a Dr. Pepper and some M&Ms? And a large popcorn to share?”

Niall studies him for a moment and Louis smiles reassuringly.

“You want butter on it?” Niall asks finally.

“Do I want butter on it?” Louis laughs. “Honestly, Neil, when I have I ever not gotten butter on my popcorn? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Niall grins, taking Louis’ money. He shoots one more glare at Nick before heading off to join the line at the concession counter.

“You better bring me back change,” Louis calls after him. “I know there’s a member discount!” He turns back to Nick and smiles.

“Nice guard dog you have there,” Nick quips.

“Yeah, well,” Louis shrugs. “I do seem to recall him threatening you, so you got off pretty easy, I reckon.”

Nick chuckles, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“You...you look good, Louis,” Nick says after a moment. “Really good.”

Louis shoves the sleeves of his lavender sweater up his forearms, resting his hands on his hips. The sweater has long ceased to smell like Harry, even if Louis tries to tell himself that it still does.


“Oh God, don’t remind me,” Nick groans. “I still can’t believe it’s actually happening. Jesus.”

“Still moving to New York?”

“Yep,” Nick nods. “Aimee and I signed a lease for June 1st. We found this great two bedroom in the West Village. It’s small but the location is killer, and that’s what we’re really paying for anyway.”

“That’s great,” Louis says brightly. “Good for you.”

“Yeah, I figure I’ll take the summer to just get used to living there, you know? Explore the city. Get my feet wet before diving in and taking Dad up on the interviews he wants to set up for me.”

“Gotta put that fancy media studies degree to use, Nicholas.”

“Yeah, well,” Nick exhales, raking a hand through his blond hair. “That’s the plan. Even though Pete would rather I make use of that business minor. You know how he feels about me wanting to go into radio.”
“You should do what makes you happy,” Louis says softly. “What feels right. It’s not about what he wants; it’s about what you want. It’s one of the most important things I’ve learned over the past few months.”

Nick gives him a lopsided smile.

“You’ve gotten awfully wise.”

“I’ve had an awful lot of therapy,” Louis laughs.

“What about you? You’ve got to be happy now, right? How’s the missus?”


“Your other half? The ole ball and chain?” Nick rolls his eyes. “Harry.”

Louis’ face falls, a knot forming in his stomach.

“Oh. Um.”

“I’m surprised he’s not here. Come to think of it, I haven’t seen him around at all lately?”

“He–”

“I just figured you two were like living in domestic bliss or something? I don’t know. Spare me the gory details.”

Nick pauses, studying Louis’ face intently, his brows wrinkling in obvious confusion.

“Wait. Are you not–”

“Harry moved to Boston,” Louis says quickly, effectively ripping the band-aid off.

*It never gets any easier to say. Fuck.*

“He did what?” Nick asks, taken aback.

“He transferred to Boston University. Early med school acceptance. We’re not...we’re not together.” Louis looks at the floor, chewing his bottom lip. “We haven’t even spoken since January.”


“Yeah,” Louis echoes awkwardly, shifting back and forth.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Nick says, exhaling loudly. “But what the fuck, Louis?”

“What?” Louis snaps, looking up at him.

“What the fuck,” Nick repeats. “I just...how are you not together? I thought–”

“We just aren’t,” Louis clips definitively, desperately trying to stuff down his sudden desire to flee this conversation.

“Seriously? You’re wearing his fucking sweater, Louis.”

Louis takes a step back, hugging himself defensively and pulling the sweater’s sleeves over his
“Why do you even care, Nick?” Louis asks helplessly after a moment. “You hate Harry. You always did.”

“I said something to him, you know,” Nick confesses.

“You did what?” Louis squeaks, blood rushing in his ears.

“I said some–”

“What,” Louis says urgently, unable to keep the desperation out of his voice. “What did you say to him?”

“I told him he needed to stop being a coward and just make a move. It was so obvious, you know.”

“What?”

“That he was in love with you. And that you were in love with him too. I told him that, too.”

Louis looks at him agape. His heart thuds in his chest.

“What did he say?” Louis asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

“He looked at me exactly how you are looking at me right now,” Nick chuckles awkwardly. “Like you’re getting brand-new information or something.”

I fucking am.

“When...when was this?” Louis asks tentatively, even though he knows the answer.

He thinks back to that last night with Harry; how quiet he’d been during dinner, how agitated he had clearly been, the way he refused to elaborate on his encounter with Nick, his sudden determination to lay everything on the table. The urgency that he was leaving and he hadn’t told Louis how he felt.

Louis feels like his world has been turned upside down all over again, the final piece of the puzzle he’s been trying to solve for months just dropping in his lap out of nowhere. Just like that.

I just came here today for Chris Evans and his beard. Holy shit.

“The last time I saw you,” Nick says, confirming Louis’ suspicion. “We ran into each other in the stairwell.”

Louis nods, feeling a little sick to his stomach.

“Did he never say anything to you? Did he move to Boston and never tell you how he felt? That little chickenshit–”

“No,” Louis says fiercely. “No. He...he did. He put everything out there. He did.”

“Then why did he leave?”

I didn’t ask him to stay.

“I said no,” Louis croaks. “I...I said no.”

“It’s complicated! He wanted me to just up and move to Boston with him. Just like that. A week out of rehab,” Louis protests.

“Yeah, okay, that was a little dumb,” Nick concedes. “But still.”

“It all just came out of nowhere.”

“Did it though?”

“I had just broken up with you,” Louis exclaims.

“Yeah, and we’ve been broken up for three months now,” Nick counters. “Cut the bullshit.”

“He’s my best friend, he always has been.”


Louis stops, his shoulders slumping. He doesn’t have any more excuses left. He just nods miserably.

“You know, there are a lot of reasons you and I didn’t work out. Why we never would have. I get that now, yeah? But honestly...the biggest reason was how you always felt about Harry.”

“I didn’t know,” Louis says meekly. “I...I’m sorry, Nick. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Nick shrugs. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I was pretty pissed at you for a while. But I’m good now. Really good. Great even.”

“Yeah?”

“I mean, why wouldn’t I be? I’m a catch. Any boy would be lucky to have me.”

Louis barks a laugh as Nick grins cockily.

“I should...I should go,” Nick says after a moment. He gestures over to Aimee, who is now waiting a safe distance away from them, immersed in her phone. She looks up and raises her eyebrows at Nick questioningly. “We’re meeting everyone at Trinity for drinks soon. And your guard dog is on his way back.”

Louis turns and sees Niall carefully making his way back to them with a large cardboard tray, two massive sodas balanced precariously in opposite corners, a large tub of popcorn in the middle and two packages of candy wedged in the front.

“Yeah, I should go help him, shouldn’t I?”

“Yeah, probably,” Nick laughs. “That’s a disaster waiting to happen. It was...it was good running into you.”

They stand there awkwardly for a moment before Louis hugs him quickly, clapping him on the back and then pulling away.

“You too, Nick. I’ll see you around?”

“Maybe I’ll come by the coffeehouse,” Nick says, shoving his hands in his pockets as he starts to
walk away. “Put your barista skills to the test.”

“I’ll have you know that I make an excellent cappuccino!”

Louis knows that Nick probably won’t come by. But that’s okay.

“Hey, Louis?” Nick turns back to him.

“Yeah?”

“Remember what you just said to me? About doing what makes me happy?”

Louis nods.

“Maybe it’s time you took your own advice, yeah? He made you happy. So you should fix it.”

Nick slings his arm around Aimee’s shoulder. She gives Louis a little wave, which he returns.

“See ya,” Nick says over his shoulder, giving Louis one last smile.

“Bye,” Louis says quietly.

Louis watches them go, lost in his thoughts.

You should fix it.

Can I even fix it? Is there anything to fix?

Of course there fucking is. It’s Harry.

“A little help here?” Niall calls.

“Shit, yeah, sorry,” Louis replies, shaking out of his trance. He strides over to Niall, carefully plucking one of the sodas and the two packages of candy from the tray, trying not to upset the balance. He rolls his eyes when he spots two hot dogs wedged into the back corner of the tray.

“Christ, Niall, did you get enough snacks?”

“Excuse you, Bender, this is my dinner,” Niall replies archly. “And no, I could have gotten more. I didn’t have room to get nachos. So there.”

“Well, okay,” Louis chuckles. “Excellent self-restraint then.”

“Was that...whole thing...with Nick...okay?” Niall asks, his blue eyes full of concern. “I mean I know when I’m being told to leave, but still…”

“It was...enlightening,” Louis says vaguely. “Can we...I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“Ooooooookay,” Niall drawls, one eyebrow arched. “So Chris Evans time?”

“Please.”

They silently shuffle to the ticket taker, who rips their stubs in half, and then they head into the theatre, which is quite full by this point.

“Here good?” Niall asks, stopping at a pair of seats on the aisle about five rows from the back of the theatre.
“How do I fix it? How?”

“How?” Niall sing-songs. “Are you there? Are these seats okay?”

“Yeah yeah,” Louis replies distractedly. “These are great.”

“I thought you’d want to be closer to his beard,” Niall teases, settling into the second seat, allowing Louis to have the aisle.

“No, it’s all about perspective,” Louis says primly, taking a sip of his soda. “If we’re too close, we can’t fully appreciate him.”

_too close. Can’t fully appreciate him._

Shit.

_I really miss him._

_I mean, I knew that. I always know that._

_But shit._

“You sure everything is okay, Lou?” Niall asks as the lights start to dim for previews.

“Everything is great,” Louis responds. “Everything is fucking great.”

_Harry fidgets in his uncomfortable metal folding chair, listening intently to the young woman sitting next to him as she talks about her alcoholic husband._

“...And it’s like whenever he’s up, I’m up higher...because it’s a good day, you know? But the bad days...when he hits a low, I’m lower. We’re so fucking co-dependent. It’s like I don’t even know how to be my own person anymore.”

Harry nods, quietly humming his agreement. He takes a sip of the predictably bad coffee that he’s grown almost fond of because he associates it with Wednesday night, the local YMCA, and spending an hour with a group of strangers who understand what he’s going through, even if he’s never said a word about it.

After Louis’ intervention last November, Harry had followed James’ advice and found a local Al-Anon meeting in Charlottesville. He’d gone regularly while Louis was in treatment, finding comfort in spending time with people in the same boat as he was and learning more about addiction. But then he went home for Christmas and then Louis had gotten out of rehab right after that and they spent that week in a blissful little bubble of happiness and then things went to complete shit and Harry had never gone back to a meeting. But the morning after his first karaoke night, where Jade had called him out on closing himself off and hiding away from the world, Harry woke up and promptly googled local Al-Anon meetings. He attended his first one the following Wednesday and he’s been coming ever since.

He’s yet to share anything though.

“...And I know he’s trying. And I know it’s hard. But it’s hard for me too, you know? Anyway, thanks for listening.”

“Thank you for sharing, Sarah,” Jeff, the counselor leading tonight’s meeting, says gently. The
group turns their attention to Harry.

“Hi, I’m Harry,” he rasps.

“Hi, Harry,” the group murmurs.

Harry pauses. Normally this is where he would say “And I’m just here to listen.” It’s what he’s said at every meeting he’s attended, even the ones in Charlottesville. He takes a deep breath, screwing up his courage.

I can do this.

“I lost my best friend three months ago,” Harry starts.

A wave of sympathetic sounds makes its way through the group, punctuated by a couple of gasps.

“Oh fuck,” Harry gasps, his eyes wide. “I just realized how that sounded. That’s...that’s not what I meant. He’s alive...very much alive...we’re just...fuck...sorry, m’nervous. I hate public speaking.”

Gentle laughter ripples through the group.

“Let me start again,” Harry says with a rueful smile. “My best friend’s an addict. Um...both drugs and alcohol. Three months ago, we stopped speaking. S’why I said that I lost him...’cause honestly it feels like I have, you know? I just...I just don’t know a world where Louis isn’t my best friend.”

Harry pauses, looking down at his hands. He picks at the ever-persistent hangnail on his thumb.

“Louis and I have been best friends since we were five. I remember the exact moment we met. It was our first day of kindergarten. I had my brand-new lunchbox with Cheer Bear on it...you know...the Care Bears? I was so proud of it and then a couple other boys started making fun of it for being girly and I started to cry. Then this boy with bright blue eyes plopped down next to me and took my hand and announced to the whole table that Cheer Bear was his favorite too. He told me his name was Louis and he asked what my name was and that was it. We were instant best friends. Soulmates, really.”

Harry feels tears stinging at his eyes already. He blinks them back, swallows hard, and then takes a sip of his lukewarm coffee.

“We were inseparable from that day on. I like...I don’t remember a single important event in my life that Louis wasn’t there for. It’s funny ’cause you’d look at us and you’d think we were total opposites, but we actually balance each other out? We took care of each other. I’ve always been really shy. Deliberate. And Louis is...spontaneous. And loud.” Harry huffs a laugh. “Loud. Loud.”

“He came out to me the summer before our junior year. He just did it. No fear. No hesitation. I was in awe of that. To be honest, I was always a little bit in awe of him. But this time it was more than that because I knew I wasn’t as brave as he was. I’d known I was gay for a while. A long while...but I wasn’t ready to tell anyone. Even him. I didn’t realize how much I needed for him to make it okay, but I think he did. He knew. He let me take things at my own pace. He always did. Honestly, looking back, I don’t know why I was so nervous about it. I knew my family would be supportive. And I had Louis. I always had Louis. I think I was afraid of it changing everything? Like it’s one thing to know it and it’s an entirely different thing to say it.

“When I finally did come out to him that winter, I cried. A lot. And Louis he...he just hugged me. Petted my hair. After a while, he said we should go for ice cream. So we hopped in my car and went to the grocery store to get our favorites. Mint chocolate chip and Rocky Road. When we got
to the store, Louis told me to pick out a DVD from Redbox while he grabbed the ice cream. As soon as we got back in the car, Louis presented me with this rainbow print teddy bear he had found in the toy section. ‘Welcome to the club,’ he said, with this like...massive smile on his face. ‘This is the gayest thing I could find on short notice.’”

The group laughs heartily.

Harry smiles sadly, thinking of Rainbow Bear. He wonders if Louis is taking care of him. If he still cuddles him at night or if Rainbow Bear sits in a box in the back of his closet, like how all of Harry’s Louis things are slowly gathering dust in the back of his.

“That’s basically Louis in a nutshell. He’s just...so bright. He draws people in. He loves wholeheartedly. He just...he always took care of me, always made sure I felt safe. For so much of my life, it was Louis forging ahead, almost like he was clearing a path for me to follow him. I don’t...I don’t know when we switched places.

“That’s not true,” he sighs. “I know when it changed. You know, the movies always make it seem like realizing you’re in love with someone comes with some sort of...earth-shattering moment or something. For me, it was just a cup of coffee. We had taken a road trip to see The Script in Washington D.C. for my 19th birthday. The morning after the concert, I woke up in our hotel room and Louis wasn’t there, which was weird because like he’s not a morning person. You have to drag him out of bed most days. The only time he would ever willingly get up early was when it had anything to do with my birthday.”

Harry smiles fondly.

“I’d only been up for a few minutes, barely long enough to even register that Louis wasn’t there when he came back with coffee and breakfast sandwiches. I’m very particular about coffee. Louis always calls me a coffee snob, but I just like it how I like it, you know? Okay, fine, I can admit it. I am a snob. It’s fine. If I can’t tell the truth here, where can I?”

Harry pauses, lifting his paper cup with a grimace and everyone laughs. He drains the cup with a shudder and then places it by his feet.

“No, no, no. Anyway, Louis handed me my coffee, not even saying anything. He had made it exactly how I liked it. He always made my coffee perfectly. I just looked at him and he smiled at me over his sandwich, his eyes all crinkled shut...and I knew. I knew right then that I was in love with him. That I had probably been in love with him my whole life. And well...that was fucking terrifying. My head was like ‘Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit,’ the whole drive home.

“He...ah...not long before we went on that trip, he met this guy Nick at a party. They were just hooking up, Louis had even said it wasn’t anything serious, but they...just kept doing it. I was still working up the nerve to tell Louis how I felt, and we were at one of Nick’s parties and Nick introduced Louis to one of his friends as his boyfriend. And I just...I remember Louis looking over at me and shrugging before turning to the guy and saying ‘Yep. Nick’s boyfriend. That’s me.’ Just like that. I can’t even imagine what my face looked like.

“It was fine for awhile. Louis always made time for me; he never like...neglected our friendship anything. I just needed a little bit of him...that piece of his heart that was always mine. It had to be enough because I...I just couldn’t imagine not being in Louis’ life. And he was happy and that’s what I wanted for him. So I tried to be supportive But...things got harder the longer they were together. Nick and I never got along. We brought out the worst in each other and Louis was always in the middle. He did his best to be fair to be both of us, keep us in our boxes, I guess?
“But something changed last year. He was really struggling in school and his stepfather was putting a lot of pressure on him. He just...he dimmed. He was still my Louis...but he also wasn’t? It’s hard to describe. He and Nick partied a lot, they always did, but there was a point where it became...a constant thing? And...it’s not like I’m a stick in the mud or anything but going out and getting drunk all the time just isn’t my thing. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it but, something felt off about him. Every time I tried to say something Louis would just laugh and say he was fine. I eventually stopped pushing because Louis had never lied to me, you know? He’d never kept secrets from me, so I believed him. I believed he was fine. It really just felt like...not that we were drifting apart...but that our relationship was changing. And like...friendships do that, right? They change, they evolve. So I just...chalked things up to that and I didn’t...I didn’t see how bad things had gotten. Not until it was too late. I didn’t see it.”

A sob rips through him and he buries his head in his hands. Sarah rests her hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently. She rubs his back comfortingly as he cries openly.

“Louis, he….he overdosed last fall,” Harry says shakily, gasping for air. “I found him that morning and he...he basically died in my arms. He pulled through but...I genuinely thought I had lost him. I had never been so scared in my life. And when I...when the doctor told me what had happened, I just couldn’t help but feel that I had failed him. I had no idea he was using. No idea. How did I miss it? How did I not see that the person I loved most in this world was a drug addict?”

Harry pauses, wiping the tears from his cheeks. Sarah hands him a box of tissues, which he accepts gratefully. He blows his nose noisily and takes a deep breath.

“The guilt’s what I’ve struggled with the most. It’s overwhelming, you know? I think about it all the time...what I could have done differently. I could have pushed harder when I knew something was wrong. I could have...I could have done something to help him, you know? I know it’s not my fault, I do. I mean that’s what we learn here, right? It’s not my fault. There’s nothing I could have done. He hid it so well. He didn’t want me to know. I can’t blame myself for his actions. But it’s so hard not to, you know? When you love someone, you want to protect them and when you find out that you couldn’t...it’s just...devastating.”

Murmurs of agreement ripple through the group.

“After getting out of the hospital, Louis went straight to rehab. He resisted it at first, but his parents didn’t give him any choice, you know? We had to have this whole intervention with him at the rehab center because...almost fucking dying still wasn’t enough of a wake-up call for him. And I was so angry. I just unleashed on him. I felt so guilty about that too, about the things I said to him. But we...we got through to him. I went to visit him a month later and it was like night and day. Like, yeah, he was an addict and he was in rehab but...it was like he’d come back to me, you know? My best friend had come back. And he fucking thanked me. For everything. For saving his life, for saying what I did. It felt like everything we’d been through was worth it ‘cause we just...came back better. It was going to be okay. We were going to be okay. He was working so hard and I was so fucking proud of him. He’s the strongest person I know.”

Harry crumples the tissues and puts them in his empty coffee cup.

“Louis ended things with Nick as soon as he got home. And we just...fell into each other. Spent this amazing week together. It felt like something had shifted between us and maybe...just maybe...he was in love with me too. Things were different. I know they were. I had spent almost two years pining for him at that point, and there’d been times where I thought he might feel the same way about me. But I always second-guessed everything, and it’s not like it mattered – he had a boyfriend. But then, after that week we had together, after things ended with Nick, I was so sure
Louis felt the same way about me. But...he didn’t. Everything fell apart...and it was all my fault.

“Louis and I always knew that we wanted to go to college together. We applied to all the same schools but we knew that if we both got into UVA then we’d go there. He was a legacy, and it was important to his stepdad, and I managed to get a lot of scholarship money there. Undergrad didn’t matter to me so much, I’d always wanted to be a doctor and Boston University was my top choice for med school. And in January, I got offered the chance to transfer to BU’s accelerated pre-med program and I took it. I just...I had to.”

Harry methodically pops his knuckles, sighing deeply.

“Louis freaked out; he was furious that I was leaving him. And that had to have meant something, right? He had to have felt the same way about me. So I put it all out there. I told him I was in love with him and that I wanted him to come to Boston with me. He said no. That’s all he kept saying. No. No. No. So I left. And we haven’t spoken since. I can’t believe it’s been three months...more than that, actually. It still doesn’t really feel real, you know?

“Looking back, I know that I was incredibly naive to think that it could be that easy, you know? I didn’t even think...I was just...I was so sure that we were supposed to be together. That he loved me too. I didn’t consider his life in Charlottesville, didn’t consider everything he needed there. After all, it had always been me and him, you know?

“I mean...wasn’t I the exception to everything I had learned about recovery?” Harry asks sarcastically. “God. I actually said that to him. I still can’t believe I did that. I don’t know what the fuck I was thinking.

“I was so...foolish,” Harry says sadly, shaking his head. “I didn’t listen to him and I pushed until I destroyed what we had. I’m the one to blame here...even if I’m the one whose heart got broken, you know?”

Harry sniffs, a few fat tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Which brings me here, I guess. Figuring out my life without him. It’s...something I never thought I would have to do. And it’s hard. Louis is fine. I mean...I hear he’s fine. I haven’t been fine though. When I first got here, I was so lost. It was like I didn’t know how to function without him. We were always just...so wrapped up in each other. It was always HarryandLouis. Never just Harry. And that wasn’t healthy. I can see that now. I didn’t realize how much I needed to learn how to stand on my own until I was forced to do it, you know? And I’m doing it, I am. I’ve found friends. I’ve settled into school, and I love it. I’m building a life here. I’m getting there. That’s what I’m telling myself anyway.”

Harry looks around the circle, wiping tears away as he takes in all the understanding faces looking back at him.

“Most days I believe it. When I tell myself that I’m getting there. I know it in my head, but...my heart. My heart aches for him. I don’t think it will ever stop aching for him. I miss him. I miss him so fucking much. I miss how he’d steal my clothes. I miss how I’d let him do it. I miss how he’d force me to watch shitty reality shows until I got emotionally invested in them. I miss how he’d always play with my hair whenever we watched TV. I miss how he always cheated at Scrabble. Vibey is not a word, don’t ever let anyone tell you it is,” Harry laughs through his tears.

“I miss how he would take me out on an adventure whenever I got too stressed out. I miss how he would light up an entire room with his smile. I miss how he always just got me, you know? We could have whole conversations without saying a single word. I miss how he made me feel like I
could do anything I ever wanted. I miss everything about him. He just...he felt like home.”

His heart clenches painfully.

“I wonder if he misses me. If he feels like a part of him is missing too. I wonder if we’ll ever find our way back to each other. I mean we have to, right? He was part of my life for fifteen years. You don’t just throw that away. But I feel like it’s on him now, you know? Maybe that’s selfish, I don’t know. But it’s how I feel. I laid everything out there for him, so now it’s his turn.”

Harry cringes.

“But the thing is...when I first moved here, my parents treated me to a new phone. You know, as like a congrats on BU kinda thing? And we were at the store and the salesperson asked me if I wanted to keep the same number and I...on total impulse, I said no. I said I wanted a local number. I lived here now after all, it was like I should have a local number, right? That’s what I told myself anyway. But deep down, I think I really did it so I could make a clean break because Louis...he didn’t love me. He told me to go, after all. I had to like...take him at his word. So I needed to make a fresh start, right?”

Harry rakes a hand through his hair and then scratches at his neck.

“I regretted it almost as soon as I did it,” he admits. “But it was too late to change it back. So I don’t even know if he’s tried to call me. But...if he wanted to talk to me, I feel like he would have by now, you know? He wouldn’t have let the phone number stop him. I mean...it’s 2017, there’s a million ways you can contact someone if you really want to. And he hasn’t.”

Harry sighs heavily.

“I know it sounds like I’m testing him. But I’m not. I swear I’m not. Or maybe I am. I don’t fucking know. I’m just...I’m trying to take care of myself.”

He looks down at his hands.

“I have to take care of myself,” Harry whispers. “Because Louis isn’t here to do it.”

“You sound like you’re doing your best,” Sarah says gently. “That’s all you can do.”

Harry smiles at her, his eyes watery.

“At the end of the day, what I know is this: I know that I’m better for having this time to stand on my own. It was something I really needed to learn and as weird as it sounds, I’m grateful for it. I’m grateful to have this group that helps me know that I’m never alone. But I also know that I’m not better off for not having had Louis in my life. In any capacity. Even though we’ve hurt each other, I can’t regret a single damn day. No matter what I do, he’ll always be a part of me. A good part of me. Thanks for listening.”

“Thanks for sharing, Harry,” Jeff says, smiling kindly.

“Thanks for letting me talk so long,” Harry laughs ruefully, wiping his eyes and leaning back in his chair. Sarah holds her hand out to him and he takes it, squeezing reassuringly.

He’s okay.
Harry's karaoke performance is inspired by [this video](#). Do yourselves a favor and watch. It will change your life.
Louis grabs the stainless steel canister of whipped cream and gives it a quick couple of shakes before angling it over the absurdly large, wide-rimmed coffee cup. He gently presses the nozzle, swirling the whipped cream around in a flat circle as he bops along to the new Imagine Dragons song that’s been in regular rotation at the coffeehouse since it came out on Friday.

“Not a yes sir, not a follower,” he quietly sings, having completely memorized the words by the end of his shift on Saturday. “Fit the box, fit the mold, have a seat in the foyer. Take a number. I was lightning before the thunder.”

He sprinkles some sea salt on top of the whipped cream, rolling his eyes as he does so because there’s already salt in the caramel syrup he added to the espresso, so it’s more for decoration than anything else. Grabbing the squeeze bottle of caramel, he continues to sing to himself.

“Thunder, feel the thunder.”

Louis carefully draws a smiley face on top of the whipped cream, tapping his feet in time with the music.

“Lightning and the thunder.”

Satisfied with his work, he puts the whipped cream and the caramel back in their respective places and then rinses off his hands, drying them on the towel that hangs by the sink.

“Hey Jes,” Louis calls. “Cool if I take my break?”

Jesy looks up from rearranging the bags of coffee beans sold by the register.

“It’s dead in here,” she shrugs. “Go for it.”

Louis nods as he places the mug on a matching saucer. He grabs his iced coffee with his other hand and carefully makes his way to the back corner where Liam sits at a large square table, hunched over his laptop and surrounded by textbooks. Louis smiles as Liam leans back in his chair, squeezing his eyes shut and massaging his temples.

“You know I hear caffeine is the perfect cure for finals-induced tension headaches,” Louis quips, gingerly placing the giant coffee mug in the empty space next to Liam’s laptop.

Liam’s eyes pop open.

“Ooooooh,” he breathes, his eyes lighting up as they land on the coffee. “What’s this?”

“Salted caramel mocha,” Louis replies. “Your favorite, right? It’s not on the menu right now, but I made it special, just for you. Even drew you on it. See?”

Louis rotates the mug so the smiley face is turned towards Liam.

“Are you saying finals are going to kill me?” Liam asks with an exaggerated pout, his eyes twinkling. “You gave me Xs for eyes!”
“I never said I was a good artist,” Louis smirks. “Besides, you’ve been sitting here for almost two 
hours, Lime. You are starting to look like that.”

“Christ, has it been that long?” Liam exhales.

“Yup,” Louis pops. “Hence the treat. You looked like you needed a pick-me-up.”

Liam takes a sip and hums appreciatively.

“This is amazing, Lou,” Liam says, wiping whipped cream from his upper lip. “Thanks so much. You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to though,” Louis replies earnestly, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. “Um...mind if I join you for a bit? I just went on break.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” Liam says, snapping his laptop shut and moving it to the opposite side of the table. “I need a bit of a break myself. Obviously. My brain’s on psychology overload.”

Louis pulls out the chair on Liam’s right and sits. He takes a sip of his iced coffee, chewing on his straw nervously.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“What’s up, Lou?” Liam asks as he stacks his textbooks next to the laptop.

“I...ah...”

Louis pauses, taking a deep breath. Liam smiles at him patiently.

“I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Liam asks, his brows crinkling together in confusion.

“Well, I’m sorry for a lot of things,” Louis says honestly. “I’m sorry for never properly thanking you for sending me a care package almost every week while I was in rehab. I feel really shitty about that. I’m sorry I’m such an asshole.”

“You’re not–” Liam interrupts.

“Let me finish? Please?”

Liam nods, taking a sip of his mocha.

“That meant so fucking much,” Louis continues. “Like...you have no idea? Just sending me Us Weekly and People and junk food, you know? Just because you know I love them. That was so thoughtful, Li. You’re so thoughtful and you never ask for anything in return. And I’m sorry I haven’t let you know how much I appreciated it until now.”

“You said thank you before, Louis. You did.”

“But not enough–” Louis starts, his throat tightening.

“I was happy to do it,” Liam replies earnestly, squeezing Louis’ shoulder. “I don’t know...we just felt so...helpless? Like there wasn’t anything we could do for you. So it was like if I could do something special for you every week, just so you would know I was with you, no matter what...of course I’d send you stupid magazines every week. You’re my brother, Louis. It’s what brothers do.
I’ll love and support you whether you’re a million miles away or sitting here next to me.”

Tears sting at Louis’ eyes. He gulps and pinches the bridge of his nose, trying desperately not to fall to pieces at work, break or no break.

“You’re my brother too, Liam,” Louis croaks, gripping the hand on his shoulder. “Always.”

“I know, Lou,” Liam smiles, his eyes crinkling almost completely shut. “I know.”

Louis takes a few steadying breaths in order to calm himself before continuing.

“And I’m...I’m sorry for what happened in January. When...when everything with Harry—”

Liam chokes on a sip of coffee, his eyebrows shooting sky high. His face turns bright red as he coughs, his eyes watering.

“Jesus Christ,” Louis exclaims, leaping to his feet and clapping Liam hard on the back. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Liam croaks, pounding on his chest. “It just...went down the wrong pipe.”

“Do you need some water?” Louis asks with concern, looking over at the cooler in the opposite corner housing bottled waters and juices.

A final, painful-sounding cough rattles Liam’s chest.

“Fuck, that hurt,” Liam wheezes. He takes a few cleansing breaths and looks up at Louis. “Sit down, Lou. I’m fine. Promise.”

“Are you sure? I can get you some—”

“Sorry, I just...I haven’t heard you say Harry’s name in months,” Liam confesses, his face still a little pink. “You just surprised me is all.”


Louis looks up to see Liam studying him curiously. They sit in silence for a few moments.

“Anyway, like I was saying. I’m sorry for shutting you out. Back in January. I’m sorry for letting it affect our friendship.”

“Louis, we’re good,” Liam interjects. “You know that right? We’ve been good for a while now, you’re not—”

“You...you were my first friend here, you know?” Louis wrings his hands and then takes a sip of his coffee, slurping noisily through the straw as he gathers his thoughts. “I won the roommate lottery with you. I hope you know what your friendship means to me. I’m so, so, so sorry that you got caught in the middle.”

“Hey, hey, none of that,” Liam says firmly. “I put myself in the middle, yeah? I chose a side when it was really none of my business. That wasn’t cool. You were hurting as much as he was and I ignored that. I kept my distance. I blamed you and I shouldn’t have. I know that. Now I do anyway. I didn’t then. I only saw how one of my best friends was hurting and you were the one who caused it. I don’t know...it’s like I forgot you were...no...are...one of my best friends too.”

“But I was a really shitty friend,” Louis protests. “Do you forgive me?”
“So was I,” Liam counters, lifting his coffee mug to his lips. “Do you forgive me?”

They look at each other for a few moments; Louis chewing on his straw, a small smirk curling his lips, Liam’s eyes sparkling as he peers at Louis over the brim of his mug.

“Call it even?” Louis asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Call it even,” Liam echoes with a smile, offering his fist towards Louis, who promptly bumps it.

“Not that I don’t love a good bonding moment, because you know I do,” Liam says after a few moments. “But where is this coming from? Like I said, we’ve been good–”

“It’s one of my steps,” Louis says simply with a small shrug. “Well...two of them actually. Number eight and number nine. Make a list of the people you’ve harmed and be willing to make amends. Make direct amends whenever possible...except when it could cause more harm.”

“Oh,” Liam says softly.

“Yeah,” Louis huffs, feeling his cheeks heat ever so slightly. “It was the topic of my meeting yesterday. It’s um...it’s something I’ve been building up to. Something I finally feel ready for. I’ve been so focused on myself, because that’s what I felt like I needed to do, you know? I’m trying to figure out what the fuck I want to do next. I have some ideas that I’ve been discussing with my therapist and I’m excited about them. But that meeting like...made me realize that I can’t ever truly move on until I fix things, right? Or at least try to. And it’s not like I haven’t thought about it before, I have, but just...it just hit me yesterday. I don’t know, recovery is weird sometimes.”

Liam laughs gently.

“And then you came in today and it felt like a sign. Time to nut up. So here I am. Asking for your forgiveness. Which I know you just gave. But I’m asking again.”

“You have it,” Liam says solemnly. “Of course you have it, Lou.”

“Thank you,” Louis replies genuinely. “Thank you so much.”

Louis feels his stomach start to flutter. He cracks his knuckles and then grabs his coffee, shaking ice around in the plastic cup and slurping up the last of it.

“There’s um...there’s one more thing,” Louis starts. “And I swear to God, it’s not the only reason I came to talk to you. I don’t want you to think that I’m like trying to butter you up with your favorite coffee drink ’cause I’m not. I promise I’m not, but—”

“Louis,” Liam says patiently. “Just ask.”

“How is he?” Louis asks tentatively. He takes a deep breath. “Harry. Is he...I just want to know...can you tell me if he’s...is he okay?”

“He’s okay,” Liam says softly after a moment.

“Just okay?” Louis presses.

Liam hesitates, his brow furrowed.

“Li, come on,” Louis urges quietly. “Please?”

“The first couple of months were pretty bad,” Liam says finally. “I mean, he was all alone in a new
city, completely starting over. He was the new kid and he didn’t know anyone. And you know how Harry is in those kind of situations. He just kind of shut down.”

“He needs a wingman,” Louis whispers, his stomach twisting. “Someone who makes him comfortable, someone who pulls him out of his shell. Someone who’ll take him on an adventure.”

Someone like me.

“I was so worried about him. He called me every day,” Liam continues. “Usually twice a day. I did my best to be there for him, but it’s hard when you’re in different cities, you know? All I could do was listen to him cry. About everything. He was...he was really fucking lonely and just...completely heartbroken.”

Louis winces.

“You asked.”

“I know,” Louis replies, rubbing his temples. “I tried to call him, you know? On his birthday.”

Liam gapes at him.

“You never said.”

“Yeah, well,” Louis shrugs. “He changed his number, didn’t he? Didn’t really want to bring that up. The message was pretty clear.”

“I told him that was stupid,” Liam huffs. “So fucking stupid.”

“It’s probably for the best though,” Louis admits, trying to stay nonchalant. “I had no idea what I was going to say anyway. It...probably wouldn’t have ended well.”

“Lou–”

“You said he was okay, Liam. This doesn’t sound okay to me.”

“Things got better. It’s almost like...he decided he needed to snap out of it? He got used to his classes, made some friends. He started sounding like Harry again. I...um...I actually went up to see him over Easter? You’d said your parents were coming down for the weekend and I had promised Harry I would visit. So I went.”

Louis looks at him with surprise.

“Sorry I didn’t tell you,” Liam apologizes. “We’ve just...I’ve never wanted to bring him up? I’ve never known how to. I thought it would make things weird.”

“No, I get it,” Louis says, chewing on his lip. “I get it.”

“I got to meet all of his friends. You’d like them, Lou. His lab partner Jade’s basically a female version of you. She’s hilarious and loud and super smart. Her girlfriend Leigh-Anne is great, she’s really sweet. We went with them to an open mic night Ed was playing; you’d really like his songs, he’s so talented. He’s teaching Harry how to play guitar.”

Louis can’t help the hot flash of jealousy that courses through his veins. He knows exactly who Liam is talking about; he’s seen this guy with the guitar on Harry’s Instagram.

Not that I check it regularly or anything. I can’t help when it comes up in my feed. That’s all.
“And Harry and Ed...they...they're just friends?” Louis asks, doing his best to sound breezy but cringing immediately at how obvious he sounds.

“Just friends,” Liam replies, arching an eyebrow knowingly and crossing his arms.

Louis blushes and looks down at his hands.

“I think he’s happy, Lou,” Liam says gently. “He was so excited to show me around Boston, to take me to all the little places he’s discovered and to introduce me to everyone. He’s building a life there. I...I don’t want him to get hurt again, you know?”

“I don’t want that either,” Louis agrees, his voice low. “At all. I never wanted it. I hope you know that.”

They sit in silence for a few moments.

“Does he...does he ever ask about me?” Louis asks timidly.

Liam sighs deeply. Louis tries to swallow around the lump that’s forming in his throat.

“Not anymore.”

“Oh. O-o-okay,” Louis stammers, his heart sinking.

Liam looks at him sympathetically, his mouth downturned.

“He used to. Every time he called. Asked how you were, what you were doing. Hell, he was the one who told me to get my head out of my ass and go to Sunday dinner. But then he just...stopped asking. And I didn’t want to bring it up, you know? Not when it seemed like he was–”

“Getting over me,” Louis finishes, a single tear slipping down his cheek. “I get it.”

Liam leans back in his chair, studying Louis appraisingly.

“You miss him,” he states.

“Obviously,” Louis replies quietly, wiping his cheek. “I miss him every day. So much.”

“Why don’t you call him,” Liam says, pulling out his phone. “I’ll give you his number right now.”

“I...I don’t think...I’m not ready–” Louis sputters, heart racing. “No.”

“Help me out, Louis,” Liam says evenly. “'Cause I’m a little confused here. If you don’t want Harry’s number, why are we even having this conversation?”

“I just wanted to know if he was okay,” Louis insists. “That’s all.”

“He misses you too. I know he does, even if he doesn’t talk about it anymore. You have to believe me. He would be thrilled to hear from you, Louis. I know it.”

“He changed his fucking number without telling me, Li.”

“Sounds like a lame excuse to me. Are you really going to let that one thing stop you? That’s not the Louis I know.”

Louis doesn’t have anything to say to that.
“What about your steps, Lou?” Liam asks, leaning forward as he changes tactics. “If there is anyone you need to make amends with it’s Harry.”

“I know, but—”

“But what?”

Louis hears James’ voice in his head. He doesn’t remember all that much from detox, but he does remember this.

_What you need to do is take responsibility for the choices you’ve made, Louis. What you need to do is stop being so selfish. Are you ever going to think about what’s best for Harry instead of what’s best for yourself?_

Louis takes a deep breath and scrubs his hands down his face.

“Step nine: make direct amends whenever possible except when it could cause more harm,” he recites, looking Liam directly in the eye.

“Louis, you can’t possibly think that—”

“Can’t I though? I mean, you pretty much said that Harry was a wreck a few months ago and now he’s not. He’s happy. He’s moving on. I don’t wanna mess that up for him.”

Liam shakes his head furiously.

“That is so not what I meant and you know it.”

“I can’t hurt him again. I won’t. I feel like calling him would be selfish. I mean, would I really be calling him to fix things? Or would I be calling him just because I need to hear his voice and know that he’s still there? I can’t call him until I know that for sure.”

“Why can’t it be both of those things?”

“I need to think of him and what he needs,” Louis says resolutely.

“He needs you. He loves you. He always has. And you love him. So what’s the problem here?”

Louis bites his lip.

“I don’t know. Sometimes I just think...maybe he’s just better off without me, you know?”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Liam bursts out. “Why are you being such a stubborn asshole?”

Liam springs back in surprise.

“You’re killing me. You’re both killing me. You’re miserable without each other. I don’t know where the fuck you guys got in your heads that you were better off without each other after a fifteen-fucking-year friendship that like redefines the phrase ‘best friend.’”

Liam whips out his phone, tapping away furiously, talking more to himself than to Louis.

“Do you even know how lucky you are to have found each other? And you’re just throwing it away. Just like that. What the hell? You’re not even fighting for it. Idiots. Well. Absolutely fucking not. I’m fucking tired of it. This has gone on long enough.”
He tosses his phone down on the table and looks up at Louis, exhaling with satisfaction.

Louis’ phone buzzes in his pocket. He fishes it out and looks at Liam’s text message glowing on his screen and then looks back up at him, his eyes wide.

“Harry’s number. Do with it what you will. But you should call him. For the love of Christ, just call him.”

The phone feels hot in Louis’ hand.

“I...I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t be such a chickenshit, Louis. It won’t be any harder than it was with me.”

Louis arches an eyebrow, a smirk tugging at his lips.

“Okay, so that’s bullshit. It will be harder. But...it’s Harry, Louis. Harry.”

“I know,” Louis says after a moment. “You gotta...you gotta let me do this in my own time, okay? Don’t say anything to him. Please.”

Liam nods. Louis glances over to the register, making eye contact with Jesy. She taps on her watch and smiles.

“I gotta get back to work,” Louis says apologetically. “Jesy’s already let me take an extra long break. And you need to study. I’ve distracted you for too long. Are you done with this? I can take your cups.”

“Lou.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“You’ll feel better when you call him.”

“Please, don’t push me, Li,” Louis sighs. “I said I’d think about it, okay? That’s all I can do right now.”

“Okay,” Liam concedes. “Sorry.”

“Hey...are you doing anything Saturday afternoon?” Louis asks.

“Nope,” Liam replies. “I just have a date with Sophia that night.”

“Would you...would you like to come to a meeting with me?”

Liam looks confused.

“I can just...I can come to a meeting?”

“Yeah, yeah, anyone can come any time they want. But this...this is a special one. I’m, um, celebrating six months of sobriety.”


“Thanks,” Louis grins. “Anyway, I have to get up and tell my story. Like properly on a stage with a microphone and everything and I’m really fucking nervous and I would just love it if you came.”
“Really?”

“I mean, yeah. Like I said, you’re important to me. And I want all the most important people to be there.”

“I’d be honored,” Liam says earnestly. “Thanks for asking.”

“I’ll text you the details later,” Louis says, as he stacks up Liam’s dirty cups. “Um...thanks for the talk. Now get back to work!”

“I’ll have you know that you and Harry are helping me ace my psych class,” Liam calls after him.

Louis gives him the finger behind his back as he goes, shaking his head. He heads back behind the counter, placing the dirty dishes in the bin at the end. The bell at the door chimes and a slew of sorority girls file into the coffeehouse.

“Right on time,” Jesy mutters, shooting Louis a grin. “You wanna take them?”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it,” Louis says easily, heading to the register and giving the first girl a kind smile. “What can I get for you today?”

Louis’ phone is burning a hole in his pocket when he gets off work a few hours later. He starts to head home, but when he reaches his turn-off, he finds himself driving in the opposite direction, heading across town instead. He taps his fingers anxiously on the steering wheel as he stops for a red light, tempted to just turn around and go home, but he takes a deep breath and keeps going once it turns green. He turns the radio up as his sense of resolve grows. A few minutes later, he turns into a shopping center and parks in a spot right in front of the sandwich shop next door to Zayn’s salon. He glances over at the sign and smiles.

He still can’t believe Zayn actually did it.

Shutting off the ignition, Louis leans over to the glove compartment and opens it, pulling out his emergency pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He taps one out and then puts the pack in his pocket as he gets out of the car.

He can start quitting again tomorrow.

Leaning against the car, he lights the cigarette and pulls his light denim jacket around him, the spring air pleasantly cool. He takes a drag off the cigarette and exhales slowly, feeling his body relax ever so slightly. He pulls his phone out of his pocket, thumbing over to his text messages. Liam’s text sits at the top, the string of unfamiliar numbers glowing back at him. He hasn’t saved the number to his contacts yet, too afraid that he would accidentally press call before he’s ready. Locking the phone with a sigh, he stuffs it back in his pocket, puffing away on the cigarette.

“Enough already,” Louis mutters to himself, stubbing the cigarette out in the smoker’s pole outside the salon. He pushes the door open, chimes sounding to announce his arrival. Zayn’s sister Doniya looks up from her nail station, where she’s in the middle of giving a manicure.

“Hey, Louis,” she chirps, a smile blooming on her pretty, heart-shaped face. “How are you?”

“Good, good,” he replies, returning the smile. “Zee still here?”

“Yep,” she answers, tilting her head towards the back stockroom. “He went back to get some
shampoo but probably popped out for a smoke too. Should be right back.”

“Thanks,” Louis says, helping himself to a bottle of water from the mini-fridge in the waiting area.

She gives him another smile and then turns her attention back to her client. Taking a sip of his water, Louis wanders over to their wall of products, plucking a bottle of his favorite coconut shampoo and conditioner from the white shelves and placing them on the checkout counter. His eyes rove over the space, his chest swelling with pride. He’s been here several times of course, between the opening night party Zayn’s parents organized and nights like this where he just swings by after work, but every time he’s here, he’s so impressed at what Zayn and Doniya have built. He’s so fucking proud of them.

The salon is on the small side, a long and narrow room with two stylist stations, two sinks, two dryers, and two manicure/pedicure set-ups. The back wall where the sinks are is painted bright purple (“Monica purple” as Niall had lovingly called it) while the other two walls are a soft dove gray. The front of the salon has floor to ceiling windows and the late afternoon sun spills into the space, sparkling on the deep gray floor tiles. All of the furniture is a glistening white; the chairs a soft purple that complement the accent wall. Louis can see Zayn in all the little touches around the salon, from the funky chrome light fixtures hanging from the ceiling to the elegant black and white photos hanging on the wall. Soft music plays over speakers installed in every corner. The room feels light and airy, the overall effect incredibly calming. Louis feels the tension ebbing out of him already.

Zayn comes down the hallway that leads to the storage room and back office, whistling quietly, carrying several bottles of shampoo. He drops two off by the sinks and then turns and sees Louis, a surprised smile breaking out on his face.

“Hey, Lou,” he says warmly, giving him an awkward one-armed hug before he heads to the product wall, setting the rest of the shampoo on the shelves, lining them up carefully and making sure all the labels are facing the right way. “What’s up,” he asks over his shoulder. “Wanna grab dinner or something? We’re closing up once Doniya’s done.”

“Yeah, yeah, dinner sounds great,” Louis replies. “I was actually hoping you could cut my hair first, if you don’t mind?” He cards his hand through his shaggy fringe. “It’s gotten long again.”

“It has,” Zayn says, studying him with an appraising eye. “Can’t have you not looking your best for Saturday, can we? Come on back.”

Louis lets out a small whoop of delight and shrugs out of his jacket, hanging it up on one of the chrome hooks on the wall at Zayn’s station before following him back to the sinks. He sits in the soft leather chair, reclining back and resting his neck on the padded dip in the sink.

“Good?” Zayn asks as he turns on the water, adjusting the taps as he checks the temperature. “You need me to move it back farther?”

“Nope,” Louis says, wiggling back into the chair. “All comfy.”

“Sure beats the first time we did this, huh?”

“I don’t know,” Louis replies. “I’ll always think fondly of the three of us crowded in that bathroom. You at the sink, me awkwardly leaning my desk chair back against it, with just a towel under my neck; Niall in a face mask, sitting in the bathtub with his guitar, serenading us between eating all my cookies. This? This is far too luxurious for me. How am I supposed to get a crick in my neck with all this padding?”
Zayn squirts him with water.

“Excuse you,” Louis squawks, affronted. “This is hardly professional behavior, Mr. Malik. Is this how you treat all your clients?”

“Just my favorite ones,” Zayn quips, as he wets Louis’ hair. “Temperature good?”

“Perfect,” Louis sighs happily, stretching into Zayn’s touch and closing his eyes.

Zayn hums, sweeping Louis’ hair back and massaging his scalp. They fall into comfortable silence for a few moments as Zayn works the shampoo into his hair; Louis smiling as he inhales the familiar coconut scent. The door chimes and Zayn sighs contentedly, shoulders slumping ever so slightly.

“How was your day?” Louis asks, peering up at him.

“Good,” Zayn replies. “Busy. I had a lot of appointments back to back today. I’m still not used to being on my feet all day, so I’m pretty tired.”

“Thanks for doing this then,” Louis says appreciatively. “I’ll make an appointment next time. Sorry for making your day longer.”

Zayn gently tugs the ends of his hair in response.

“You know I don’t mind, Lou. It’s a good tired. It means we’re doing well, you know? Doniya’s been amazing. She made this whole business plan all on her own and has been busting her ass getting our names out there. We probably would have closed in a week if it hadn’t been for her. If we had even opened at all. She’s a genius.”

“I heard that,” Doniya chirps, walking back towards them. “And don’t sell yourself short, little brother. Your talent is gonna keep ’em coming back.”

Zayn blushes, biting back a grin.

“I’m gonna head out,” she continues, patting Zayn on the back, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek and ruffling his hair. “I’m meeting the girls for dinner in half an hour. You good locking up?”

“Yeah, of course,” Zayn nods. “Go. Have fun. I’ll take care of everything.”


“Bye, Doni! Have a good night.”

The door chimes, signaling her exit.

“She’s right, you know,” Louis says after a moment. “I’m so proud of you, Zee. You’ve worked so hard.”

“It’s a little overwhelming,” Zayn says quietly, as he starts to rinse the suds from Louis’ hair. “It’s not the work that wears me out, it’s the constant social interaction with strangers, you know? I have to like...stop and do one thing for myself every day so I can recharge and not let myself get lost in it. Even if it’s just for an hour. Like going to an afternoon meeting or taking a walk by myself or when Liam brings me lunch on Tuesdays.”

“Like when Liam does what now?” Louis exclaims. He starts to sit up but is stopped by a firm hand on his shoulder.
“Do you want soap in your eyes?”

“Since when do you two hang out without me?” Louis pouts, settling back into the neck rest.

“You don’t know everything about me, Lewis,” Zayn says mildly, a smile quirking his lips as he washes the rest of the suds out of Louis’ hair. “I do have other friends.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Liam came in the week we opened,” Zayn says, grabbing the conditioner. “So...six weeks? He bought a gift certificate for his girlfriend and we ended up getting coffee.”

“So you cheated on me and my coffeehouse.”

“You’re still my favorite, babe.”

“Wouldn’t hurt you to say it once in a while,” Louis grumbles. “So how did this standing lunch date happen then?”

“When we had coffee, I mentioned that in the run up to opening, a lot of days I would forget to eat lunch,” Zayn says with a small shrug. “A few days later, he showed up with sandwiches and we took them to the back and just...hung out for an hour. It became a thing. He’s a good guy.”

Louis smiles, happiness bubbling in his chest despite his dramatic protestations.

“Hey, Zee, you know I’m just joking, right?” he says after a moment. “I’m like...so happy that you guys are friends. Especially since you two had a rough start.”

“Yeah, well,” Zayn says simply. “I misjudged him.”

Zayn shuts off the water and starts toweling off Louis’ hair.

“Besides,” he continues. “It would be a bit like holding a grudge against a puppy, wouldn’t it?”

Louis laughs as Zayn puts the chair upright.

“It’s the eyes, isn’t it? Like a little golden retriever.”

“Definitely the eyes,” Zayn agrees, as he continues to rub the towel over Louis’ head. He tosses the towel into a hamper and nudges Louis’ shoulder. “C’mon, let’s do this.”

Louis follows Zayn to his station and settles into stylist chair. Zayn drapes a smock around him, fastening it at the neck.

“You want the same cut?” Zayn asks, carding his fingers through Louis’ damp hair and letting it fall in its natural part.

“Yup,” Louis replies. “Why mess with perfection?”

Zayn grins and grabs his scissors, standing behind Louis and centering his head in the mirror, measuring out the pieces of his hair with his fingers. He starts snipping the sides as Louis takes a deep breath, trying not to fidget in the chair.

“Speaking of Liam,” Louis says as casually as he can, clearing his throat. “He was at the coffeehouse today and we...um...we had a long talk.”
“Oh, yeah?” Zayn hums, arching an eyebrow and meeting his eyes in the mirror.

“Just...the meeting we went to yesterday really hit home with me, yeah? I had a lot of stuff I needed to own up to. Like how I took him for granted. Our fight back in January and how I let things affect our friendship. That kind of stuff. So I...I asked for his forgiveness. It’s funny ’cause he had forgiven me a long time ago, you know? But it was still good to like...say it. And hear it.”


“And we talked about Harry,” Louis says quickly.

“What about Harry?” Zayn asks carefully, his face neutral.

“It’s like...Liam’s my only tie to him, you know? And I just...I just wanted to know how he was doing. If he was okay.”

“And?”

Zayn gently presses Louis’ head down towards his chest as he starts to work on the back. Louis sighs, more than a little relieved that he can do this without Zayn’s eyes on him.

“He said...he said he was doing good. That things had been really bad for a while, but he was good now. He actually went to see him over Easter. Met all his new friends and everything. So he’s...he’s happy. Which is great. He deserves to be happy.”

Zayn hums in agreement.

“And then Liam asked if I needed Harry’s new number. He said since I was making amends and all, I would probably need it, right? ’Cause if there’s anyone I should make amends with it’s Harry. So he offered the number just like that...like it was so easy. And I freaked out ’cause I really don’t want to mess things up for Harry if he’s actually happy. When I said that Liam had a total meltdown. Like talking to himself and everything, saying we were killing him and all sorts of other shit. He texted me the number anyway. So, yeah. I have Harry’s number now. I’ve had it for hours. It’s just sitting there in my phone and I have no idea what the hell to do with it. It’s making me nuts, Zayn. Because it’s not as simple as just calling him up, you know? Not after all this time. It’s not that simple. It’s actually really fucking complicated because I’m in love with him.”

Zayn’s hands still in his hair. Louis chews on his lip in the ensuing silence. Taking a deep breath, he dares to look up at Zayn, meeting his gaze in the mirror. Zayn’s face is soft, his eyes shining with compassion and understanding.

“You don’t...you don’t look surprised,” Louis says quietly. “You knew.”

“Yes,” Zayn breathes. “Yeah, I knew. I just didn’t know that you knew.”

“Yeah, well. I’m an idiot.”

“Hey. Don’t talk about my best friend that way,” Zayn says firmly, nudging his shoulder before he swivels the chair around so he can focus on Louis’ fringe.

“S’true though,” Louis says quietly. “Everyone knew but me. You...Niall...Liam...even Nick knew. I’m so~”

“Louis, I have scissors in my hand. Don’t finish that sentence. Just don’t. You’re not an idiot. You’re not. You just...weren’t ready.”
Louis sighs, giving him a tiny nod. Zayn sweeps Louis’ hair to the side, angling the scissors as he trims it.

“I didn’t let myself see it,” Louis admits quietly. “All this time. I didn’t let myself.”

“What are you going to do?” Zayn asks tentatively after a few moments.

“I don’t know. What would I even say?” Louis shrugs helplessly. “Hey, Haz, I know we haven’t spoken in almost four months now but guess what? I’m in love with you? You’ve always been it for me and I’ve been too scared to say so? Let’s get married and live happily ever after?”

“Well, maybe I wouldn’t lead with that—”

“It doesn’t work that way! I can’t—”

“Why not? Just be honest with him, Lou.”

“Because he’s moved on, Zayn,” Louis says stubbornly. “Because I’ve hurt him enough. Because he’s happy and I...I missed my chance.”

“You don’t know that,” Zayn says gently. “Don’t jump to conclusions just because you’re scared. Don’t make Harry’s decision for him. Shouldn’t he be able to choose for himself?”

Louis gapes at him. Zayn sighs, dropping his scissors into a container of sterilizing solution. He leans back against the gleaming white counter, crossing his arms and fixing Louis with a piercing gaze.

“Don’t you think Harry has the right to know the truth? To hear it? If the situations were reversed, wouldn’t you want to know?”

Louis looks down, the gray floor littered with little locks of his hair. He cracks his knuckles under the smock.

“He changed his number, Zee,” Louis says weakly.

“Stop using that as an excuse. Jesus, Lou, you have to let that go. You have his number now. Make him hear you. If you really are in love with him, you need to tell him.”

Louis looks up at him, eyes wide. Zayn’s eyes are blazing with determination.

“But—”

“This can’t go on, Lou. You can’t let Harry go on thinking you don’t love him. Because that’s what he thinks. Liam told you that, remember? You’re not being fair to Harry. Or to yourself.”

“But you’ve said that I should—”

“I know what I’ve said before. But you’re not the same person you were in January, Lou. You’re in a much stronger place now.”

“But the steps say—”

“I know what you’re doing, Louis,” Zayn interrupts, calm but firm. “You’re trying to follow the program to the letter of the law with the whole ‘do no harm’ thing, and that’s admirable. I get it. But you’re also hiding behind it because you’re afraid of getting hurt.”
“What if he says no?” Louis asks in a tiny voice.

“But at least you’ll know,” Zayn states plainly. “You’ll know you missed your chance with him. And you’ll be able to move on. You can’t keep just...carrying this big not-even-a-secret around. There’s nothing honorable about that, babe. Absolutely nothing. You’re not doing anyone any favors by keeping quiet. You’ll never move past this if you don’t do something about it. At the risk of sounding like a dick but...aren’t you tired?”

Louis feels something come loose in his chest as tears spring to his eyes, spilling over almost immediately.

“Yeah,” he gasps through a sob. “Yeah, I’m tired, Zayn. So fucking tired.”

Zayn pushes himself off the counter and goes to Louis’ side, wrapping his arms around his shoulders. Louis turns into him, the hug made awkward by both the smock and the chair, but they make it work anyway.

“I miss him so fucking much.”

“I know you do, Lou,” he murmurs into his damp hair. “I know.”


“Well, first, you’re gonna let me dry and style your hair,” Zayn says, a smile evident in his voice. He pulls back and swipes the tears from Louis’ cheek with his thumb. “And then we’re gonna go and get burgers, okay? Giant, greasy, delicious burgers with all the fixings.”

“And cheese fries?”

“And cheese fries,” Zayn agrees. “We can talk about this some more, if you want, but we’re not going to do anything about Harry tonight. It’s not a good idea. Not when you’re this worked up, okay?”

Louis nods gratefully, his smile wobbly.

“Okay,” he says, taking a cleansing breath. “Okay.”

Zayn grabs a can of mousse and squirts a large dollop into his hand. He scrunches it into Louis’ hair, his fingernails scratching his scalp comfortingly. He grabs a styling brush and his dryer, switching it on.

As Louis watches Zayn’s reflection work, a feeling of peaceful certainty settles in his gut. He takes several deep breaths, allowing the feeling to wash over him. He feels...lighter.

“Hey, Zee?”

Zayn switches the dryer off, his eyebrows raised.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

Zayn smiles softly, his eyes warm.

“Always, Lou. Now let me finish ’cause I’m starving. Liam didn’t bring me lunch today, remember?”
Chapter End Notes

Final update will be on Wednesday the 28th because...28. We're almost there! Thank you for reading.
Chapter 20

Zayn is already waiting on the curb outside the salon when Louis pulls into the parking lot Saturday morning. Louis doesn’t even bother parking in a proper space; he just idles the car as Zayn stubs out his cigarette and trots over to the passenger side, pulling the door open and hopping in.

“How was your morning?” Louis asks as he hands an iced coffee over to Zayn, who smiles back gratefully.

“Good,” Zayn replies, after taking a long sip of his drink. “Busy, but good. Managed to squeeze most of my clients in this morning, only had to reschedule a couple people, so I could take off at 1:30. Big day, you know?”

Louis grins as he pulls out of the parking lot.

“Thanks, Zee. It means a lot to me.”

“I would never miss it, Lou,” Zayn says earnestly. “What about you? How was the morning shift?”

“Same,” Louis replies. “Busy. But I was just glad to be working instead of sitting at home and making myself nuts.”

“Still nervous? Did you figure out what you wanted to say?”

“Yeah,” Louis breathes, his stomach fluttering with a combination of nerves and excitement. He takes a sip of his own iced coffee. “I wrote it all out last night after you left. Started to put it on index cards and everything but then I remembered how much I hate when people pull out pre-written acceptance speeches at the Oscars so I decided to just wing it. Well. Not wing it, but you know what I mean.”

“You mean you equate getting your six-month sobriety chip with getting an Academy Award,” Zayn says with a wry smile.

“Precisely,” Louis replies. “You always get me, Zayn.”

They sit in comfortable silence for a few moments, Louis quietly humming along to the radio while Zayn sips his drink.

“So,” Zayn asks casually, nodding towards the backseat. “Are you gonna tell me what the deal is with that suitcase or what?”

“Oh, that,” Louis replies with a small smile. “I’m going to Boston after the meeting. So you’re going to have to get a ride home with Niall or Liam, if that’s okay?”

Zayn stares at him, his eyes wide and mouth agape.

“You’re–”

“Going to go get Harry, yes.” Louis finishes.

Zayn clears his throat, placing his drink in the cupholder and pulling his crumpled pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket.
“Do you mind?” he asks.

“No, not at all. Go for it.”

Zayn rolls down his window and lights a cigarette, taking a long drag.

“In fact, give me one,” Louis orders, clicking the air-conditioner off and rolling down his window as well.

“Lou, you haven’t had one since Monday—”

“Zee, I’m about to drive ten hours to go pour my heart out to a boy who may not want me anymore. Give me a damn cigarette.”

Zayn wordlessly passes the lit cigarette over to Louis, who inhales deeply. Zayn pulls a new cigarette out of his pack and lights it, brows furrowed as he studies Louis appraisingly. Louis smiles serenely, ashing his cigarette out the window as he exhales slowly.

“When did you decide to do this?”

“A couple days ago,” Louis replies.

“A couple days ago? We hung out all last night, Louis! And you didn’t think to, I don’t know... tell me?” Zayn questions, his voice verging on shrill.

“And miss seeing your face today?” Louis asks teasingly, eyes darting towards Zayn. “Not in a million years. Totally worth it.”

“Holy fuck, Lou.”

“Yeah, well. I finally figured out why I couldn’t call him. He deserves to hear it in person, you know?”

“Yeah,” Zayn says quietly. “He does.”

“So I got it all worked out. Switched some shifts at the coffeehouse. If it works out, I can stay up there for a few days. If it doesn’t...well I won’t want to go to work anyway, so I’ll probably just...I don’t know. Go to my parents’ house and cry on my mom’s shoulder. Or I’ll just...come back here and wallow for a week.”

Louis flicks ash out the window. He doesn’t like thinking about the version where it doesn’t work out. He takes a puff of his cigarette, shoving his self doubt aside.

“I’ll leave right after the meeting, drive till like midnight and stop to spend the night somewhere. I’ll show up on Harry’s doorstep tomorrow morning with coffee and breakfast sandwiches. Gotta have coffee. Harry will listen to coffee. He always listens to coffee.”

“Do you even know where he lives?”

“Liam knows,” Louis says confidently before taking another drag off his cigarette. “Liam will tell me. He’ll be there today, he’ll tell me.”

They sit in silence for a few moments. Louis feels Zayn’s eyes on him as he takes a final drag from his cigarette, flicking the butt out the window. Louis turns to him and sees Zayn grinning at him.

“What?”
Zayn’s smile broadens.

“What?” Louis repeats with amusement.

“I’m just...I’m really happy for you, Lou.”

Louis exhales loudly, his stomach doing a little flip.

“Am I crazy for doing this, Zayn? Be honest.”

“No, you’re not,” Zayn replies.

“It might not work out.”

“It might not,” Zayn agrees quietly. “But I’m really proud of you for trying. And unless Harry’s a complete idiot, which we both know he’s not, it will work out.”

Louis takes a deep breath, trying to settle the butterflies in his belly, as he pulls into the parking lot of the local YMCA. He finds a spot near the front and parks.

“Let’s fucking do this,” Louis says as he gets out of the car. Zayn grins back at him.

“I don’t see Niall’s car,” Louis muses, scanning the parking lot. “Liam’s either. If they’re late, I’m gonna murder them. The meeting starts in ten minutes and they know I’m going first.”

“Relax, Lou,” Zayn says mildly, tapping on his phone and then sliding it in his pocket. “Niall’s driving back from seeing his gran in Richmond, remember? And I don’t know what Liam was up to this morning, but I do know he’ll be here. They know this is important, they won’t miss it.”

Louis knows that Zayn is right but that doesn’t stop him from whipping out his phone and sending Niall a quick “WHERE ARE YOU?” text with a string of siren emojis. He slurps up the rest of his iced coffee, tossing the cup in the garbage can by the door. His phone buzzes as soon as he gets inside.

**Calm your tits, Bender. Five minutes away. Promise!!!!!!**

“Niall says he’s five minutes away,” Louis informs Zayn.

“See? I told you,” he replies calmly, pulling the door to the auditorium open.

“Oh, holy shit,” Louis gulps, taking in the crowded room, zeroing in on the stage at the front. “I know James said there would be a stage, but like, that’s a *stage*, Zayn. There are steps to get up to it and everything. And I’m going to be up there all by myself. I don’t know if I can do this, I feel sick—”

“You’ll be fine, Lou,” Zayn says, rubbing his shoulders comfortingly. “Academy Awards, remember? This is your big moment.”

“Right,” Louis says, straightening his spine. “And the Oscar for Best Six-Month Sobriety Chip Acceptance Speech goes to...me.”

“Just don’t forget to thank the most important person in your life,” Zayn quips as he reaches out and smooths Louis’ hair to the side. “Your hair stylist.”

Louis laughs.
“Never. Okay, I should go check in with James,” Louis says, taking a deep breath and cracking his knuckles. He shrugs off his black denim jacket and hands it to Zayn. “Save me a seat for later?”

“Where do you want us to sit?” Zayn asks, taking it and folding it over his arm.

“Not in the front row,” Louis answers immediately, adjusting the collar of his red scoop neck tee. “But still near the front?”

“So what? Third row? Fourth row?”

“Fourth row. Perfect. You’re the best.” Louis calls, giving Zayn a thumbs up as he walks down the aisle to where James and Steve are standing by the steps leading up to the stage.

“Louis!” James says jovially, clapping him on the back. “You made it.”

“Of course I made it,” Louis says as he hugs Steve tightly.

“Congratulations, brother,” Steve says into his neck. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks,” Louis murmurs. “Couldn’t have done it without you.”

Louis pulls back from Steve’s embrace and narrows his eyes at James, the corners of his mouth pulling into an amused grin.

“Did you really think I was going to bail? After all this time? You wound me, James.”

“I don’t know, Louis,” James laughs, tapping his watch teasingly. “You were cutting it close there.”

“So, I like to make a dramatic entrance,” Louis says haughtily.

A shout comes from the back of the auditorium.

“Bender!”

Louis turns and sees Niall standing at the doors. They make eye contact and Niall thrusts his arm up in the air, Judd Nelson style. Louis laughs.

“Told ya I’d make it,” Niall calls with a cackle. “Good luck!”

Niall heads in the direction of the donuts and coffee. Louis shakes his head, smiling fondly.

“About what?”

Louis scans the front of the rapidly filling auditorium, eyes landing on Zayn, who sits in the fourth row as promised. He grins when he sees Liam sitting next to him, their heads turned towards each other as they talk. Zayn catches his eye and nudges Liam, who grins and waves, his brown eyes crinkled almost completely shut. Louis waves back, warmth spreading in his chest.

“They’re all here.

“It’s about that time,” James says. “Are you ready?”

Louis takes a deep breath as the butterflies in his stomach kick into high gear.

“Yeah,” he exhales. “I’m ready.”
James trots up the steps and goes to the microphone. Louis sits in the front row next to Steve, who squeezes his knee encouragingly.

“If everyone could take their seats,” James says. “We’re going to go ahead and get started.”

Louis grips Steve’s hand tightly as people sit and the chatter fades away.

“We’ll begin, as always, with a moment of silence for those not with us today, followed by the Serenity Prayer.”

The auditorium falls completely silent. Louis closes his eyes and breathes evenly, clearing his mind. After a long moment, James speaks.

“May God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Louis mutters the words along with him, centering himself. He tunes out as James continues with the preamble that opens every meeting, focusing on breathing in and out.

“...please welcome Louis to the stage.”

The audience starts to clap. Louis’ eyes pop open. He squeezes Steve’s hand one more time and smiles at him before getting up and jogging up the stairs. James is waiting for him centerstage, eyes sparkling. Louis embraces him, James laughing softly as they sway back and forth.

“Congratulations, Louis,” James says as he pulls away. He reaches into his pocket and hands Louis a small medallion. “You’ve earned this.”

“Thank you, James,” Louis whispers. “Thank you so much.”

Louis looks down at the medallion, biting back a grin as he thumbs over the raised number six in the center, the phrase “To Thine Own Self Be True” etched around the number.

Blue.

My favorite color.

James claps him on the back one more time before leaving the stage, taking the seat next to Steve that Louis just vacated. Louis swallows hard as he steps up to the microphone.

“Hi, I’m Louis. I’m an addict.”

“Hi, Louis,” everyone replies.

“I’m celebrating six months sober today,” he announces, holding up the blue medallion.

Everyone claps. Louis laughs as he’s able to pick Niall’s distinctive whoop amidst the more subdued applause of the rest of the audience.

“Technically, it’s almost seven months sober,” Louis corrects himself. “But I chose this day to celebrate because six months ago today, with the help of some amazing people intervening, I finally pulled my head out of my ass and admitted that I had a problem. I admitted that I needed help.”

Louis pauses as images of that day flash in his mind. His mother throwing bottle after bottle of pills at his feet. Harry tearing pictures in half, his agonized sobs echoing through the room. The utter
sense of despair Louis felt once he locked himself in the bathroom. Zayn holding him on the floor of that bathroom as he shared his own story. Niall crawling into bed with them, urging Louis to talk about the intervention.

He looks down at the medallion clenched in his palm and deftly rolls it between his fingers, smiling proudly to himself.

*I’ve come so far.*

He looks up at the full auditorium, feeling his cheeks flush with heat as his mind goes almost completely blank taking in all the expectant faces.

“I stayed up pretty late last night writing out what I wanted to say today on notecards,” Louis confesses. “But I ditched them this morning ’cause I didn’t want to come up here and read off of them; I wanted to just talk, you know? Kinda rethinking that decision now. If *only* James had taken me up on my suggestion of installing a teleprompter.”

Everyone laughs and Louis feels the tightness in his chest start to loosen.

“And yes, James,” Louis laughs, meeting James’ eyes in the front row. “I completely realize that I’m using humor to diffuse the tension right now because I’m feeling vulnerable. I *do* listen to you in therapy, you know.”

James chuckles, shaking his head fondly.

Louis shuffles his feet for a few moments before planting them and straightening his shoulders.

“So how did I get here?”

He takes a deep breath, sweeping his hair out of his eyes.

“The thing is, I can’t pinpoint one thing or one traumatic event. That’s been the most frustrating part of this whole process. Do I blame it on my biological father leaving me and my mother when I was a baby and having nothing to do with us ever since? Do I blame my stepfather for being emotionally unavailable and setting all these expectations for me that I always fell just short of? Do I blame the teachers who thought I would never amount to anything? Do I blame myself for putting others’ happiness above my own? It would make things so much easier if I could look back at my life and say ‘Yes. This one moment is the moment that changed everything for me. This is the moment where I became an addict and this is why.’ I can’t do that.”

Louis sighs, clenching the medallion in his fist, the metal warm in his palm.

“What it boils down to is that I’ve never really ever felt good enough. For anyone. Or at anything. I mean there’s only so many times you can hear that you aren’t good enough before you start believing it, yeah? It wasn’t that I was miserable and crippled by self-doubt all the time. Most of the time I felt happy. It was more just...something that built up over time, something I learned to deal with. Something that I got good at hiding. I made up for all my insecurities by always being the loudest person in the room. The person who thrived on being the center of attention. I’ve always been that person. Ask any of my friends. They’ll tell you. I’m loud. With a capital L.

“My best friend Harry once described me as fearless. Someone who dove headfirst into things, completely unafraid, just excited about the adventure. I didn’t see myself that way. I wasn’t fearless. I was actually afraid of everything. Afraid of failing. Afraid of never living up to expectations. Afraid that people would see just how full of shit I was. I just never let it show. I had them all fooled. On the outside it looked like I had everything together. I had tons of friends, I had
a great boyfriend, and I was going to be a doctor. Just like my stepfather wanted me to be. But on the inside...”

Louis trails off with a shrug of his shoulders. He meets Steve’s eyes; Steve gives him a tiny nod and an encouraging smile.

“On the inside,” he starts again. “It’s like I was a ticking time bomb. It was only a matter of time before things fell apart, you know? That started happening just over a year ago. I was falling behind in my classes. I couldn’t keep up, no matter how hard I tried. My stepfather started coming down really hard on me about my grades and I...I just felt hopeless. I felt like I couldn’t do anything right, that I was stupid. I was pulling an all-nighter for a midterm, struggling to stay awake, when a classmate handed me a couple tablets of Adderall. Told me they would help. So I took them. And they did help. I stayed awake all night studying and I managed to get a C+ on that test. Which was the best I had done all semester.

“So I kept taking them. I didn’t think it was a big deal. Adderall was crazy easy to get, once I knew where to find it. It was really common on campus, a lot of my classmates took it. I told myself that it wasn’t like I was doing an illegal drug or something. The pills helped me focus. I started taking them everyday. Then I started depending on them just to get through the day because my focus became shit without them.

“I was relieved when summer came,” Louis admits. “At first anyway. Then I got my grades and I still only scraped by with a C average. Things got pretty ugly with my stepfather. It was like...no matter how I tried to make myself fit into the mold Mark had made for me, I just couldn’t do it. There was always something he would pick at, something that wasn’t good enough. I really started to hate myself, you know? I drank a lot that summer. When I got back to school, my classes were even more intense. And then...the Adderall wasn’t enough anymore. It stopped giving me the same feeling, no matter how many I took. So I had to graduate to speed. Which was like...Adderall on crack. Sorry, I know that’s a shit way to describe it but that’s what it felt like. It made me feel like I could do anything, like I had it all under control. I really thought I did.

“I kept telling myself I was fine. I was in complete denial that I had a problem. Harry...he...he would ask if everything was okay with me and I would just...brush him off. Tell him I was fine. And he believed me because I never lied to him. But I was a good liar. I’d already had so much practice hiding things already. He would still always try to help me out with school though, always asking me to study with him, even though he’s a freaking genius and I just slowed him down. I would lie to my boyfriend about how much I was drinking when we went out. I mean, he knew I partied; we always partied together. So he didn’t think the occasional hit of speed was that big a deal. He just had no idea how much I was taking. I was lying to every single person in my life. But most importantly, I was lying to myself. I still thought I could quit whenever I wanted to. I just...never wanted to. I never wanted to.”

Louis pauses. He runs his fingers over the jagged scar on his left arm, tracing its path. He looks down at the shiny, pink, slightly raised skin; it’s started to fade a little bit, but still stands out in stark contrast to the rest of his arm.

“Last October, after a night of heavy drinking and partying with my boyfriend, I woke up a little before 5 A.M. for a midterm cram session with Harry. I woke up still drunk, so I...I swallowed a handful of pills to get me going. Didn’t even think about how many I was taking or how many I’d already had the night before. I noticed that one of the lightbulbs in my ceiling had gone out and in my blitzed state, I thought I was totally fine to replace it. It was just a fucking lightbulb, I climbed up in my chair to replace them all the time, you know? I remember standing on my tiptoes because that was the only way I could reach. I remember removing the old bulb and starting to screw the
new one in...and I remember my heart racing and the room starting to spin. The next thing I knew, I was waking up in a hospital bed six days later.”

Louis takes a shaky breath as tears start to well in his eyes.

“Harry found me that morning,” he continues, his voice cracking. “I’d passed out and fallen. On the way down, I put my arm through my window, shattering it. I severed an artery.”

He unconsciously traces the line of his scar again as the tears spill over.

“Harry found me unconscious and lying in a pool of my own blood. If he...the doctors, they said that if he’d gotten there a few minutes later, I would have been dead already. If he hadn’t acted quickly and put pressure on my arm...if he hadn’t known how to do CPR...I would’ve died. I, um...I did die in his arms. My heart stopped, I stopped breathing. But the paramedics, they...they got me back. Harry tried to come in the ambulance with me but they wouldn’t let him. Because he wasn’t family. Which is ridiculous because anyone that’s ever met me knows that he’s my...everything.”

Louis swipes his cheeks. He looks towards the edge of the stage, where James has discreetly slid a box of tissues. He smiles at him gratefully as he picks them up, blowing his nose noisily.

“I’ll never know just what that morning was like for Harry...and I’ll carry that knowledge with me for the rest of my life. And the thing is, I know he’s forgiven me for it. He’s told me so. But the truth is, I have only recently begun to forgive myself. That’s the real battle.”

Louis balls up the tissue in his hand and then stuffs it in his pocket.

“You’d have thought that almost dying would have been my rock bottom. It wasn’t. I started using again as soon as I got home from the hospital, even though my parents were sending me to rehab just a few days later. I told myself that I would be careful this time. That I had just made a stupid mistake. Just one or two pills a day wouldn’t hurt me. Not when I had been having as many as six a day. I was high the day I checked into rehab. I was in denial all through detox, even though my body was literally telling me that I had a physical addiction and was going through withdrawal. I thought I could coast through my 28 days without having to lift a finger and then I’d be able to get on with my life.

“My rock bottom was six months ago, when James organized an intervention with my parents, my boyfriend, and Harry. I won’t bore you with the gory details but suffice it to say, it was the worst day of my life. But I’m so grateful for it. It was like...looking in a mirror for the first time and actually seeing how self-destructive I’d become. I realized that not only had I been hurting the people I loved, I was hurting myself. That it wasn’t about getting better just for them. My life was only going to get worse if I kept using. I’d already had one close call, you know? And that’s a hell of a lot more than some people get. So I started putting in the work in my therapy sessions. It was and still is really difficult work. I learned how fucked up my coping mechanisms were and started to learn how to build healthy ones. I took a long and hard look at my life. I ended my relationship because what had once been fun had become toxic and enabling. Slowly, one day at a time, I realized that I have to accept myself for who I am, not who someone else thinks I should be. I’m good enough for me. Just as I am. And that has to be what matters.”

Louis sniffs and then clears his throat.

“Harry isn’t here today,” he says sadly, looking down that the floor. “And that’s...that’s just so fucked up because he should be here. It’s my fault he’s not. We’ve been best friends since we were
five. Instant soulmates, you know? I can’t remember my life without him in it. But we haven’t spoken in almost four months now. A fact that I am painfully aware of every single day. A week after I got out of rehab, he got offered a spot in Boston University’s Early Medical School Selection Program. We had just spent what was the best week I had had in a long time, probably ever, together, and then all of the sudden he was leaving.

“Harry...he wanted me to come with him. He told me that he was in love with me and I...I panicked. I pushed him away. Shoved him is more like it, really. It was just...it was too much for me. Knowing that he was in love with me and wanted to be with me...after everything I’d put him through, he still wanted me. I was such a fucking mess, you know? I didn’t understand how he could want me. I never thought I was good enough for him, that I deserved someone as good as him. So I...I had never let myself go there before.

“I’d just started recovery. I knew I had to focus on myself and getting better. I needed to learn how to live in the real world again. There was no way I was capable of loving someone else right then. Not in the way someone like Harry deserves to be loved. So I broke his heart instead. He moved to Boston and we haven’t spoken since.”

Louis cards his hands through his hair and then sweeps it back to the side again, blowing out a big breath.

“I have a lot of regrets,” he says, looking down at his feet. “A lot of them.”

He forces himself to look back up.

“But I think my biggest regret is letting Harry leave without telling him how much I loved him. How much I was in love with him. Because I was. I was so in love with him.”

He pauses as a tear rolls down his cheek.

“I’ve loved Harry my entire life. I just didn’t realize it until I lost him. I always thought that falling in love would be like...I don’t know...lightning bolts. Song and dance numbers. Butterflies. It wasn’t like that with Harry. Not that he didn’t give me butterflies because Jesus...there would be moments where he would just...take my breath away. I just didn’t realize what that meant.”

Louis feels his face flush as he huffs a laugh.

“With Harry, it’s a million little things that all add up to the fact that he’s the love of my life. He always lets me steal his clothes when I get cold. I have this like...whole collection of gigantic hoodies and sweaters that belong to him. He loves traditions and birthdays. He makes the best chocolate chip cookies in the whole world but he also always tries to get me to eat vegetables. He makes this ridiculous frog face whenever I take Advil on an empty stomach. I know exactly how he takes his coffee. Which is a feat, let me tell you, because he’s the biggest coffee snob on the planet.”

Louis wipes his tears away as a ripple of laughter rolls through the auditorium.

“He has this great big honking laugh – and an even bigger heart. He can calm me down with a single touch. He has this quiet confidence that I admire so much. He’s seen me at my worst and his support has never wavered.”
Louis runs his hand through his hair, ruffling it. He exhales with a smile.

“He makes me strong.” Louis says simply.

“I never thought...I never expected that love would feel like coming home...but that’s what it is. Harry’s home. He’s always been my home. I don’t know if I’ll get a second chance with him. God, I want one so fucking badly. Because the thing is...I’ve learned to live without him. But I’ve also learned that I don’t want to. That’s the difference.

“Listen, I know I’m still a work in progress. I always will be. Recovery is a not a process that just ends. You have to work every single day. But that’s why it’s important to celebrate days like today. So I can see how far I’ve come. I’m not the same person I was six months ago and that’s something to be proud of.”

He smiles softly and holds up the medallion, the blue metal catching on a ray of sunshine. He pulls his out his wallet and carefully slides the medallion inside.

“I just want to say thank you to all the people I’ve had in my corner this whole time. I can’t put the work in without your love and support. I could try...but I doubt I’d get very far. Saying thank you doesn’t even begin to cover it, but I’m gonna say it anyway. Thank you.”

He looks at James and Steve in the front row, nodding at them. He finds Zayn and Liam on the fourth row. They beam back at him. He quickly scans the first few rows for Niall, but can’t spot him. He shoves his wallet back in his pocket, a grin breaking out across his face.

“If you’re new to these meetings and you need someone to talk to, come find me by the donuts and the truly terrible coffee at the next one. Right now though...I gotta go see about a boy. Thank you.”

Louis steps back from the mic, blowing out a big breath and laughing. Everyone starts clapping as James makes his way back up to the stage.

“Thank you for sharing, Louis,” James says, squeezing his shoulder tightly. “Okay, everyone. We’re gonna take a ten-minute break before diving into today’s topic. See you in a bit.”

People start getting up, the hum of conversation rising as they mill about.

“Going to see about a boy, huh?” James says as they walk towards the stairs.

“Yeah,” Louis breathes. “After the meeting is done, of course.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything less from you,” James replies with a grin. “I’m gonna grab some coffee. Want any?”

“No, I’m good, thanks. You should hurry up though. You know they’re vultures with the donuts. If Niall left any that is.”

James trots down the stairs with a laugh. Louis pauses halfway down the steps, taking a moment to scan the room to look for Niall. The crowd shifts and Louis finally catches sight of Niall’s blond hair in the last row. He opens his mouth to shout at him, but shuts it immediately as his heart starts to jackrabbit in his chest.

Because Niall is talking to Harry.

Louis blinks several times, convinced he’s seeing things. He stands rooted in his spot, his mouth going dry.
Harry’s here. Oh my God, Harry’s here.

Almost as if he feels Louis’ eyes on him, Harry turns and their eyes lock as Louis sucks in a sharp breath. Harry’s been crying; his green eyes are bright, his cheeks are wet, and the tip of his nose is pink. His hair falls in loose ringlets that hang barely past the shoulders of his loose purple button-down patterned with white stars.

He’s the most beautiful man Louis has ever seen.

Louis has no idea how long they keep staring, drinking one another in. It could be seconds, it could be hours. Louis feels like all the sound has been sucked from the room; the only thing he can hear is the pounding of his heart.

Harry, Harry, Harry.

Finally, Harry smiles at him bashfully, giving him a tiny little wave in greeting.

“Hey,” he mouths.

Louis bursts into tears. He presses the heels of his hands into his eyes, overwhelmed with happiness and a sheer sense of relief. Scrubbing his hands down his face, he peers at Harry through his fingers. Harry is still staring back at him, a tiny crinkle forming between his eyebrows, unshed tears welling in his eyes. They spill over as he smiles at Louis softly.

The sound comes rushing back in and suddenly Louis remembers how to use his legs. He practically sprints down the rest of the stairs. As soon as Louis moves, Harry does, edging his way past Niall so he can get to the aisle. Louis makes his way through the crowd; people clap him on the back as he passes through, offering him their congratulations and well-wishes. Louis nods, smiles, and utters thank yous, not wanting to be rude, but at the same time, he’s desperate to just get to his boy. He keeps his eyes trained on Harry, watching him bob and weave around people as he makes his way down the aisle.

Right as they are about to meet in the middle, Harry clips the toe of his boot on the corner of a chair. He stumbles forward into Louis, catching himself on his shoulder; Louis’ hand flies to his waist, steadying him.

“Oh, oh!” Harry gasps.

“Hi,” Louis breathes before he surges up, slotting his lips over Harry’s.

Harry responds immediately, crushing Louis to his chest as he wraps his arms around him, kissing him back fervently. Louis winds a hand into Harry’s soft curls, while the other grips his waist tightly, anchoring him.

Everything clicks into place.

Warmth spreads through Louis’ chest as his tongue presses against Harry’s plush lips; Harry opening for him instantly with a soft groan. Everything is a little bit sloppy, imperfect, and maybe too desperate, considering where they are, but Louis doesn’t care; their teeth clack slightly against each other and tears are streaming down both of their faces. Louis can barely breathe through his nose at this point but he doesn’t want to stop kissing Harry because goddammit if this isn’t the greatest kiss of his entire life.

He’s come home.
With one last peck, gentle this time, Louis pulls back. The hand that had been in Harry’s hair slides around to his cheek, his thumb pressing into Harry’s dimple. Harry beams at him, his chest heaving slightly as he catches his breath.

“Hi, yourself,” Harry grins, eyes sparkling with happiness.

Louis presses another soft kiss to Harry’s lips, unable to stop himself from doing so now that he knows he can.

“You’re here,” he whispers, gazing at Harry in awe.

“I am,” Harry nods, a final tear slipping down his cheek.

“How much of that did you hear?” Louis asks, gently thumbing the tear away.

“All of it,” Harry replies. “Every single word, Lou.”

Louis laughs wetly, burying his face into Harry’s neck and breathing him in. He pecks a kiss there, feeling goosebumps prickle on Harry’s skin. Harry’s hand travels up Louis’ spine, resting on the base of his neck and squeezing gently.

“This isn’t fair, Haz,” Louis whines through a smile as he straightens up.

“Oh, yeah?” Harry asks, gently sweeping the hair out of Louis’ eyes. “Why not?”

“Cause I was gonna say something much better when I showed up at your door in Boston. I had this whole plan that involved breakfast sandwiches and coffee. You totally just stole my thunder.”

Harry honks a laugh, pulling Louis close and kissing his forehead.

“Sorry, baby. You’re gonna have to ditch that set of notecards too.”

“Don’t be silly, Hazza,” Louis scoffs. “You deserve more than notecards. You had a whole PowerPoint presentation.”

Harry giggles, pecking his lips. Louis sighs contently, squeezing him tightly before leaning back so he can look him in the eye. He tucks a curl behind Harry’s ear.

“Your hair’s getting so long,” Louis marvels.

“You like it?” Harry asks quietly.

“I love it,” Louis affirms. “And I love you. I love you so, so much.”

Harry’s smile is blinding.

“I love you too,” Harry replies, framing Louis’ face in his hands. “So, so much.”

He kisses Louis softly. Slowly. Perfectly.

“Wait a minute,” Louis says suddenly, breaking the kiss. “How did you...how did you even get here? How did you even know this was happening?”

“Well,” Harry grins, bopping him on the nose. “A puppy and a leprechaun showed up on my doorstep last night, insisting there was somewhere I needed to be today.”
Louis whips his head around, spotting Liam, Niall, and Zayn grouped together not far from them, trying— and failing—to not make it obvious that they are watching.

“Are you serious?”

Harry nods.

“We drove all night. Slept at Liam’s for a few hours. Got up and showered and then went to get breakfast before coming here. Apparently it was all a very elaborate plan.”

Louis glances back at his friends and then back at Harry. He smacks a kiss to Harry’s cheek.

“Come with me,” he says, lacing his fingers through Harry’s.

He sprints towards his three best friends, dragging Harry along behind him. Dropping Harry’s hand, Louis leaps on Niall’s back, hugging him tightly.

“Visiting your gran in Richmond, my ass,” Louis exclaims. “Does she know that her grandson is a filthy liar?”

Niall cackles as Louis slides down to his feet.

“She’ll understand,” he says, embracing Louis tightly. “Did we do good, Bender?”

“So good,” Louis replies, glancing at Harry over Niall’s shoulder. “I just…I can’t even…how did you…thank you. Thank you so much.”

“As much as I’d love to take all the credit for this grand gesture,” Niall says with a smile. “And believe me, I wish I could. I mean all the theatrics were my idea, obviously. But the whole thing…it was Liam’s idea. I just went along for the ride. Literally.”

Louis looks over at Liam, who shrugs slightly, his cheeks pink.

“You said you wanted all the most important people here,” Liam says simply. “And I knew that you hadn’t called him, so…”

Louis throws his arms around Liam, squeezing tight.

“Did you have any idea that I would say—”

“I thought you might,” Liam confirms. “Either way, we all decided that it was important for Harry to be here.”


Liam laughs.

“Just take care of each other, yeah?”

Louis meets Harry’s eyes. Harry smiles at him fondly.

“That’s my plan.”

“Excuse me, where’s my hug?” Zayn pipes up. “I’m the one who had to stay here and distract you for the past two days.”
“You,” Louis accuses teasingly, pointing his finger as he walks toward him. “You knew the whole time. You listened to me going on and on in the car about how I was going to Boston after this and you didn’t give anything away. How could you not tell me?”


“I can’t believe you,” Louis says as he hugs Zayn and smacks a kiss on his temple. “You’re the one who should be accepting an Oscar today, honestly.”

Louis takes a step back and looks around their small circle, a rush of affection for his friends, his family, swelling in his chest. Harry’s hands sneak around his waist and he pulls Louis back against his chest. Louis relaxes into him instantly, eyes closing as Harry presses gentle kisses against his temple. Louis hums contently, threading his fingers through Harry’s.

“Oh God, what have we done,” Niall moans dramatically. “They were disgusting before, what’s it going to be like now?”

Louis cracks one eye open, arching his eyebrow.

“Shut the fuck up, Neil. Let us enjoy this. We’ve earned this.”

“Yeah,” Harry affirms, pressing another kiss to Louis’ temple. “We’ve earned this.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

“Nay, you may proceed, minstrel. Bring forth the tale of dicks.” (FINALLY, I KNOW.)

Shout out to Maggie, who yelled at me about NOT having smut in my original outline ("Think how mad YOU get when it doesn't happen!!") and who convinced me that I would be able to write it.

When the meeting wraps up a little after 3:00, the five of them go to Louis’ favorite diner to celebrate with a late lunch. (“A very late lunch,” Niall huffs. “I’m fucking starving.”) They squeeze into a round booth in the far corner, Harry pressed in tightly next to Louis. As they eat, Louis and Harry pick off each other’s plates, Harry helping himself to a quarter of Louis’ grilled cheese, while Louis snags one of his chicken fingers. Niall snorts in amusement as Louis dips one of Harry’s curly fries in a small bowl of ranch.

“Are they always like this?” he asks, turning to Liam.

“Yes,” Liam deadpans as he takes a bite of his burger.

“Sharing is caring, Neil,” Louis says primly, pushing his plate towards Harry as he plucks a tater tot from it.

“Excuse me, Bender,” Niall says, affronted. “I vividly remember you trying to stab me with your chopsticks last week when I tried to eat the last fried dumpling.”

“I recall nothing of the sort, how dare you slander me this way,” Louis gasps.

Harry guffaws as he takes another sip of his Mountain Dew. Louis winks at him, resting a hand on his thigh and squeezing it gently. Harry beams at him, his dimple carving a deep crater in his cheek.


“If we’re as disgusting as you keep pointing out,” Harry says, pointing a chicken finger in Niall’s direction, “why did you even organize Operation Taken in the first place?”

“Oh, Haz, don’t,” Liam groans. “He’s gonna–”

“I don’t have money,” Niall growls, deepening his voice and adding a pretty terrible imitation of an Irish brogue. “But what I do have are a very particular set of skills, skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a nightmare for people like you–”

“What are you even talking about?” Louis laughs, his thumb tracing circles on Harry’s thigh. “Taken? How does that even apply here? I mean, I get that Harry was being kidnapped but still. You’re losing your touch, Niall.”

“You take that back! It does apply,” Niall insists, dropping back into his regular voice. “I have
“Skills!”

“Oh yeah? What are these special skills then?”

“Helping my friend win back the love of his life, thank you very much,” Niall says smugly.

Harry slides his hand under Louis’, lacing their fingers together. Louis looks up at him through his eyelashes and Harry smiles back softly before pressing a kiss to his temple.

“Yeah, okay Niall,” Louis sighs happily. “I’ll give you that.”

“Thank you,” Niall says triumphantly before taking the last bite of his bacon cheeseburger.

The waitress drops off their tab a few minutes later and all five of them go for their wallets.

“Put your money away boys,” Zayn says, gesturing at Louis and Harry as he pulls some bills out of his wallet. “We’ve got this.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Zee,” Louis protests. “You don’t have to pay for us.”

“Seriously,” Harry echoes, opening his wallet. “You don’t–”

“Guys,” Liam says as he tosses a couple of bills on the table. “Both of your meals combined were like less than twenty bucks. It’s a big day. Let us get this.”

Harry and Louis look at each other, shrugging as they share a private smile.

“Thanks, guys,” Harry says softly, popping a peppermint in his mouth. “We’ll get you next time.”

“It’s all part of Operation Lobster,” Niall says proudly as he adds his bills to the small pile and stacks them neatly.

“What happened to Operation Taken?” Louis asks, his eyebrows raised.

“That was just getting Harry in the car,” Niall smirks. “It was a very complex mission, Louis. It required multiple names. Don’t question my genius.”

“You’re an idiot,” Louis says, slinging his arm over Niall’s shoulder as they shuffle towards the exit.

“And Harry’s your lobster.”

Louis sneaks a peak over his shoulder at Harry, who’s walking in between Liam and Zayn.

“Ah, you got me there, Neil,” Louis says. ‘I can’t believe he’s actually here,” he adds quietly. “I’ll never be able to thank you guys enough...even if you ruined my grand gesture.”

Niall tickles his ribs before pushing the door open.

“You’ll never let us live that down, will you?”

“Nope,” Louis says, holding the door open for the others. “Never.”

“Oh, so Niall and Zayn with me?” Liam says once they are all outside. He presses his key fob to unlock his SUV and Harry pops the back door, pulling out a small duffle bag. He moves around to the passenger side of Louis’ car, looking back at him expectantly. Louis’ stomach flips.
“Oh, are you coming with me, Styles?” Louis asks innocently.

“I mean, I can go with Liam,” Harry replies teasingly, looking at him with amusement. “He does have room. If that’s what you want. Pretty sure he has a date with Sophia later, I’d have his whole apartment to myself—”

Louis unlocks the car.

“No, no,” Louis clips decisively, his eyes focused on Harry’s. “That won’t be necessary.”

“All right then,” Harry grins, tossing his bag in the backseat next to Louis’ suitcase.

“Are you two quite finished?” Niall asks. “Zayn and I have a movie night to get to and I’d like my goodbye hugs.”

Louis and Harry hug them all goodbye, Louis squeezing his friends extra tight, and then they all pile into their respective cars. Liam taps the horn twice before he pulls out of the parking lot. Louis turns and looks at Harry, who is already smiling back at him, and hands him his iPod.

“You pick?”

Harry’s smile broadens as he takes the iPod that he’d given Louis for his birthday.

“You use this?”

“Course I do, Haz. I love it,” Louis replies as he turns pulls out of the parking lot. “Took me ages to listen to everything.”

“I’m glad,” Harry says, as he scrolls through the myriad of playlists and selects one.

The soft strains of “Here Comes the Sun” start playing from the speakers. Harry sighs contently, tapping out the rhythm of the song on his thigh.

“I learned how to play this on guitar,” Harry says after a few moments.

“Yeah?”

“My friend Ed is studying guitar at Berklee,” Harry explains. “He’s giving me guitar lessons. This was the first song he taught me. It’s pretty simple. Repetitive, you know?”

“You always did want to learn how to play.”

“M’not that good yet,” Harry admits.

“I highly doubt that, Haz. You’re good at everything.”

“M’not!” Harry protests with a laugh. “I can only play one song! And not even that well!”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Louis says definitively. “You’ll play for me, yeah?”

“Of course,” Harry says, leaning back against the headrest, a tiny smile on his face.

Louis stops at a light. He reaches over and tucks a curl behind Harry’s ear, caressing his cheek tenderly. Harry leans into his touch like a cat, closing his eyes and pressing a kiss to Louis’ palm. He yawns softly.
“Tired?” Louis murmurs, his thumb tracing Harry’s cheekbone.

“Mmm,...a little,” Harry hums, resting his hand on Louis’ thigh. “M’fine though. Caffeine will kick in soon.”

The light turns green as “Here Comes the Sun” gives way to “Your Song.” Harry twists in his seat so he can look at Louis better, his hand a warm weight on Louis’ thigh. They smile at each other goofily, Harry quietly singing along with Elton. Louis bites his lip and laces their fingers together, sighing happily.

They drive in comfortable silence, holding hands, occasionally singing along to the music. Fifteen minutes later, Louis releases Harry’s hand as he pulls into his usual parking spot and shuts off the ignition. He turns to look at Harry, smiling fondly when he sees that his eyes have slid shut and his mouth is hanging open ever so slightly.

“Hazza,” Louis says, gently stroking his finger down the slope of Harry’s nose. “Baby, we’re here. Wake up.”

Harry blinks his eyes open and smiles softly at Louis.

“Sorry,” he says sheepishly, stretching languidly.

“It’s okay,” Louis chuckles. “It’s been a bit of a day.”

“Like you calling me baby,” Harry says, his cheeks pinkening. “S’nice.”

“I’ll just have to keep doing it then,” Louis says simply. “Baby.”

Harry grins at him, his dimples carving deep craters in his cheeks.

They get out of the car, grabbing their bags from their respective sides and walk towards Louis’ building hand in hand, only letting go when Louis has to punch in the access code to let them in. Harry takes Louis’ suitcase as he pushes the door open.

“Such a gentleman,” he grins.

Harry gives him a little bow and laughs.

“I aim to please.”

When they reach the stairs, Louis starts up first, with Harry hanging back behind him. He pauses, looking back at him over his shoulder, frowning slightly.

“You coming?”

“Yeah,” Harry replies with a smirk, his eyebrows waggling a little as his eyes rake over him. “Just...enjoying the view.”

Louis flushes, his cheeks suddenly hot. He blows out a big breath and rolls his eyes, even as his stomach starts to flutter nervously.

“You’re awful,” he says affectionately as he starts back up the stairs, putting an extra wiggle in his step for Harry’s benefit.

Harry snickers behind him, following him up the steps. Louis feels his eyes on him, his gaze hot, and the nerves kick into high gear. They link hands again once they reach Louis’ floor, Louis
fishing his keys out of his pocket with one hand. Harry squeezes his hand, smiling at him softly, letting go as Louis fiddles with his keys. He unlocks the door and pushes it open, flicking on the lights.

“Sorry the apartment’s a mess,” Louis apologizes as they shuffle inside. “Clearly, I wasn’t expecting company. I mean I wasn’t even expecting to be here tonight. I was up late last night after Zayn left working on my speech and then I was packing–”

“Lou, you don’t need to apologize,” Harry says as places his duffle in the armchair and starts to pull off his boots. “Besides, it wouldn’t be your place if it wasn’t a little messy. Feels like home.”

Louis’ heart skips a beat when Harry says home.

“Still though,” Louis says, carding a hand through his hair as he surveys the living room. He steps out of his Vans, kicking them against the wall and depositing his phone and wallet on the end table. “I wish it wasn’t messy.” He swallows hard, suddenly nervous. He wrings his hands. “You want anything to drink? I can make a pot of coffee if you’re still sleepy?”

“I’m good, thanks,” Harry replies with a smile, lining his boots up with Louis’ discarded shoes.

“You sure? I’ve got soda, too. Dr. Pepper or Coke? Oh, and there’s this truly disgusting orange soda that I only keep on hand ’cause Niall loves it. Water?”

Harry comes around to face Louis, resting his hands on his shoulders, stilling him. Louis gulps, looking up at him. Harry gently takes Louis’ face in his hands, pressing a soft kiss to his lips.

“Lou,” he whispers, resting their foreheads together and sliding his hands back down to Louis’ shoulders.

“Sorry,” Louis sighs, wrapping his arms around Harry’s waist and resting his chin on his shoulder.

“For what?” Harry asks, scratching the base of his neck comfortingly.

“I just... got nervous all of the sudden. I don’t know why. I’m sorry.”

“It’s just me, Lou.”

Louis pulls back, looking Harry in the eye and arching an eyebrow.

“I don’t think you’ve ever been just ‘you,’ Haz. Not to me.”

Harry smiles and pecks Louis’ lips again.

“Wanna sit? And talk?”

“Yeah,” Louis breathes. “We have a lot to talk about, don’t we?”

Harry nods, his hand on the small of Louis’ back as he leads them to the couch. They sit close, angled towards each other. Louis picks at a loose thread dangling from the hole in the knee of Harry’s jeans.

“I tried to call you,” Louis admits, pulling the thread out.

“You did?” Harry asks quietly, tensing slightly. “When?”

Louis takes a deep breath and looks up at Harry, who has a pained expression on his face. Louis
reaches out and smooths the furrow between his eyes.

“Your birthday.”

“Shit,” Harry says, raking a hand through his curls. “Fuck.”

“Yeah, that was pretty much my reaction too,” Louis huffs, smiling slightly. “When I realized you changed your number.”

“Louis, I’m so sorry,” Harry says fervently, tears in his eyes. “Fuck. I didn’t know what I was doing. I wasn’t in a good place. I mean...it was right after...everything. And I was hurting and angry and just...so sad. My parents bought me a new phone and it...it was such an impulse decision. One I regretted right away, I–”

“Don’t,” Louis says lovingly, gently swiping a tear from the corner of Harry’s eye. “You don’t have to justify how you needed to deal with things, Hazza.”

“I just needed a fresh start,” Harry admits, wiping his eyes. “At the time, I told myself it was about putting roots down in Boston. Which it was. But also just...”

“I know, baby,” Louis says, squeezing his hand tightly. “I know.”

“But still, I...fuck. You know, in the back of my mind, I always wondered if you’d ever tried to call? And you did. Fuck.” He digs in his back pocket for his phone, unlocking it. “I’ll text you my new number right now, okay? I never deleted your contact. I never could.”

Louis wipes more tears from Harry’s cheek, gently taking the phone from his hands. He places it on the coffee table.

“I got your number from Liam,” he says. “Just this week actually. And then I...I didn’t think I could just call, you know?”

Harry nods, sniffling as he squeezes Louis’ hand.

“I’m not gonna say it didn’t hurt,” Louis continues. “Because it did. But I also think it was good? That I didn’t talk to you back then? I...God, it was your birthday and I’d never missed it before...but at the same time, it wouldn’t have been fair to talk to you. Not when my head was still a mess. But I just...I missed you so much, Haz.”

“I missed you, too. So much.”

“I had myself a good wallow that day,” Louis admits. “I went full on social media stalker. At first it was just to see whether or not you had blocked me everywhere, but then it was like...I had to see everything, you know? And then I saw your post with the pancakes–”

“Oh, God,” Harry groans, burying his face in his hands.

“Yeah.”

“Does it help knowing that I didn’t even eat them?” Harry asks through his fingers.

“Haz,” Louis says softly, gently pulling Harry’s hands away from his face.

“I just...I was trying so hard,” Harry says, looking up at him, his eyes bright. “To be normal. To prove to myself that I was okay. And pancakes on my birthday...it was tradition.”
“You love traditions. I love that about you.”

Harry smiles at him, his eyes watery.

“It was so dumb though,” Harry says. “Because it was our tradition, Lou. The whole time I was waiting for my food, I kept telling myself it was fine. That I didn’t need you. As soon as the waitress put the plate in front of me, I lost my appetite. It was just all wrong. I...I just started crying. I felt horrible. I did tip her really well at least. Left her a twenty for like an eight-dollar tab.”

“Of course you did,” Louis says soothingly, tucking his hair behind his ear.

“I don’t even know why I posted that picture on Instagram,” Harry continues. “Like I said, I think it was just me trying to prove to myself that I was okay. Even though I wasn’t.”

“I’m so sorry, love.”

“I just had to eventually...put you in a box,” Harry confesses quietly. “It was the only way I could...not move on, ’cause clearly I didn’t. I never stopped loving you...but I guess compartmentalizing was the only way I could start a life there. Make friends. Feel good again. And I did. It had always been you and me, you know? And these past few months, I learned how to stand on my own two feet. I really love Boston. Well...I loved Boston once it stopped snowing. And my friends are really great, Lou. I can’t wait for you to meet them.”

“Me either,” Louis says genuinely. “They looked really nice whenever I saw them on your Instagram. Even though I would go a little crazy every time you posted that one guy, Ed, I’m guessing? The one with the guitar?”

“He’s really nice, Lou.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sure he is. But he just kept popping up in your feed more and more often and...fuck. Yeah, I was jealous. Crazy jealous.”

“You spied on my Instagram?”

“Yeah, fuck, of course I did,” Louis admits, scrubbing his hand down his face. “All the time. I would tell myself it would only be whenever I saw you in my main feed, but no, I looked all the time. Twitter, Facebook, even though I know you never use it. All of it.”

“God, it got pretty embarrassing, didn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t say that–”

“Oh, I would,” Harry laughs ruefully, his cheeks turning pink. “I would get all emo online ’cause there were just...times I needed a place to get it all out,” Harry explains. “I unfollowed you on Instagram. I just...I was scrolling through my feed on Valentine’s Day and you had posted a selfie and it was like...a sneak attack of your face. I hit unfollow without even thinking about it. Just like the thing with my number, you know? I muted you everywhere else.”

“I get it. You had to do what you needed to do, Haz.”

Harry nods.

“Those first six weeks without you were just...miserable,” he says quietly after a moment. “I was in a new city and I was so lonely. I asked Liam about you all the time. And then I finally asked if you
had ever asked about me...and he said no.”

“I didn’t,” Louis admits. “I didn’t ask.”

“Because of my birthday right?”

Louis nods. Harry blows out a big breath, nodding as well.

“Makes sense.”

“Liam and I had this massive fight the day you left,” Louis adds. “Things were really weird with us for a good while. I didn’t...I didn’t think I had the right to ask him. It’s probably why he nearly choked when I finally did ask about you.”

Harry chuckles, kissing Louis’ hand.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” Louis smiles.

“When did you know?”

“That I loved you?” Louis clarifies.

“Yeah,” Harry breathes.

Louis traces patterns on Harry’s knee, gathering his thoughts. Harry waits patiently.

“It’s like I said today. It’s not like there was one thing or moment. I feel like...it’s almost...I was too close to you and couldn’t...I couldn’t see the bigger picture. It all just came together slowly. It’s like that painting, you know? The one in Ferris Bueller? With the dots?”

“Seurat,” Harry says with a smile.

“Yeah, that one. It’s like all I could see before were all the dots. I needed to take a few steps back...so I could see the whole painting.”

“Holy shit,” Harry mutters.

“What?” Louis asks, looking at him curiously.

“That’s just...a lot.”

Louis tangles his fingers with Harry’s.

“Since we’re being honest, a lot of stuff about our relationship started coming out while I was in rehab? After the intervention. That month I didn’t talk to you, remember?”

Harry nods.

“I talked about you a lot that month. In my sessions with James. He pushed me to think about a lot of things. What exactly our relationship was like, my feelings for you. Why you were always the first person I wanted to call whenever anything important happened. He never outright said ‘You’re in love with him, you idiot,’ ’cause that’s not his job. But he did point out how emotionally intimate our relationship was. Is. He told me I needed to figure out my feelings for you...before it all blew up in my face. Surprise...he was right. I hate when that happens.”
Louis blows out a big breath, and looks down at their joined hands.

“Niall and Zayn confronted me about us too. After you visited. And I...I had a panic attack.”

Harry’s grip on his hand tightens.

“Oh, Lou.”

“It was just...it was a lot to take in. I’d never had anyone question our relationship before. Not like that. I was confused. Really confused and really scared. Because it was you. You had always been the most important person to me in the whole world. And like of course I loved you, Harry. That was never the issue. I just didn’t realize...then there was Nick, and things were falling apart there. And after rehab, I had to focus on getting my head straight. I wasn’t ready...for any of it.”

“Then I went and gave you an ultimatum,” Harry says mournfully, his voice rough. “Fuck.”

“And I panicked.”

Harry rakes his free hand through his long hair. He sighs deeply.

“Louis, you have to know that I’m so sorry for everything that happened that night,” Harry says fervently. “I should have been more upfront with you about everything that was happening with Boston. I was just...I was trying to be so careful with you that week ’cause I knew you were in a fragile place and I just...I fucked everything up instead. God, I’m so sorry. Can you forgive me?”

“Forgave you a long time ago, Haz,” Louis says, tucking his hair behind his ear. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. I want you to know that wasn’t what I was intending to do when I came over that night. Please know that.”

“I know.”

“I never, ever imagined that would be the way I told you how I felt about you. I wanted to like...properly woo you. Like how you deserved to be wooed. Not force you to make a choice right then and there and make it an all or nothing situation. But I was leaving and it felt immediate and–”

“And Nick had told you that I was in love with you.”

Harry’s eyes widen.

“How did you–”

“I ran into him last month,” Louis explains. “He, um...he was pretty shocked we weren’t together. He told me what he said to you and just...suddenly everything about that night made sense.”

“Yeah, that fucked with my head,” Harry admits. “And after the week we’d had...I was so sure that we were heading in that direction, you know?”

“We were,” Louis confirms. “I would have gotten there eventually, Haz. I did get there, clearly. I just wasn’t ready then.”

“Everything just happened so fast. It spiraled out of my control and I couldn’t stop it and I just started saying all this shit that I literally couldn’t believe I was saying, Lou. Jesus. I mean, there was truth there. I did want you to come with me. But I wanted us to talk about it and figure it out together and instead I dumped it all on you. And then you said no and that was like all I heard–”
“Hey,” Louis says firmly, squeezing his hand. “Stop beating yourself up. You’re not the only one who fucked up here, you know. I didn’t tell you what I was feeling, Harry. I could have asked for time, I could have told you where my head was but I didn’t. I completely shut down on you. It was like ‘no’ was the only thing I could say, but I couldn’t say why I was saying it. It’s like my brain couldn’t process the words, you know?”

“I just feel like I abandoned you when you needed me the most, Lou,” Harry says ruefully.

“You didn’t abandon me, Haz,” Louis says gently. “I told you to go. You needed to go to Boston. It’s your dream. I was so scared of getting in your way, you know? I would never want that. And like...what you said before? About learning how to stand on your own two feet? I needed that too. I needed to be by myself. Because the thing is, I was leaning on you too much. I was depending on you for everything. If we had started a relationship back then, it wouldn’t have been healthy. For either of us. It would have ended badly and it would have been awful, Harry. Like worse than these past few months have been. We weren’t ready.”

“But we’re ready now,” Harry says, his eyes hopeful as his face breaks into a smile. “Right?”

“Yeah,” Louis grins back at him. He leans in and gently kisses Harry’s lips. “We are.” He kisses him again. “What do you say, Haz,” Louis says breathily, mouthing along Harry’s jaw. Harry sighs, whining a little in the back of his throat and rolling his head to the side to allow Louis more access. “I love you,” Louis murmurs between kisses. “Be my boyfriend?”

He presses a final kiss on the curve of Harry’s jaw, giving it a little nip before sitting back to look at him. Harry’s eyes flutter open as he puffs out a breath. He beams at Louis as he cups his cheek with his massive hand.

“I love you too,” he whispers, kissing the tip of Louis’ nose. “There is nothing I want more,” Harry continues, pecking Louis’ lips, “than to be your boyfriend.”

Louis giggles. He can’t help it. Harry pulls him into his side, wrapping his arms around him as Louis nuzzles his neck, resting his hand on Harry’s tummy.


“Proper boyfriends,” Harry echoes, kissing the top of his head. “Can we promise each other something, boyfriend?”

“Anything, boyfriend,” Louis replies as he laces his fingers through Harry’s.

“Promise me that we’ll always talk to each other,” Harry murmurs into Louis’ hair. “No matter what.”

“Always. No matter how scared or overwhelmed or angry we get,” Louis says firmly. “I want us to always be honest.”

“As honest as we’re being right now.”

“I don’t ever want to lose you, Haz,” Louis says, squeezing his middle.

“I don’t want to lose you either, Lou,” Harry affirms. “Never again.”

“You won’t,” Louis promises, nuzzling his chest. “No backing out now. You’re stuck with me, Styles.”
“Nowhere else I’d rather be,” Harry laughs, scratching his scalp.

They sit in comfortable silence, Harry stroking Louis’ hair while Louis gently traces circles on his stomach.

“How long can you stay?” Louis asks after a few moments.

“You know, I really didn’t think much past just getting in the car last night,” Harry says, petting Louis’ hair. “God, Lou, when Niall and Liam showed up at my place...I thought something had happened to you.”

“M’sorry they scared you,” Louis murmurs, pressing a kiss over Harry’s heart.

“Yeah, it was like...my heart stopped as soon as I saw them. And I...fuck...I thought that was it, you know? I was right back there in that emergency room.”

“Baby,” Louis whispers, squeezing him tightly around his middle. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“Liam jumped in quickly, ’cause he saw me go all pale. I mean, he was there that day, you know? Once he explained that you were okay, that everything was okay, but that you needed me, that’s all I needed to hear. I didn’t even question it. I don’t even really know what I packed. I just threw shit in my bag, so I’m probably gonna have to borrow some stuff.”

“You can have anything you want, Haz,” Louis says, kissing his chest. “Anything. Make yourself at home.”

Harry holds Louis tight to him and they breathe together.

“I can skip class on Monday,” Harry says after a moment. “It’ll just be review sessions for finals and Jade can give me her notes. I have to be back on Tuesday though ’cause we have lab and I don’t want to leave her alone for that. Bad lab partner form, you know?”

Louis sits up, frowning at Harry.

“No,” he says definitively. “You’re not skipping class, Harry. Not right before finals. We’ll drive to Boston tomorrow morning.”

“Oh we will, will we?”

“Well, I am already packed,” Louis says archly, pressing his thumb into Harry’s dimple. “And you need a ride.”

“I could always take the bus,” Harry teases.

Louis scoffs, poking him in the ribs repeatedly. Harry yelps, grabbing his hand and stilling him.

“I’m joking, I’m joking!” he laughs. “I would love to take a road trip with you.”

“I don’t have to be at work again till Friday,” Louis says seriously, placing his hand on Harry’s chest. “So I could stay through Thursday morning. If that’s okay with you?”

Harry’s grin is blinding.

“More than okay with me.”

“I won’t be in your way? Or be a distraction?”
“Not at all.”

“Good,” Louis says, tucking himself back into Harry’s side.

“What are your plans for the summer?” Harry asks, kissing the top of his head and winding their hands together. “Are you staying here? Or are you heading home to Philly?”

“I’ll be working at the coffeehouse,” Louis replies. “And I’m taking a class at the community college.”

“You are?” Harry asks with surprise.

“I am. I think I figured out what I want to do with my life, Haz,” Louis says, sitting back on his knees.

“Oh, yeah?”

“I want to major in psychology. I’m thinking a lot about addiction counseling?”

Harry’s face softens.

“Oh, Lou,” Harry says, his eyes shining. “That’s amazing. You’d be so good at that.”

“I think so too,” Louis says a little bashfully. “I think I just want to help people like me, you know?”

“James must be proud.”

“He jokes that I’m Single White Female-ing him,” Louis says with a grin.

Harry laughs.

“I’ve been talking with the Admin office at UVA,” Louis continues. “About like, seeing what credits I have that can transfer so I don’t have to like...completely start over, you know? ’Cause I don’t…I don’t want to go back there, yeah? It wouldn’t be good for me.”

Harry nods.

“So yeah, I’m taking an Intro to Psychology class at the community college over the summer. I’ve like missed the deadline to get in anywhere with a bachelor’s program for fall semester, but I’m gonna take a couple more core classes here and aim for transferring in the winter.”


“Yes,” Harry confirms. “Starts the first week of June.”

“That’s when my class starts.”

“I was gonna go home after finals, since I have two weeks off,” Harry says. “But I could come here instead?”

“I think you should still go home,” Louis states. “I don’t want you like, changing all your plans for me, okay? So go home for a few days first. See your parents. And then come stay with me for the
Harry nods and then looks at him, his brow furrowing. Louis reaches out and smooths the crinkle away.

“Why are you frowning, baby?”

“This is gonna be hard, Lou. With you in Charlottesville and me in Boston. It’s like...hitting me all of a sudden that there’s a ten-hour drive between us. And there aren’t any direct flights to Boston from here. I remember because I checked when the move came up in the first place.”

“We’ll make it work,” Louis says simply. “Yeah, it’s gonna be hard. But it’ll be worth it. We can like...trade off weekends or we can meet in the middle or something. We’ll figure it out. We should make like a two-week rule? And in between, we’ll facetime, we’ll skype. Look, I already know you’re good at phone sex so…”

“Oh my God, Louis,” Harry sputters, turning bright red. “That was a game.”

“Yeah, and you won every single time, Harry.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Harry says cheekily.

Louis squeezes his hand tightly and rests his forehead against Harry’s, kissing him delicately.

“We’ll figure this out, Haz. I promise. No getting rid of me, remember?”

“How could I forget,” Harry sighs, capturing Louis’ lips again. “We’re boyfriends now.”

“But,” Louis grins, kissing Harry quickly. “I may have a solution to the whole long distance thing.”

“What?” Harry snickers. “Do you have a private jet I don’t know about or something?”

Louis ruffles Harry’s curls as he reaches across him and grabs his phone from the end table. He winks at Harry as he unlocks the phone and opens up the internet browser, typing in the now familiar address. The page loads and he hands the phone to Harry, biting his lip. Harry chews his own lip as he studies the page, his tongue peeking out the corner of his mouth.

“Wheelock College?” he asks, looking over at Louis.

“Wheelock specializes in social work and psychology.” Louis explains. “I’m looking at other schools obviously, because it would be dumb not to, but this is the one I’m most excited about. It feels like it could be a good fit, you know? It’s small. Focused. I won’t like...get lost in the shuffle. James’ best friend from grad school is actually on a tenure track there, he said he would help with my application–”

“Louis,” Harry breathes, his eyes wide. “Louis, Wheelock is in Boston.”

“Yeah,” Louis says shyly. “Yeah, Haz, it is.”

“Holy shit,” Harry squeals, dropping the phone to the couch and hauling Louis into his lap. Louis laughs, straddling Harry’s thighs and resting his arms on his shoulders. “You want to come to Boston? Really?”

“Yes, really,” Louis confirms. “Is that...is it okay that I’ve been looking into this?” Louis asks seriously, even as a massive grin breaks out on his face. He cards his fingers through Harry’s ringlets, studying Harry’s face. “Cause yeah, Boston is a big selling point, obviously, ’cause
you’re there, but also it’s come up first in all my research and I was hoping I could visit while I’m there this week if you want—"

Harry surges forward, connecting their lips, his hands resting on the dip of Louis’ waist. His kiss has none of the gentleness that any of his previous kisses have had; instead it’s immediately hungry and filled with intent, his tongue pressing against Louis’ lips right away, demanding entrance. Louis melts into him, his mouth opening as he meets Harry’s kiss with equal fervor. Electricity shoots down Louis’ spine as Harry licks into his mouth, their tongues colliding and dancing together. Harry groans as Louis nibbles on his bottom lip before suddenly breaking the kiss, sitting back on Harry’s knees.

“Hold your horses, Curly,’’ he laughs breathlessly. “I may not even get in! My pre-med grades are terrible, you know.”

“But you’ll write an amazing essay, Lou,” Harry says excitedly, squeezing Louis’ waist. “I know you will. James will write you a recommendation letter. Fuck, I’ll write you one too.”

“What will it say?” Louis laughs. “Dear Admissions Committee, please accept my boyfriend, ’cause I miss him so much and he promises to work really hard and be a model student?”

“Shut the fuck up, you know what I mean. You’re gonna get in. I believe in you. You can do anything.”

Louis leans forward, kissing him softly. His heart feels so fucking full.

“You’re gonna come to Boston, baby,” Harry whispers against his lips.

“In January,” Louis whispers, kissing him again. He gasps as Harry’s hand creeps under the hem of his t-shirt.

“God,” Harry breathes, gently stroking the bare skin on the small of his back. “It’s so cold in January. You’re gonna fucking hate it.”

“I can’t wait,” Louis says, rubbing his nose against Harry’s and then kissing down the column of his neck, biting where it joins with his shoulder. “You can keep me warm.”

Harry cups Louis’ face with his hands, pulling him back up to claim his mouth in a bruising kiss. Louis moans softly, winding his hand into Harry’s silky curls, gently tugging his head to the side to deepen the kiss even more. Harry goes easily, ceding full control to Louis with a slight whimper as Louis thrusts his tongue against his insistently. Harry's lips are warm and soft against his and he still slightly tastes of the peppermint he had at the diner. Harry's hands slide down his back, his touch hot through the thin fabric of his t-shirt. Louis breathes him in, the combination of citrus and rosewood and just Harry making him a little dizzy. His cock is starting to throb in his jeans as it hardens; he instinctively rolls his hips down against Harry’s, seeking friction. They both gasp at the contact.

“Haz,” Louis breathes, resting his forehead against Harry’s. He swallows hard, deliberately rolling his hips again, feeling Harry’s cock twitch beneath him. “Baby.”

“Fuck,” Harry groans, gripping Louis’ ass firmly, pulling him flush against his growing erection, their chests pressing together. Louis hums in approval, tossing his head back and baring his neck as Harry sucks kisses down his throat. Goosebumps prickle on his skin as Harry mouths along his collarbone, alternately biting and soothing the sting with his tongue. Louis feels hot all over, his cock straining in his jeans as he rocks against Harry’s hips. He tugs Harry’s curls, bringing his
mouth back to his and kissing him feverishly, his tongue moving in time with his hips. Harry’s big hands squeeze his ass as he guides his movements.

*Harry, Harry, Harry.*

“Lou,” Harry gasps as Louis grinds into him. Louis pulls back to look at him, Harry’s bright green eyes already glazed over with lust, his pupils blown and his chest heaving. “God,” he sighs, pressing another feverish kiss to Louis’ mouth as his hands move back under his shirt, his fingers running along the waist of Louis’ jeans, dipping under the denim ever so slightly. “Is this...shit,” he grits out as Louis moves to suck a bruise where his neck meets his shoulder. “Is this okay?”

“More than okay,” Louis murmurs against his skin, shoving Harry’s open collar aside so he can get better access to his collarbone. Harry’s hips thrust up into him as Louis bites down gently. Harry’s hands are suddenly everywhere, as if he can’t decide where to put them; they roam from his ass to his back to his arms to his hair and then back to his ass.

“We,” Harry pants as Louis works his way back up Harry’s throat. Harry swallows hard as Louis nips at his Adam’s apple. “We probably have a lot more to talk about.”

“We have time,” Louis hums, kissing the underside of Harry’s jaw. “We have all the time in the world.”

Their mouths meet again, their kisses growing increasingly desperate as they rut against each other.

“Are you sure?” Harry whispers, pressing a kiss under his ear and then sucking his earlobe between his teeth.

Louis shivers and then takes Harry’s face in his hands, looking deep into his eyes. He smiles softly as he takes in Harry’s flushed cheeks and swollen spit-slick lips. He tucks Harry’s unruly curls behind his ears, leaning in and kissing him tenderly. His tongue slowly slides against Harry’s as he thumbs gently over his cheekbones.

“Harry,” Louis breathes, shaking slightly as he sucks on Harry’s bottom lip. “I’m sure.” He rests their foreheads together as one hand slides down to Harry’s neck, feeling his pulse fluttering there. “Baby. Baby, I want you so much.”

Harry shudders as a grin breaks out across his face. Louis kisses his dimple, his tongue flicking into it.

He wants to devour him.

“I want you too,” Harry murmurs, hands kneading the curve of Louis’ ass. “So much. You have no idea.”

Louis huffs a laugh as he connects their mouths again, kissing him filthily. He palms the bulge in his own jeans, relieving some of the pressure there as his other hand slides down to Harry’s shirt, popping one button open, then a second. He moves to kiss the newly exposed skin.

“So gorgeous, Harry,” he mutters against his pec. “Making me crazy.” He inhales deeply as he presses a kiss there. “God, you smell so good. Always smell so good, baby.”

His hand sneaks inside Harry’s shirt, his fingers finding Harry’s nipple and pinching it slightly.

Harry moans, pushing his erection against Louis.
“You like that?” Louis smirks wickedly.

“Yeah,” Harry pants. “Fuck.”

Louis sucks a love bite under Harry’s jaw as he rolls the bud between his fingers, pinching harder. Harry moans shamelessly.

“Yeah, Haz,” Louis breathes. “Let me hear you.”

“Jesus Christ,” Harry grits out, his eyes squeezing shut. He grabs Louis by the wrists, moving his hands to his shoulders. “Hold on, Lou.”

“Hmm?”

“Hold. On.”

Harry grips under Louis’ ass tight with one hand, the other pushing down on the arm of the couch as he stands, taking Louis with him effortlessly.

“Holy shit, Harry,” Louis gasps as his legs automatically wrap around his middle.

“We’re not having sex on the couch, Louis,” Harry says roughly, hoisting Louis up around his waist. “Not this time anyway.”

“Yeah,” Louis pants, clinging to Harry’s shoulders as he mouths between his collarbones. “Yeah, okay.”

As Harry walks them back to the bedroom, he misjudges where the living room gives way to the hall, bumping Louis back into the wall.

“Oops!”

Louis cackles into Harry’s shoulder, playfully biting it.

“Shit, sorry,” Harry laughs, gripping his thighs. “You okay?

“Yeah,” Louis giggles, scratching the base of Harry’s scalp as he looks at him fondly. “At least you didn’t drop me.”

Harry gazes at him, love written all over his face.

“I love you,” he says softly.

Louis kisses him sweetly.

“I love you too.”

Harry presses him into the wall, kissing him deeply.

“God,” Harry grunts, kissing down Louis’ throat, his tongue dipping into the hollow made by Louis’ collarbone. “This t-shirt is obscene, Lou.” He mouths along the deep scoop of Louis’ shirt before attaching his lips to his other side. “Been wanting to do this all day.”

Louis whines, wiggling his hips against Harry’s. He rucks up Harry’s shirt between them, fumbling for the last few buttons.
“So many buttons,” he grumbles as he manages to get one undone.

Harry snickers into his collarbone.

“Having some trouble there, kitten?”


“Yes, sir,” Harry replies, hitching Louis up around his waist as he lifts him from the wall.

They fall quiet, watching each other as Harry walks them down the short hallway. Harry kicks the door to the bedroom open and walks them over to the bed, depositing Louis gently on the edge. Louis scoots back and Harry crawls over him, holding himself up on all fours, gazng down at Louis with awe. Louis sits up, Harry straddling his thighs as he settles in his lap. He takes Harry in, caressing his cheek, his skin golden in the late afternoon sunlight. He delicately kisses his lips and then pressures gentle kisses all over his face. He pulls back with a sigh, smiling at him.

“What?” Harry asks softly.

“So pretty, Haz,” Louis murmurs, brushing Harry’s hair back. “You’re so pretty.”

He keeps his eyes on Harry’s as he reaches for the last button of his shirt and undoes it. He pushes the fabric down Harry’s shoulders, running his hands over the smooth plane of Harry’s chest; Harry shudders, a small gasp escaping from his lips. Harry pulls his arms free of the sleeves, depositing the shirt on the floor next to his discarded blouse.

“Gorgeous,” Harry mutters, his thumbs brushing over Louis’ nipples. Louis arches into his touch with a sigh. “Can’t believe you’re mine.”

“You’re not the only one who’s good at manhandling,” he mutters, kissing down Harry’s torso as he scoots down his thighs. Harry laughs shakily and Louis grins back up at him, nipping the soft skin just below his belly button. Louis traces his tongue along the dents of his hips as he palms the bulge in his jeans, Harry whimpering softly when he squeezes it.

He pauses at the button of Harry’s jeans, looking up at him through his eyelashes, tacitly asking for permission. Harry bites his lip as he looks down at him, nodding his approval. Louis pops the button open and carefully drags the zipper down, shimming the denim down his thighs and nosing at Harry’s cock through the soft cotton of his black boxer briefs.
“Lou, oh my God,” Harry keens, his fingers carding through Louis’ hair as he sucks at the head of Harry’s cock through the briefs, the cotton already damp with pre-come. Louis pulls back, licking his lips as he peels the briefs down under Harry’s balls, freeing his cock, which slaps wetly against his belly.

“So big,” Louis whispers reverently, gripping the base and twisting his fingers. He presses a kiss to the head, dipping his tongue into the slit. “So pretty.”

He gently sucks the head into his mouth, tongue flicking at the crown. Harry’s hips jerk forward involuntarily as he cries out. Louis stills him with his free hand, pressing his hips into the mattress and arching an eyebrow as he looks up at Harry, swirling his tongue around the head of his cock.

“Fuck,” Harry pants, brushing the hair off Louis’ forehead. “Sorry.”

Louis slides off him, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“So eager, baby,” Louis purrs, running his tongue up and down Harry’s shaft before sucking him down completely. Harry throws his head back and swears loudly.

Louis’ cock throbs painfully in his jeans. He gives himself a squeeze with his free hand, moaning around Harry’s cock. He hollows his cheeks as his lips meet his fist at Harry’s base and he starts to bob up and down, running his tongue along the thick vein on the underside. Pre-come blurs from Harry’s cock, the taste salty and slightly bitter on his tongue.

“Look at you,” Harry murmurs after a few moments, pressing his fingers into Louis’ cheek, feeling himself move back and forth in Louis’ mouth. “So beautiful, Lou. Most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

Louis hums, taking Harry down further, the head of his cock nudging against the back of his throat. He gently tugs Harry’s balls, rolling them in his hand. His jaw is starting to ache; he tightens his lips around him and swallows, Harry’s head slipping into his throat.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Harry chants breathlessly. “Lou, I’m gonna come if you keep doing that.”

Louis pops off him, pressing a gentle kiss to his tip before smirking up at him.

“Can’t have that now, can we?” he rasps.

Harry grabs his face in his hands, kissing him deeply and moaning as he tastes himself on Louis’ tongue. He rolls them over as Louis tugs at Harry’s jeans. He grunts in frustration when the tight denim won’t move any further.


Harry pecks a kiss on his lips before he scampers clumsily off the bed, his hard cock bobbing between his legs. He peels his jeans and underwear down his long legs, hopping back and forth on his feet as he removes them; he tosses them on the floor, along with his socks. He crawls back on the bed, hovering over Louis as he presses a kiss to his belly. He drags his mouth down the fine hair of his treasure trail, pressing soft kisses along the waistband of his jeans.


“Shhhhh, baby,” Harry soothes as he swiftly undoes Louis’ jeans, reaching inside his briefs and grasping his cock as soon as he works the zipper down. “I’ve got you.”
Louis nearly sobs in relief as Harry frees his cock from his briefs, spreading pre-come down his shaft and giving his cock a few solid tugs, his hand expertly twisting on the upstroke.

“So fucking gorgeous,” Harry praises as Louis keens. “Lift up for me, love,” Harry says, tapping his hip.

Louis raises his hips as Harry tugs his jeans and briefs down together over the curve of his ass. Harry sits back on his knees as he pulls one leg free, then the other, tossing the clothes to the pile on the floor.

“Wow,” Harry sighs, his voice reverent as he crawls back over him. Louis’ thighs fall open as Harry settles between them, pressing their naked bodies together completely.

“Hi,” Harry whispers tenderly, gently brushing his thumbs over Louis’ cheekbones as he rocks their erections together.

“Hi,” Louis whispers back, tucking Harry’s long curls behind his ears. He swallows hard, his heart pounding in his chest. A tiny gasp escapes his lips as Harry swivels his hips against him again; the friction delicious against Louis’ cock.

They smile at each other. Harry leans in, connecting their lips. They kiss slowly, completely un hurried, their tongues stroking against each other sensually. As Louis traces his fingers down the curve of Harry’s spine, he knows that sex has never been like this for him before. Ever. He’s always scoffed at the term “making love,” finding it incredibly cheesy and overwrought. But as Harry presses gentle kisses along his jaw, his long fingers skimming down his neck delicately, Louis suddenly understands. There is simply no other way to describe what they’re doing right now. He knows he’ll never forget this feeling for the rest of his life.

Harry peppers kisses down the column of his throat and then moves across his collarbone, his tongue dipping out to taste his skin. Louis shivers, winding his hand in Harry’s hair as he nips the meat of his left shoulder. Harry scoots back a little as he kisses down Louis’ bicep. He stops at Louis’ scar, his fingers tracing the shape of it. Louis squirms self-consciously, but Harry holds him in place.

“Don’t,” Harry says softly, pressing a kiss to the tip of the scar. “You’re beautiful, Louis.” He kisses down the length of it. “Every single part of you is beautiful to me.”

Louis shudders, completely overwhelmed by how right everything feels and how he almost fucking missed out on having Harry this way. Tears spring to his eyes, his chest heaving as they spill over.


“God,” Louis groans, blinking tears away as he shivers again. “I want you inside me. Fuck me. Please fuck me.”

Harry captures his mouth in a searing kiss. He grinds against him and Louis moans as pure heat shoots down his spine. He feels like he’s going to explode, his need for Harry suddenly consuming

Harry’s hand skims down Louis’ torso as he sits back on his knees. He squeezes the base of Louis’ cock before reaching over to the nightstand, yanking the top drawer open. Harry fumbles around for a bit before he finds the bottle of lube. He drops it on the bed and then reaches back to the drawer, rustling around for a condom.

“Haz,” Louis says quietly, touching his arm. Harry looks at him questioningly.

“Can we…” Louis gulps, trailing off. He takes a deep breath, his heart pounding. “Harry, I’m clean.”

Harry’s eyes widen, understanding dawning on his face.

“Me too,” he replies softly. “Lou, I’ve never–”

“My either, Haz,” Louis says, equally quiet, tracing gentle patterns on his wrist. “My either.”

Harry looks at him with a mixture of mild surprise and awe. Louis smiles as he pulls Harry back to him, propping himself up on his elbows as he looks deep into Harry’s eyes.


Harry drops his head to Louis’ chest, taking a deep breath and kissing over his heart. He’s trembling.

“I want that too,” he says, his voice wavering. “So much.”

Louis reaches between them, stroking Harry’s cock. Harry moans, his tongue flicking over Louis’ nipple.

“Gonna take care of you, Lou,” Harry promises, his fingers brushing over Louis’ other nipple. “Gonna make you feel so good.”

“I know, baby.”

Harry kisses down his chest and tummy, his tongue dipping into his belly button. He scoots down farther between Louis’ legs, propping them up as he reaches for the bottle of lube, opening it with a snick. He drizzles lube on his fingers, rubbing them together to warm it. He licks a fat stripe on the underside of Louis’ cock as his fingers slip between his cheeks, pressing against his rim as he spreads the lube around.

“Oh, fuck,” Louis groans as Harry carefully presses a long finger inside of him.

Harry sucks a bruise on the inside of his thigh as he starts to slowly push his finger back and forth, allowing Louis to get used to the sensation.

“So tight, baby,” Harry murmurs.

“Yeah…ah…f-fuck,” Louis stammers, throwing his arm over his eyes as he starts to move his hips in time with Harry’s slow thrusts. “It’s been a while.”

Harry moves to his other thigh, biting down and sucking a matching love bite.

Harry withdraws his finger and Louis whines at the loss. Harry dribbles a little more lube on his fingers and then presses back into his hole, this time with two fingers. Louis hisses at the stretch; Harry gently sucks the head of his cock into his mouth to distract him from the slight sting. Louis moans as the burn melts into immense pleasure, pre-come blurring into Harry’s mouth. Harry swirls his tongue around his head, humming with approval.

“Taste so good, love,” Harry praises, popping off his cock and resting his head against Louis’ knee. He gently scissor his fingers as he works Louis open. “Love you so much.”

“Love you – oh, Jesus!” Louis cries as Harry crooks his fingers, brushing over his prostate. Little pops of color explode behind his eyelids as the fire in his belly burns hotter.

“There?” Harry smirks, rubbing the same spot again. Louis arches up off the bed with a groan.

“Jesus, fuck, yeah, right there,” Louis sputters, fucking himself down on Harry’s fingers.

“God, look at you,” Harry says with awe, his fingers picking up speed. “So gorgeous, Lou. Doing so well, love.”

He presses in a third finger on his next thrust. Louis’ eyes fly open, a low and slow moan rumbling from his chest. His cock throbs, pre-come dripping on his belly.

“Christ, Harry,” Louis gasps as he continues to rock back on his fingers. “Your fingers. So good, baby.”

Harry sucks one of his balls into his mouth, nosing at Louis’ aching cock. He rolls his tongue around it and then releases it, immediately doing the same to the other.

“Harry, Harry, Harry,” Louis says urgently as Harry presses down on his prostate, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through his whole body. He feels dangerously close to the edge already. “Baby, I don’t wanna come like this. Wanna come on your cock. Please, please, baby, I’m ready. God, fuck me.”

Harry thrusts into him a few more times before withdrawing his fingers, wiping them on the duvet. Louis whines as his hole clenches around nothing. He gropes for the bottle of lube, finding it by his foot. He uncaps it, pouring a generous amount into his hand, fumbling a little as he flips the lid shut with one hand and tosses it aside.

“C’mere,” he orders.

Harry scoots forward on his knees obediently. Louis gives a kitten lick to the head of his cock and then slides his hand up and down the shaft, lubing him up. Harry bites down on his lip as he watches him. Louis pumps his cock a few times, thoroughly coating him before wiping his hand on the duvet.

“We’re gonna have to do laundry before we leave tomorrow.”

“Is that my new nickname?” Harry asks automatically, his dimple carving a deep crater in his cheek.

Louis cackles, throwing his head back.

“I can’t believe you’re quoting Friends right now.”
Harry bends down and kisses the tip of his nose.

“You love it.”

“I love you,” Louis says with a grin, squeezing Harry’s pert ass cheeks.

“I love you too.”

Louis lies back as Harry grabs a pillow, sliding it under Louis’ hips and settling between his spread legs. He kisses Louis gently as he lines himself up, the head of his cock snubbing Louis’ rim. They both take a deep breath.

“You ready?”

Louis nods, caressing Harry’s cheek. Harry turns and kisses his palm as he presses his hips forward. They both gasp as the head of Harry’s cock pushes past the tight ring of muscle, popping inside. Louis feels like all the air has been punched out of his lungs, his mouth falling open in a silent moan. Harry holds himself still above him, his mouth hanging open too, sweat beading at his hairline and his arm muscles bulging.

“You okay?” Harry murmurs, pressing soft kisses all over his face.

“Yeah,” Louis puffs. “Oh, God, Haz.”

Harry gently kisses his lips, sucking Louis’ bottom lip between his teeth.

“I know.”

“Go slow,” Louis breathes.

Harry nods, carefully pushing his hips forward, sinking into Louis another inch. The stretch is incredible as Harry slowly sinks into him bare, the pain quickly giving way to pleasure, thanks to Harry’s thorough prepping. Louis feels like Harry’s splitting him wide open, filling him up in the best way possible. Harry watches him carefully as he presses in further, his eyes searching Louis’ face for any sign of discomfort.

“God,” Harry pants, resting his forehead against Louis’. “Baby, you feel so incredible. So tight, so amazing around me. I can’t believe...”

Louis kisses him, his tongue running along Harry’s swollen lips.

“I know, baby. I know.”

He wiggles his hips, causing Harry to sink into him even deeper. Louis whimpers softly, brushing Harry’s hair back off his face.

“So good, Haz. You feel so good,” he whines. “Jesus, you’re so big.”

Harry smiles as he finally bottoms out, his hips cradling Louis’ ass. He leans in and kisses him, his tongue sliding against Louis’ slowly.

“Love you,” Harry whispers.

“Love you too,” Louis replies softly, gently scratching his nails down Harry’s back as they kiss. “So much, Harry.”
Harry holds still as Louis adjusts fully, his eyes shining with wonderment. Finally, Louis gives him a tiny nod.

“You can move, baby.”

Harry releases a breath Louis didn’t even realize he was holding as he slowly draws his hips back. Louis groans as he feels every last nerve ending in his body lighting up, the slick glide overwhelmingly intimate. Harry thrusts back in slowly, his cock hot and velvety inside him. Harry gasps, squeezing his eyes shut and then opening them again. He brushes Louis’s hair back as he swivels his hips in a figure-eight motion, thrusting into him deeply and slowly.

“Fuck, so hot,” Harry mutters, scraping his teeth down Louis’ neck as Louis’s hips start to meet his movements. “Yeah, that’s it, Lou.”

They rock together, kissing passionately, their tongues thrusting against each other, mimicking the motions of their hips. The friction of Harry’s torso moving above him feels amazing on Louis’ throbbing cock. He grips Harry’s ass, pushing him in even deeper as they both moan loudly. Louis meets Harry’s every thrust eagerly, gently tugging on his curls.

“Yeah, Haz,” Louis whispers in his ear before pulling his earlobe between his teeth. Harry whimpers, his arm muscles shaking with restraint as he holds himself above him. “Harder, baby. Give it to me harder. Want you to.”

“Shit,” Harry grits, dropping to his forearms and pulling almost all the way out of Louis and then slamming back in, his balls slapping against his ass. “Oh, God!”


Harry moans, picking up the pace as he mouths along Louis’ neck. Louis clings to his shoulders, holding on tight as Harry sets a punishing new rhythm, pounding into him. Heat coils in Louis’ belly as he tosses his head back into the pillow, moaning wantonly, which only spurs Harry’s deep thrusts on. The bedroom is filled with the sounds of their skin slapping together over and over again.

Harry grabs under Louis’ knees, wrapping his legs higher around his waist, changing the angle of his thrusts. On his next hard thrust, he hits Louis’ prostate and Louis sees stars.

“Jesus Christ,” Louis keens. “Right there, baby, right there.”

Harry slams into him, hitting his prostate over and over again. Louis feels dizzy with pleasure as his balls start to tighten up.

“M’close,” Louis slurs, licking the salty sweat from Harry’s throat.

Harry reaches between them, wrapping his hand around Louis’ cock, stroking it in time with his thrusts.

“C’mon, baby,” Harry urges, his voice raw with emotion. “Bet you’re so pretty when you come.”

Harry strokes him two more times and Louis’ vision whites out as he comes hard, crying out Harry’s name and spurting all over his belly and chest.

“Oh, fuck, Haz,” Louis cries, tears leaking out of the corners of his eyes as he gasps for air, wave after wave of pleasure wracking his entire body as Harry strokes him though it. “Jesus Christ.”
He blinks his eyes open and finds Harry looking back at him with pure amazement as he thrusts into him shallowly.

“Gorgeous,” he whispers, kissing Louis deeply as aftershocks continue to roll over him.

Louis blinks several times, taking a breath as he comes back to himself. He clenches around Harry’s cock and Harry wails in pleasure. His pace is erratic now as he chases his orgasm.

“Oh God, Lou. Gonna come.”


Harry thrusts once, twice, and then a third time. He tenses, coming with a sob and dropping his head to Louis’ shoulder as he pulses inside of him. Louis gasps at the feeling of warmth flooding inside of him.

“Love you so much,” Louis murmurs, pressing kisses to Harry’s temple, combing his sweaty curls back as Harry trembles in his arms; he feels wet tears against his neck. “So good, baby. Best I’ll ever have. M’so lucky.”

Harry lifts his head from Louis’ shoulder, his eyes bright. He caresses his face, thumbing over Louis’ cheekbone as he gazes at him. He leans in, kissing Louis’ mouth lazily.

“It’s me who’s lucky,” Harry whispers against Louis’s lips in between kisses.

Harry carefully pulls out of him, Louis wincing slightly at the loss. Louis wiggles his hips and smiles as he feels Harry’s come starting to leak out of him. Harry slips his finger between Louis’ cheeks, pressing at his rim and sweeping some of it up. He brings his finger to Louis’ lips, gently pressing it against them. Louis sucks his finger in, rolling his tongue around as he tastes Harry, salty and slightly bitter. He licks Harry’s finger clean, his eyes focused on him as he hollows his cheeks around it. Harry groans, sliding down and lapping up the come that’s splattered on Louis’ chest, his tongue swirling around Louis’ nipple.

“Jesus, Harry,” Louis moans, his spent cock twitching feebly against his thigh. “Filthy.”

Harry snickers, biting down on Louis’ pec.

“You’re gonna kill me,” Louis says affectionately, gently running his fingers through Harry’s hair, carefully smoothing out any tangles he comes across.

“What a way to go though,” Harry replies, kissing his chest.

“Yeah,” Louis laughs. “Jesus Christ. Why’d we take so long to do that? Fuck, Hazza.”

“We’re very stupid,” Harry says, nuzzling into his side, his fingers running through the sparse hair on Louis’ chest. “The stupidest.”

Louis cuddles Harry close to him, pressing a kiss to the top of his head as he continues to pet his curls. Harry sighs contently, throwing a leg over Louis.’ They lie there quietly, tangled together as they come down from their highs.

“Love you baby,” Louis whispers into his hair.

Harry laces their fingers together, resting their entwined hands on Louis’ chest.

“Love you too,” Harry murmurs in reply.
After a few minutes, Louis shivers, goosebumps prickling all over his skin.

“Cold?” Harry asks, resting his chin on Louis’ chest as he looks up at him.

“Yeah,” Louis admits. He stretches, pointing his toes and rubbing a hand over his belly, dried come flaking off his abs as he does so. “And disgusting. Shower with me?”

“Love to,” Harry replies, pushing up and crawling off the bed. He holds his hand out for Louis, helping him up. Louis grimaces as he scoots off the bed and stands, his ass and lower back twinging.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Louis replies, stretching his arms over his head. “Just...gonna be feeling that for a while.”

Harry bites back a grin, his dimple popping.

“No need to look so smug, Haz,” Louis teases. “You have a massive cock and know how to use it. It’s really not that big of a deal.”

Harry honks a laugh. He cups Louis’ face in his hands and bends down to kiss him, his tongue running teasingly along the seam of his lips. Louis yanks him close, pressing their bodies together, his mouth opening as he meets Harry’s tongue eagerly. His cock twitches in interest and he feels Harry’s do the same as it presses against his hip.

“Okay, okay,” Louis laughs, breaking the kiss. “Shower first.”

“Shower first,” Harry agrees, drumming his fingers on the meat of Louis’ ass. Louis pecks his lips one more time and heads towards the bathroom, looking coyly at Harry over his shoulder as he sways his hips.

“Christ,” Harry mutters as he follows him. “So sexy, Lou.”

Louis grins as he flicks the bathroom light on and then reaches into the shower, turning the water on. He smiles softly as Harry bends down and plucks an extra towel and washcloth from under the sink.

“Make yourself at home,” he giggles.

“You told me to,” Harry replies, winking at him.

Louis sticks his hand under the water, humming happily when he finds that it’s warm enough. He pulls back the shower curtain and steps into the tub, Harry following him. Louis stands under the spray, sweeping his hair back as it gets wet. He scoots back to make room for Harry as he grabs his bottle of honeysuckle body wash and his loofah. He uncaps it and squeezes a large dollop onto it. He turns to Harry, who’s waiting with his washcloth in his outstretched hand. He squeezes the gel on it, smiling up at him and pecking his lips.

“Did you work up an appetite?” Louis asks, soaping up and scrubbing Harry’s shoulders with the loofah. “Because I, for one, am starving.”

“I could eat,” Harry agrees, gently rubbing the washcloth in circles down Louis’ chest and stomach, working the body wash into a lather.

“I didn’t get groceries for the weekend since I wasn’t planning to be here, but I’m sure I could
scrounge up something? I think I have some chicken in the freezer...”

“You grocery shop now?” Harry asks with surprise. “You?”

Louis lightly slaps Harry’s ass; Harry giggles.

“Niall and I took a cooking class,” Louis explains, squirting more body wash into the loofah and reaching around, rubbing it down Harry’s ass. “Switch,” Louis orders, tapping his hip. They shuffle around each other, Harry tilting his head back under the spray, suds running down his long legs.

“It was just a beginners’ class,” Louis continues, a little bashfully. “M’not as good as you are, but I can manage. I have a couple things I’m pretty good at.”

“I remember that chicken you made for me before I left. It was delicious, baby,” Harry says, kissing him softly, gently kneading the muscles of Louis’ lower back as he washes him. “I’m sure you’re even better at it now. Plus, I bet you look real sexy in a chef’s hat.”

“I’ll model one for you some time,” Louis says wryly.

“Oh my God, you know what I could go for?” Harry says suddenly, his hands slipping down the curve of Louis’ ass, gently rubbing the washcloth between his cheeks.

“What?”

“Can we get Mr. Wang’s?” Harry asks eagerly, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

Louis’ stomach growls at the mere mention of their favorite place. His mouth waters as he thinks of sesame chicken.

“I haven’t found a Chinese place I like nearly as much as good ole Mr. Wang,” Harry sighs longingly. “I miss him so much.”

“Harry,” Louis huffs with mock offense, hanging the loofah on its hook. “I’m right here.”

“Aw, baby,” Harry laughs teasingly, draping his washcloth over the faucet and pulling Louis close. He strokes Louis’ cock, which has been half hard ever since they got in the shower. “Don’t get jealous. You’ve got all the Wang I’ll ever need.”

Louis stutters a laugh even as he starts to fuck into Harry’s fist, his cock rapidly filling to full hardness.

“That was terrible, Haz,” Louis gasps, as he feels Harry’s cock poking at his belly.

“You loved it,” Harry replies, a soft moan escaping his lips.

Louis looks up at him through his wet eyelashes. He palms Harry’s ass, bringing them closer together.

“Yeah,” he breathes. “Now kiss me, you fool.”

And that’s exactly what Harry does.

******

“I’m fucking starving,” Harry says, tipping his head back as he holds his chopsticks up, lowering
the chow mein noodles into his mouth. He moans happily as he chews. “God,” he says after swallowing them. “Why’d we wait so long to order food?”

“Don’t look at me,” Louis says mildly, popping a piece of sesame chicken into his mouth. He points his chopsticks at Harry as he chews and swallows. “You know how busy they get on Saturday night. But you’re the one who decided that blow jobs in the shower were more important than ordering food first.”

“Didn’t hear you complaining,” Harry quips.

Louis laughs, poking him in the ribs.

“You got me there, baby.”

Harry purses his lips, blowing a kiss at Louis as he delves back into his chow mein.

“I aim to please, Lou.”

Louis smiles at him, taking him in. Harry’s damp hair is tied up in a bun and his glasses are on. He’s in a pair of Louis’ sweatpants, the cuffs hitting him about mid-calf and he’s wearing one of Louis’ hoodies, one that was definitely his own at some point in their lives. He looks overwhelmingly soft and cuddly.

Louis loves him with all his heart.

The buzzer on the dryer sounds.

“That’ll be the duvet,” Louis says, placing his carton of sesame chicken on the coffee table. He hands Harry the remote to his Roku. “Hey, wanna watch a movie and snuggle?”

“Always,” Harry replies, taking the remote from him. “Have any new Chris Evans movies been added to Netflix lately?”

Louis giggles, pressing a kiss to Harry’s head as he gets up. He stands and surveys their spread of Chinese food, reaching for the last piece of Crab Rangoon.

“Don’t you fucking dare, Louis,” Harry says, never taking his eyes off the Netflix menu. “You know those are my favorite.”

Louis arches an eyebrow as he grins down at him.

“Just testing you, babe.”

“Uh-huh,” Harry replies, swatting Louis’ ass playfully as he passes by him. “I’ve got my eye on you, Tomlinson.”

Louis laughs, squeezing Harry’s bun as he heads back to get the duvet out of the dryer. He looks back at Harry, smiling fondly when he sees that Harry’s settled on a movie they’ve watched together more times than he can count.

Everything is as it should be.

Pausing for a moment to take it all in, Louis is so fucking grateful that after everything he’s been through – they’ve been through – he and Harry have found their way here.

They’re together.
Home.
Harry feels the morning sun warming his face as it filters in through the slats of the blinds and scrunches his nose, trying to ignore it. He’s been hovering in that place between awake and dreaming for a little while now, with no desire to leave the little bubble that he and Louis have created. Eventually, he finds that he can’t ignore it any longer and he blinks his eyes open, seeing Louis’ bedroom washed in warm golden light. With a huff, Harry fumbles for his phone on the nightstand, Louis grunting behind him in protest. Harry sits up slightly, squinting as he lights up his home screen, seeing that it’s just after eight A.M.

_Fuck my internal clock honestly._

Harry drops his phone back on the nightstand and burrows back into his pillow, squeezing his eyes shut. He hopes he can will himself back to sleep, because the bed is so cozy and Louis is warm and naked behind him and he’s just not ready to get up. Not yet.

Because it’s too fucking early.

They had stayed up well past midnight, laughing, cuddling, and decidedly not paying attention to the romantic comedy that Harry had put on Netflix, nor the one that started playing automatically after that. It felt like they were making up for lost time as they caught each other up on the past three months, sharing every last detail and story, all the highs and lows, from Louis’ emotional confrontation with his parents to Harry’s epic karaoke night debut. It felt like nothing had changed between them but at the same time everything had, their conversation punctuated with kisses and heated touches. Eventually, Louis had grabbed the remote and clicked the television off, smirking before straddling Harry and kissing him deeply.

Harry’s cock stirs at the memory of Louis riding him right there on the couch, the same couch where they had spent countless nights just watching television together.

Harry sighs, knowing that he should just give up and get out of bed. Once he’s up, he’s up; there will be no more sleep for him now.

_I can make breakfast. Bring it to Louis in bed._

Harry moves to get up and Louis snuffles, pulling Harry back snug against him. He throws his leg over Harry’s and the hand that had been resting on Harry’s hip sneaks up to his chest. Harry smiles contently at Louis’ tight and possessive hold as he snuggles back against him.

Louis wiggles impossibly closer to him and Harry feels his half-hard cock pressing up against the cleft of his ass. Harry puffs out a breath as he feels his own cock hardening; he squeezes himself as he rocks his hips back into Louis’ hard-on, smiling when he feels it twitching. He swivels his hips and Louis sighs behind him.

“Go back to sleep, Haz,” Louis mutters even as his hand gently skims up and down Harry’s ribcage.

“Can’t,” Harry replies, shivering as Louis’ clever fingers brush over his nipple.

“S’too early,” Louis slurs, pressing a kiss to Harry’s shoulder.
Harry turns in Louis’ embrace, grinning when he sees that Louis’ eyes are still closed and his face is scrunched adorably. He pecks gentle kisses to his forehead and then his cheekbones.

“Sorry, baby,” Harry whispers, moving to Louis’ jaw. “Morning person.”

“You’re the worst,” Louis mumbles, pursing his lips for a kiss.

Harry brushes Louis’ messy hair off his forehead and then quickly pecks his lips chastely, his mouth closed. Louis’ eyes fly open at that, his eyebrows immediately knitting together as he glares at him, looking like an angry hedgehog.

“If you’re gonna wake me up at I don’t even want to know what time it is on a Sunday, Harry, the least you could do is actually kiss me.”

Harry bites back a grin.

“I need to brush my teeth.”

“Harold,” Louis huffs. “I don’t care. Need I remind you where your mouth was last ni—”

Harry laughs and kisses him quiet, cupping Louis’ face as his tongue slides into his mouth. Louis sighs as his tongue meets Harry’s, stroking against it lazily. He tastes a little stale, but Harry finds that he doesn’t care in the slightest. Louis is still the best taste he’s ever tasted. Harry whimpers softly as Louis gently tugs the ends of his curls, their cocks brushing together as Louis rocks his hips into his. Their tongues start sliding against each other with a little more intent as Harry brushes his fingers down Louis’ chest, tweaking his already stiff nipple; Louis gasps, breaking the kiss. Harry snickers, sucking Louis’ bottom lip between his.

“Better?” Harry asks.

“Much better,” Louis replies breathlessly, nipping Harry’s lips gently, his tongue darting out teasingly. “Morning, baby.”

Harry nuzzles into Louis’ neck, kissing it.

“You hungry? I can go make us breakfast and you can stay in bed if you want.”

“What I want,” Louis says, manhandling Harry back into their original spooning position, “is for you to stay right here and go back to sleep.”

Harry giggles, fluffing his pillow and pressing himself back into Louis’ chest. Louis once again throws a leg over Harry’s thighs and snakes his arm up his chest, anchoring Harry against him.

They’re silent for a few minutes; Louis’ breath evening out. Harry does his best to regulate his own breathing so he can go back to sleep but it’s incredibly difficult with the way Louis is delicately running his fingers up and down his chest and ribs, his hard-on poking the back of his thighs. Harry sighs in frustration, his cock starting to throb.

“You’re not gonna go back to sleep, are you?” Louis asks quietly.

“Nope,” Harry puffs, giving his cock a couple of firm pulls. “Not gonna happen with you doing that.”

Louis snickers, batting Harry’s hand away from his cock.

“Don’t touch,” he says lowly, right into Harry’s ear. Louis sucks his earlobe between his teeth and
exhales hotly. “Mine.”

Harry shudders, biting his lip and nodding.

He sweeps Harry’s long hair aside, sucking kisses down the column of his neck and biting where it meets his shoulder. Harry groans, pushing his hips back against Louis’ erection, swiveling them when he feels it pressing against his crack, so close to where he wants it to be. Louis stills him, gripping his hip firmly; Harry whimpers.

“So greedy, Haz,” Louis whispers, clicking his tongue. He noses up Harry’s neck and then presses a kiss right under his jaw. “Now stay still.”

Louis releases his hip, running his fingers up Harry’s torso, his touch feather-light as he traces the lines of his abs. He delicately circles one nipple and then the other; Harry can feel him smirk into his shoulder as the buds pebble under his touch. He rubs them, keeping his touch oh so light; Harry groans, his cock jumping as Louis pinches one unexpectedly. He bites his lip as he fights his instinct to rock back into Louis’ hips.

“So sensitive,” Louis mutters, his voice awed as he runs his fingers back down Harry’s torso, skimming his ribs and tracing the curve of his hip. “Bet I could get you to come just from doing this.”

Louis sweeps his fingers through the downy hair of his treasure trail to the neatly trimmed thatch of hair at the base of Harry’s cock, barely brushing his shaft before walking his fingers back up his stomach, tracing around his belly button. Harry whines at the loss, his cock jumping, pre-come gathering at his tip.

“Louis,” Harry grits, bucking his hips. “Stop being such a fucking tease and touch me. Jesus.”

Louis huffs a laugh into his shoulder and then bites it.

“You just had to ask, baby,” Louis says, grasping the head of his cock and smearing the pre-come down his shaft, easing the glide of his strokes.

Harry moans as Louis strokes him up and down slowly, rocking his erection against Harry’s ass as he peppers kisses along Harry’s shoulder and neck.

“God,” Harry gasps as he feels Louis leaking along his crack, his cock slipping in between his cheeks ever so slightly. “God, I want you to fuck me.”

“Yeah?” Louis asks, thrusting forward as he blurts more pre-come, his cock sliding against him with ease.

“God yeah,” Harry moans. “Wanna...sh*t, that feels good,” he praises as Louis presses his thumb into his slit on his upstroke. “Wanna feel you too.”

Louis hums, increasing the pace of his strokes, running his fingers down the thick vein on the underside of Harry’s cock.

“Want that too, baby,” Louis murmurs, kissing his neck as he thrusts his hips against Harry. “But not right now.”

“Why not,” Harry whines, fucking into Louis’ fist. “Want you to.”

“Wanna take my time with you,” Louis says, his tongue tracing the shell of Harry’s ear as he
expertly twists his hand around Harry’s cock. “Want to take you apart piece by piece.”

Harry groans, the sensation of Louis jerking him off while simultaneously thrusting behind him starting to overwhelm him.

“Wanna see what makes you feel good,” Louis continues, his breath hot against Harry’s neck. “Want to take my time opening you up, have you begging for it, Haz. Not some quick morning fuck. Not for you, baby.”

“Yeah, yeah, please,” Harry gasps, pleasure starting to coil tightly in his belly. “Fuck.”

“You want me to fuck you slow?” Louis pants, slowing his strokes on Harry’s cock to match his words. “Me inside you nice and deep so you can just feel every inch as I fuck you bare?”

“Nnnnnnng,” Harry moans, tossing his head back, baring his neck further for Louis.

“Or would you rather me just take what I want from you,” Louis continues breathlessly, increasing his pace, his fist flying up and down Harry’s cock. “Fuck you into the mattress so hard that all you can do is just hold on and take it, baby?”

“Christ,” Harry gasps, batting Louis’ hand away from his cock as he kicks Louis’ leg off him and flips around to face him.

Louis smirks wickedly at him, his pupils completely blown, just a small ring of bright blue showing. Harry surges forward, connecting their lips and thrusting his tongue into Louis’ mouth insistently. Louis meets him eagerly, his hand gripping Harry’s ass as he pulls their hips together, their cocks pressing against each other. Harry moans as he feels his balls start to tighten, the fire in his belly threatening to consume him.

“So good, baby,” Harry breathes against Louis’ mouth as he takes both of their cocks into his hand, Louis hot and wet against him. “So fucking good, love you so much.”

“Love you too,” Louis moans as Harry strokes them together. “Oh fuck,” he cries, his hips thrusting wildly as he chases Harry’s touch. “M’so close, baby. Wanna come. Have to.”

“Yeah,” Harry pants, squeezing them together and picking up speed. “Me too. God!”

Louis blinks at him, a grin breaking out across his face. He strokes down Harry’s cheek with his index finger, pressing it against Harry’s lips with an arch of his eyebrow. Harry opens for him, sucking his finger inside, rolling his tongue and hollowing his cheeks around it. Harry thumbs over his head of Louis’ cock and he curses, removing his finger from Harry’s mouth with a pop. Louis drags his hand down Harry’s back and presses his spit-slick finger between Harry’s cheeks.

“Oh...oh fuck,” Harry stutters as Louis circles his rim, rubbing against it, but not dipping inside yet. “Jesus, Lou!”

“C’mon, Haz,” Louis urges, gently pressing the tip of his finger inside him. “Let go.”

Harry stiffens, crying out Louis’ name as the tight coil of heat in his belly finally snaps, waves of pleasure washing over him as he spurts over his fist.

“Beautiful,” Louis sighs, taking over and grasping their cocks, stroking Harry through his orgasm while still chasing his own. “So beautiful, Harry.”

Harry sucks a kiss to Louis’ shoulder, watching in awe as Louis starts to lose himself. He lets go of
Harry’s cock and fully grasps his own, his eyes rolling back in his head with pleasure as his fist flies over it. Harry pinches his taut nipple and Louis spills over his fist with a shout. Harry gently takes him in hand as Louis goes completely boneless, falling back against his pillow, stroking him through his orgasm and pressing gentle kisses to his throat, only letting go when Louis grunts from being overstimulated. He pulls Harry into his chest as he rolls onto his back, carding his fingers through his sweaty curls. Harry presses a kiss to the hollow of his throat as he tries to catch his breath. They lie there in silence, tangled up together as Louis traces soothing patterns up and down Harry’s back as his breathing slows back to normal.

“I thought you were going to make me breakfast?” Louis asks after a few minutes.

“Seriously?” Harry asks, looking up at him. “Now you want me to make breakfast?”

“I’m hungry, baby,” Louis pouts, ruffling Harry’s hair. “Please?”

“I actually hate you,” Harry mumbles, kissing his chest and then sitting up, stretching his arms over his head.

“No you don’t,” Louis drawls, a teasing edge to his voice. “You loooooooooove me. You think I’m goooooorgeous. You want to daaaaaate me.”

Harry laughs, leaning in and pecking his lips.

“Okay, Gracie Lou.”

Harry kisses him once more and throws the duvet off his legs, getting out of bed. Louis flops on his tummy, grinning up at him as Harry bends over and plucks Louis’ sweatpants off the floor.

“Look at that ass,” Louis leers.

Harry wiggles it for him, grabbing his phone as he heads towards the bathroom. He turns the lights on and places his phone on the counter. He washes his hands and then flicks the water off them, turning to grab his washcloth from where it hangs over the tub faucet. As he runs it under the water, he looks at himself in the mirror, chuckling at the myriad of love bites littered over his chest, shoulders, and neck.

His boyfriend is apparently a vampire.

Harry grins, wringing out the excess water and swiping the washcloth over his belly and his cock, cleaning himself off.

His boyfriend. Louis is his boyfriend. He still can’t quite believe it.

Harry finishes cleaning up, rinsing the washcloth and wringing it out, putting it back over the faucet in the tub. Once he dries himself off, he tugs on Louis’ sweatpants, resting them low on his hips. He combs his fingers through his hair and twists it into a bun, securing it with the rubber band he’d left on the counter last night. He grabs Louis’ toothbrush, since he forgot his own, and quickly brushes his teeth before grabbing his phone and padding down the hall to the kitchen.

He turns on the kitchen light, placing his phone on the counter before opening the fridge. Harry’s still pleasantly surprised to see how stocked Louis’ fridge is now, considering how it used to always be stuffed full of old takeout containers, beer, and perhaps a loaf of bread and some Kraft Singles and cold cuts. Harry frowns when he realizes that there’s not enough milk to make pancakes like he wanted to; there’s only just enough for them to have with their coffee. He grabs everything he needs, lining it all up on the counter. Harry turns to the coffeemaker, grabbing a filter
from the bag in the cabinet above it, still in its usual place. He pops the lid and places the filter in the basket as he grabs the canister of coffee. Sighing appreciatively as the smell of the rich roast hits his nostrils, Harry scoops out the coffee and dumps it in the filter. He grabs the pot and fills it, pouring the water into the back of the machine, snapping it shut and pressing the brew button.

As Harry pulls two frying pans from the cabinet underneath the stove, one looking much newer than the other, he hears the bathroom door click shut, signaling that Louis has managed to get himself out of bed. He sprays the pans and clicks the burner on under the bigger one. While the pan heats, Harry drops bread into the toaster, humming to himself as he presses the button down. He grabs the pack of bacon and pulls it open, carefully pulling out four pieces and laying them in the skillet, the bacon starting to crackle almost immediately. Next, he cracks eggs into a bowl, whisking them together with some cheese. He flips the bacon and turns the other burner on, adding a pat of butter to the skillet. As it heats, Harry puts everything back in the fridge. The butter sizzles in the skillet as it melts and the kitchen is filled with delicious smells as everything cooks. Finally, Harry pours the eggs into the pan, startling a little when he feels Louis’ hands at his hips.

Louis places a kiss between his shoulder blades and Harry sags back against him, sighing contently.

“Smells good, baby,” Louis says softly as he inhales deeply, pressing several kisses along the line of his shoulders.

“Bacon and eggs and toast,” Harry replies with a smile, pushing the egg mixture around the skillet.

“That too,” Louis says, kissing his shoulder one more time and squeezing his hips before he moves over to the cabinet.

Harry’s stomach flips as he turns to look at him, seeing that Louis is wearing nothing but his oversized lavender sweater.

“Heeeeeeey,” he drawls. “That’s mine!”

Louis arches an eyebrow at him as he reaches up to grab two giant coffee mugs and a pair of plates. Harry’s mouth waters as the sweater creeps up with his movements, revealing a tiny pair of dark green boxer briefs.


Harry laughs, stirring the eggs, fluffing them with the spatula.

“We’ll see about that. You know it’s my favorite.”

“Just you try and take it from me,” Louis challenges as the bread pops out of the toaster. Louis places two slices on each of the plates and then places them on the counter next to the stove. “I’ve grown quite fond of it, thank you very much. It’s mine.”

Harry shakes his head, clicking both of the burners off.

“Put the butter and the jelly on the table, please?”

“Ooooh, the table,” Louis says teasingly. “We’re being fancy this morning, are we?”

“Wooing you, remember?” Harry says with a wink.

Louis blushes, biting his lip as he beams at him.
“Yeah,” he says softly. “I remember.”

Louis puts the butter and jelly on the table and then grabs the silverware as Harry drops the bacon on their plates, carefully pressing paper towels over the slices, dabbing off the excess grease. Louis adds sugar and milk to their coffee cups and then pours the coffee, mixing everything together as Harry divides the eggs between their plates. His heart clenches as they work perfectly in tandem.

It’s so fucking domestic and lovely, it almost hurts.

“Hey Lou?”

Louis looks up at him as he replaces the pot in the coffeemaker.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

Louis smiles at him softly, blue eyes shining happily.

“I love you too, baby.”

Harry takes their plates to the table, Louis following behind him with the coffee. Harry sits as Louis places the mugs on the table. Harry takes his, raising it to his lips and gingerly taking a sip of the steaming coffee. It’s perfect, just like always.

“I fell in love with you over a cup of coffee, you know,” Harry says softly.

“Yeah?” Louis says, sitting sideways on his lap, sliding an arm around his shoulder and brushing an errant curl that has fallen out of his bun behind his ear. He taps the tip of his nose.

“Yeah,” Harry echoes, kissing his lips softly.

“Which cup of coffee?” Louis asks, gently kissing the apple of his cheek. “There’ve been a lot of them, Haz.”

“The morning after The Script concert,” Harry confesses, thumb tracing circles on Louis’ upper thigh. “Remember? I woke up and you had snuck out–”

“For breakfast sandwiches and coffee,” Louis finishes, a look of awe on his face. “I remember.”

“You just,” Harry says taking a deep breath as Louis scratches the soft hairs at the base of his scalp encouragingly. “You handed me my coffee and it was perfect, just how I always take it, you know? You always knew. Then you smiled at me and your eyes got all crinkly and I just...I knew. I knew that you were it for me, Lou.”

Louis smiles and bites down on his lip as he shakes his head, clearly a little overwhelmed. He caresses Harry’s cheek, pressing his thumb down where his dimple normally appears.

“I love you,” he whispers, leaning in and kissing him tenderly. “So much.”

“Love you, too,” Harry whispers back, pecking his lips again.

Louis beams at him and grabs his phone from where he’d placed it on the table, unlocking it and opening his camera, flipping it to selfie mode.

“Smile, baby,” Louis says, clicking the three-second timer.
Harry grins, his dimples carving deep craters in his cheeks as he holds up his cup of coffee. Louis presses a kiss to his cheek just as the shutter goes off.

“Can I post this?” Louis asks, showing Harry the picture.

Harry smiles at the picture, his heart overflowing at just how fucking happy they look in it.

“Yeah, of course, silly,” Harry says, kissing his cheek. “Go on, breakfast is getting cold.”


Louis smacks a kiss to his lips, getting up and sitting in the chair next to him, thumbing through filters as he takes a bite of eggs. Harry also takes a bite, watching him tap away, captioning the picture. Satisfied, Louis taps his phone one more time, setting it down and reaching for the butter for his toast.

Harry swallows, putting his fork down and reaching for his own phone, which Louis had thoughtfully placed on the table for him. He opens Instagram and types in Louis’ username, grinning as he hits the follow button. He clicks on the selfie, smiling softly as he reads the caption.

*Properly wooed.*

Harry’s stomach flips as he hits the little heart under the picture and then sets his phone down, digging back into his eggs. Louis’ phone buzzes twice and he picks it up as he munches on a piece of bacon.

“You’re following me again,” Louis says softly, a huge smile breaking out across his face, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Guess you don’t mind seeing my face now?”

“Well, I do kind of love your face,” Harry says with a wink. “I guess I can handle seeing it in my feed again. Don’t want to miss any selfies.”

Louis laughs happily.

“Goddamn right you don’t.”

Louis’ phone buzzes again and he giggles with delight.

“Niall says we’re disgusting, by the way.”

“I’m not even sorry,” Harry laughs as he scrapes jelly over his toast. “I hope he always says that about us.”

“Me too,” Louis grins, taking a bite of eggs and swallowing. “These are delicious by the way. Thank you for cooking, baby.”

“Anytime,” Harry replies.

They eat in comfortable silence, Louis humming appreciatively every once in a while.

“I was thinking we could leave by ten-thirty at the latest,” Louis says after a few minutes, taking a sip of his coffee. “You don’t have much stuff and I just need to repack a few things? So we only need to clean up a bit and shower and then we can get on the road.”

“Works for me,” Harry says, polishing off his eggs. “That puts us in Boston probably by nine, depending on how long we stop for lunch. And I don’t have class until ten tomorrow.”
“That means no funny business in the shower,” Louis says seriously.

“I’m not an animal, Lou,” Harry says, rolling his eyes dramatically. “I can control myself, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure you can,” Louis laughs. “I was more worried about me.”

Harry giggles, draining his cup of coffee.

“This is really happening, isn’t it?” he asks, taking Louis’ hand.

Louis leans forward and places a soft kiss on his lips, before placing his hand over Harry’s, squeezing it tightly.

“Yes,” he says, smiling brightly. “This is happening.”

Chapter End Notes

I can't even begin to say what the response to this fic has meant to me. Thank you to every single person who has read, shared, commented, yelled at me on Tumblr, and kudosed. I have some one shots in this universe planned, so we're not saying goodbye to this Louis and Harry just yet. Their journey is just beginning, after all. <3 Kim

End Notes

A rebloggable post for the fic can be found here! Please share if you are so inclined <3

Works inspired by this one: Reach the stars by disgruntledkittenface

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!