Call Answered

by vondrostes

Summary

The day after his 27th birthday, Harry Styles attempts suicide. Louis is flown to his bedside to unravel the mystery of why he did it after a flash drive is found with a note attached, addressed to Louis. On it are a collection of 78 songs, all written for different dates from their past.

Notes

ETA2: This fic is only canon up to July 2018 and the end of Harry's tour. It was written and completed before the tragic event that occurred in March and as a consequence, Fizzy is mentioned casually a few times throughout the fic.

ETA: Essentially, this fic is a longform Louis character study that attempts to encompass the entirety of his experiences over a several-week period of time and will thus focus on a number of events and people that impact Louis's mindset--not just Harry. This is more of a writing exercise for me than anything else. The stream-of-consciousness style and slow pacing are both things I haven’t really worked with before (at least for a fic of this magnitude). This fic has been published chapter by chapter as it was being written and thus may contain some small errors and lack polish. I have edited it for readability but there may still be some hiccups and inconsistencies. That being said, I hope you enjoy the fic.
regardless of any shortcomings and that it can produce a positive experience for you.

Additional Note: This fic is labeled bottom!Harry but there are two scenes which involve b!L. They're labeled in the author's notes for those chapters if you don't want to be caught by surprise.

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God, I have never been so nervous posting a fic and I am brand new to this fandom so please be gentle with me.

First off, I want to say that I have tried to base this on actual events where possible but the timeline itself is constructed in such a way that it provides the best narrative. So not everything is going to be 100% accurate. Also, while real events are referenced, anything written herein is just my own interpretation of them, again, crafted to provide entertainment only. I don't claim to have any special knowledge of the lives of anyone mentioned in this fic.

Secondly, while I'm only posting the first chapter on AO3 right now, I actually have the first two written (and most of the fic outlined) so if you read this and really really really can't wait to read more, please check out my Twitter to learn where you can read ahead: @vondrostes (personal) & @vondrostesupd8s (writing updates)

Thirdly, you may note I have provided a chapter count. I have a pretty good track record of finishing fics thus far, so if you're worried about this being abandoned before it's done, don't. It'll be finished unless I happen to tragically die for some reason. So hopefully that won't be the case. Chapters will be in the 3-4k range so this will be pretty long when it's finished.

**Not currently accepting translation requests at this time!**
Chapter 1

February 2, 2021
Oberhausen, Germany

There were buckets of sweat pouring off Louis’s face as he stepped off-stage, but there was nothing in the world that could distract him from the high he was on after performing. Five years ago, he couldn’t have ever envisioned playing an arena tour, let alone selling out nearly every venue, but here he was: fresh off yet another successful show in Cologne on the first leg of his European tour.

The album, which he’d agonised over for far too long, according to his new manager (who was much more hands on than the last, and thank god for that), had been a smashing success, massively outselling his debut in the first month alone. There hadn’t been any collaborations this time; he’d wanted the second album to feel a bit more personal, more intimate. The lack of outside involvement also meant a lot less paperwork as it turned out, as well as a lot less hassle when it came down to booking the tour.

Louis had put things off for nearly six months while waiting on other people to get their shit together, but as soon as reconciliation was no longer on the table, Louis had launched his tour immediately, wanting to get ahead of the game.

Still, he wasn’t sure he’d ever fully get used to doing it alone.

“Louis?”

“Hmm?”

There was a towel over his face and when he lowered it, his personal assistant, Sam, was standing in front of him, chewing nervously at her lower lip. The lights permeating the rear stage cast flickering rainbows across her skin, making her look almost like a hologram. Still buzzed after his performance, it took Louis a moment to fully register that she was holding something out to him.

Louis’s phone was cradled in her hand, outstretched for him to take. He could see the call screen flashing under her fingers. Muted, but clearly someone was on the other line.

Louis frowned. He couldn’t understand what was so important that she needed to answer for him during the show instead of just letting it go to voicemail. He tried to guess at who in his phonebook would be calling him at all, considering all of them had to know he was busy, but came up with nothing.

“Who is it?” Louis asked. He swiped the towel over his face again, catching a new cascade of moisture.

Sam didn’t answer. She passed him the phone with trembling hands.

Louis glanced down at the screen and nearly dropped it.

The contact name that appeared on the screen was still listed as the skull and crossbones emoji Louis had changed it to three months ago, the last time they’d spoken. Louis felt pained even
remembering the stilted conversation that had felt like it was over before it’d even begun.

Changing the name in his address book afterwards was an admittedly juvenile reaction, but Louis honestly hadn’t expected to ever see it again after that brief encounter.

Louis examined his mobile discerningly, still not sure if he should actually pick up. The run-time on the call was nearly fifteen minutes. Sam wasn’t exactly the chatty type, especially with people she didn’t know well, so she must have had him on hold until Louis finished the show. But Louis still couldn’t figure out why he was even calling to begin with.

Louis’s thumb dithered over the screen. Finally, he pressed unmute and lifted the phone to his ear, sucking in a quick breath that felt almost like the quickest utterance of a prayer.

“Hello?” he said cautiously, hoping his tone wouldn’t belie the way his mobile was shaking between his fingers. Louis still didn’t know what he would say when the reply came, how he’d react to hearing his voice again.

But the voice that answered didn’t belong to Harry.

“Louis?”

It took him a few seconds to register the identity of the speaker. It had been years, probably, since they’d last exchanged words. “Gemma?” Louis blurted out. “Why’re you calling me from Harry’s phone?”

“I didn’t have your number,” she replied, stringing the syllables together almost too fast to be understood. “I just—you need to come down here. I don’t want to do this over the phone.”

“Do what?” Louis finally turned away from Sam, who was still staring at him with a horribly concerned look that Louis couldn’t stand to face any longer.

“Please, Louis.” Gemma’s voice was small, like she’d recently been crying. She sounded like she might start up again any second. “I need you to be here.”

He sighed and hoped she wouldn’t hear it. “Where’s here?” he asked, anticipating London; Holmes Chapel, maybe, though he sincerely hoped to avoid ever stepping foot in that particular village ever again.

“The SLS off La Cienega.”

Louis had to take a moment to catch his breath. “You’re in LA?”

“Yeah.” She didn’t elaborate.

“Well,” Louis said, scrubbing at his forehead almost compulsively with the hand-towel, “I’ve got a show in two days in Munich, but after—” He’d already started to drift farther away from Sam and the others on his team, preparing himself for a conversation he would rather keep private.

“You have to cancel it.”

Louis stopped dead halfway to the green room. “What? I can’t just cancel a show.” The protest was weaker than it should have been. His hands were still trembling, the tremors only increasing with every throbbing pulse of his heartbeat.

Louis couldn’t fathom what reason Gemma could possibly have for summoning him to LA out of
the blue like this, or why she’d stolen Harry’s mobile to do it. What if Sam hadn’t answered the phone?

Gemma sniffled quietly. “How soon can you get here?” she asked.

Louis closed his eyes, scrunching up his face in thought. It was hard to focus with the sound of the crowd still dispersing on the other side of the partition, while the crew bustled around backstage, bantering loudly in German.

“Fourteen hours, minimum,” Louis told her after doing the quick calculations in his head. He’d have to have Sam book a flight right away and then call his manager to cancel the next show. He hoped Gemma appreciated how much hell he was gonna catch for that.

“Okay.” Gemma didn’t seem pleased, but Louis couldn’t exactly hop a supersonic jet and zip halfway across the world just because she’d asked him to come. “Call me when you get into LAX.”

“On this number?” Louis wondered.

“I’ll text you.”

Louis wasn’t expecting Gemma to abruptly hang up on him after that, but he supposed it was for the best that they kept their conversation short and to the point. Gemma had sounded so uncharacteristically fragile over the phone. In hindsight, Louis could appreciate her decision not to tell him what had gone wrong until he’d landed. As bad as obsessing over the unknown would be on the flight, knowing—and not being able to do anything about it—had the potential to be so much worse.

Louis turned around again and gestured for Sam to come over. “I need you to set up a flight now to LAX. Earliest one you can get.”

“Already done,” Sam replied in a low tone. At Louis’s inquisitive look, she added: “I guessed that you would go after you’d talked to her.”

“Do you know what that was about, then?” Louis asked Sam, equal parts bewildered and disturbed by what was happening.

Sam shook her head, almost frantically. She clutched her iPad close to her chest, like it was a lifeline. “No! No, I just got the main bits, just in case.”

“God, how I love you,” Louis said fervently. He pressed a salty kiss against her forehead. “Car?”

“Waiting round the back. Do you want me to set up accommodations for you ahead of time?”

Louis shook his head. “Best not. I’ll take care of it when I get there.”

“Good luck,” Sam told him, her expression of concern finally edging toward something a little less worried.

“Cheers. Give my love to Jaime. I’m sure she’ll appreciate it when she hears about Munich.”

There was a ghost of a smile on Sam’s face as he turned to go out the rear doors, where a black SUV was waiting, as Sam had said. Mark was in the driver’s seat. He turned and nodded to Louis as he climbed in and then slowly backed out of the alley.
“There’s Xanax in the front pocket of your travel bag,” Mark told Louis in his oddly soothing rasp.
“Sam said it’s gonna be a long one.”

“Yeah.” Louis popped two and washed them down with half a bottle of water, figuring he’d have just enough time to get to the airport, through security, and onto the plane before they really kicked in. “Thanks, man.”

Louis slept for the majority of the flight-time, which was the way he preferred things. Long trips afforded him far too much time for his mind to wander. Thinking was the enemy these days.

February 3, 2021
Los Angeles, California

There were no paparazzi waiting for Louis at LAX. No one had any reason to expect that he would be there, and Sam was better at keeping things under wraps than most of his previous assistants.

Louis followed a dozen or so yards behind Mark as they made their way out of the terminal, not wanting to clue anyone in to the fact that the bedraggled man in a hoodie and sunglasses was wearing disguise chic because he was in fact a celebrity.

Louis was already planning on making a surprise visit to see Freddie by the time they got to the rental car. He’d wrap up whatever this shit was with Gemma, take care of whatever needed taking care of, get a few good hours of non-drug-induced sleep, and then drop by Briana’s in the afternoon. They could go to the beach maybe. Freddie could swim decently enough now, and Louis thought it might be fun to spend a few hours relaxing in the sun even though it was still a bit chilly.

Louis allowed these more pleasant thoughts to occupy him as Mark drove the two of them the twenty-odd miles to La Cienega Boulevard in Beverly Hills. It wasn’t until they drove past Cedars-Sinai, Louis’s eyes lingering on the imposing hospital complex passing by them through the tinted windows, that the dread began to settle in again.

Louis felt the familiar itch of desire for a cigarette and patiently waited it out, tapping his fingers to an intermittent rhythm in the back of his head.

Mark pulled the car into the back entrance of the SLS. The text from Gemma said to meet her on the fourth storey. Louis was practically vibrating out of his skin by the time they got into the lift. Mark placed a steady hand on his shoulder and nodded, waiting until Louis had taken a deep breath before letting go.

There was a girl standing out by the ice machine who gave Louis a quick double-take as he passed by, but he made it to Gemma’s room miraculously unbothered by any of the guests. Louis just hoped the girl who’d recognised him wouldn’t leak his location to the whole internet before he had a chance to spend a little time with Freddie. He could do with a few hours of quiet for once.

By the time Louis had landed in LAX, news of the show cancellation in Munich had already hit the presses, but Jaime was keeping the paps on their toes, leading them to believe that he was at ‘home’ dealing with a ‘family emergency’, none of which was strictly untrue in the grand scheme of things. It wouldn’t keep them at bay forever, but hopefully Jaime could keep the wool over their eyes long enough for Louis to do whatever he needed to do and get the hell out of LA.
Gemma’s hotel room was at the very end of the hallway. She answered almost as soon as Mark knocked on the door and quickly ushered them inside. Her hair was a few shades darker, and she wasn’t wearing any makeup, but she looked more or less the same as Louis remembered from the last time he’d seen her, and that was perhaps stranger than if she’d looked like a completely different person.

Gemma sat down on the edge of the bed after they followed her in, hands tucked under her thighs in a childlike fashion, making her seem strangely frail under Louis’s inquisitive gaze.

“Gemma,” Louis said warily, the unease pooling under his skin as he remembered just how close they were to Cedars-Sinai. “What’s happened?”

“We’re trying to keep it out of the news as best we can,” she said without looking up at him. She slid her hands out from under her legs and reached for something on the bedspread that Louis couldn’t properly see, twiddling whatever it was between her fingers. “At least for now,” she continued. “But I don’t know how much longer—” She glanced up at Mark nervously. “Maybe it’s best if we did this in private.”

“You can trust Mark,” Louis replied, feeling a bit offended by the implication. “He’s not gonna leak anything to the press, I swear it.”

“No, it’s not—I think we should just be alone, maybe.”

“Okay.” Louis frowned. He looked to Mark and nodded to let him know it was all right to leave. “Go grab a bite, yeah?”

Once Mark was gone, Louis took a seat next to Gemma at the foot of the bed. Her breathing was quick and shallow, whistling noisily in the relative silence of the surrounding space. Louis glanced down at the white shag rug under their feet, waiting for Gemma to say something, but she just dragged her socked feet through the thick fibres without uttering a single word.

“What’s that, eh?” he asked softly, gesturing to the object in her hands. It was smooth, chrome, smaller than a tin of breath mints, but he couldn’t quite tell what it was still.

Gemma drew in a shaky breath and held it as she reached over to offer Louis the item.

Louis turned the mysterious object over in his hands a few times before realizing it was a metal case of some kind. He opened it to find two things inside: a folded slip of paper and a micro flash drive, nestled into a protective inlay. Louis lifted the note out first and unfolded it, all-too conscious of the way Gemma’s breathing stuttered when he had it fully smoothed out against his thigh.

_Louis,_

_Take your time._

_-H._

Louis narrowed his eyes in confusion. “Did Harry give this to you?” he asked, turning to Gemma.

She shook her head, sniffling. “No, Kari found it when she—” Gemma paused, screwing up her face as if unexpectedly seized gut-wrenching agony.

Louis wanted to hug her, but he didn’t know if it would be appropriate, so he just sat there, useless, watching her suffer without knowing the reason why. All he knew now was that he didn’t want to
know. He wished he was back in Germany, that he’d never had to come here.

“What happened, Gem?” Louis asked, each word tasting more bitter than the last.

“He tried to kill himself.” Gemma’s answer sounded as if it had been forced out, and the words hit Louis as if they’d retained that kinetic energy, nearly knocking the wind out of him.

It took him a moment to find his voice again. “How bad is it?”

“They don’t know if he’s going to wake up,” Gemma replied in a voice just barely above a whisper.

Louis stared straight ahead at their shrouded silhouettes in the flat-screen hanging on the wall opposite them, not sure he could bear to look directly at Gemma now that he knew the truth, to see his face reflected in hers. After a few long beats of silence, he looked down at the note in his lap and the flash drive still sat in its tin.

“Do you know what’s on it?” Louis asked, and his voice broke mid-sentence despite the time he’d taken to steel himself before speaking again.

“No, I thought you should be the first to look at…whatever it is.”

Louis nodded even though he wasn’t sure Gemma was even looking at him. He folded the note back up with care before placing it back into the case.

“I’ll get a room,” Louis said finally, forcing himself to look at Gemma again as he spoke. “Can I see him? In the morning?”

Gemma wiped at her eyes and nodded frantically. “Yes, of course. Yes.”

They stood almost simultaneously, and Louis decided to try for a hug this time despite his earlier fears. She returned it without protest, but it felt wrong. Louis could tell that they both knew why. They parted awkwardly, Louis still holding onto the metal case in his hand like a lifeline, and then Gemma walked him to the door. He stood there for a second, not really knowing what to say to her.

“It’s okay,” Gemma said finally. She leaned heavily on the door, like it was the only thing still keeping her upright. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Get some sleep,” Louis replied. He wished he could do the same, but the flight had ruined any chance of that, and there was still the mystery of the flash drive Harry had left for him to puzzle out. Louis’s hand clenched tighter around the case at the realisation that for all intents and purposes, Harry had left a suicide note addressed specifically to him. And there would be nothing but pain for him to find in that.

“Yeah,” Gemma replied. “Yeah, I’ll try.”

Louis stood there for a few seconds after she closed the door before turning to find Mark waiting just down the hall with a neatly folded paper sack in hand. “Something to eat?” Louis asked, trying to infuse his voice with a bit of faux cheer.

“Aye.” Mark handed him the sack and Louis was pleased—as much as he could manage to be in the current circumstances—to find a cold ham sandwich inside. He hadn’t been aware of how hungry he was until it was pointed out to him, but there was no way Louis could stomach a full meal just yet. A light sandwich was the perfect pick-me-up. “Bad news?” Mark asked as they made their way back down the corridor to the lifts, Louis already digging into the sandwich with gusto.
Louis just nodded. He didn’t want to have the conversation again so soon after Gemma had broken the news. It wouldn’t hurt to wait to fill Mark in on the details in the morning.

After renting adjacent rooms for himself and Mark for the night, Louis began to settle in as best he could. He had a real grudge against hotels now after spending so much of his adult life in them, and there was nothing worse than staying alone in a hotel room because of a situation like this. The SLS’s oddly impersonal mod-inspired redesign wasn’t helping Louis to feel any more at home.

He sat down in the centre of the bed, his feet hanging off the edge, and fiddled with the flash drive case contemplatively. His phone weighed heavily in his pocket. Louis knew the longer he waited to look at it, the worse the feeling would get, but he didn’t want any of this to be real. Seeing whatever Harry had left for him, that would make it all very, very real.

Louis fumbled to get the case open again and this time, he delicately lifted out the drive, not wanting to drop it or, god forbid, break it somehow. He inserted it into his mobile with the same amount of care and waited for the device to register. When the notification appeared, Louis tapped it immediately, not wanting to give himself any time to talk himself out of it.

There were seventy-eight files on the drives. All were m4a files, varying in length: some two minutes, some close to eight. None had any words at all in their file names, just a string of numbers. So what then, Harry had decided on a whim to bequeath Louis his collection of pirated music? Louis felt suddenly, inexplicably angry and nearly threw his phone at the wall in frustration.

_Take your time_, the note had read. But what if he didn’t have time?

Louis wrinkled his nose, pulled out his headphones from his travel bag, and settled in against the pillows to listen to the first track.

“Hey, um. I guess if you already figured out what the track titles mean, then I didn’t give you enough credit. If you didn’t, then you’re welcome.”

Louis hadn’t been expecting to hear Harry’s voice, and paused the audio automatically in his panic. What the fuck was this? If it was a seventy-eight-part suicide note via audio message, Louis was not in any way fucking prepared to listen to that.

His thumb hovered uncertainly over his phone for a moment before he finally gathered up enough courage to resume listening.

“I did a lot of writing over the holidays, after—well, you know. Just melodies really, no lyrics or anything. That was always your forte, so I thought…. I’m sure you can figure it out. The track titles are dates—the days I thought about while I was writing. I thought you deserved to know how I felt after everything. Hopefully these say what I can’t.” There was a pause, and Louis thought that was it, but then Harry’s voice continued, saying, “You don’t have to listen right now. But whenever you’re ready, I’m here.”

Louis slammed his finger down on the pause button again and crumpled. Tears sprang to his eyes for the first time since this whole ordeal had begun, and he sat there on the edge of the hotel bed, crying bodily, shaking for several minutes before he finally felt able to come back to himself.

Fuck Harry. He wasn’t here. Louis was more alone than he’d ever been.

When the tears finally stopped, Louis ran a hand through his hair and laid back down against the decorative chequered pillows, resolving to himself that he would at the very least listen to just this
first track without stopping again, even if it killed him.

He hit play.

July 21, 2010
London, England

Louis remembered the first time he saw Harry more vividly than he did his own audition, everything that preceded his three yeses a mere blur in the aftermath. But he remembered Harry, vibrant and energetic, standing out as if he was the personal embodiment of the sun standing there in the queue for auditions, seemingly happier than anyone had any right to be in the hours leading up to such a nerve-wracking experience.

And then once the auditions were all said and done, there Harry was again, perched delicately on the staircase at Boot Camp while they all lounged around singing Man In The Mirror together, knowing that many of the faces around them wouldn’t be there in just a few days’ time. Louis had found himself hoping in some hidden corner in the back of his mind that Harry would be one of the ones that made it through.

There hadn’t been an opportunity for Louis to introduce himself then, but it hadn’t stopped him from mentioning Harry to Hannah that night on the phone, disguising whatever as yet unidentified fascination with the other boy as strategy: he’d told her he’d thought Harry would be guaranteed to go through to Judge’s House with little basis other than his own feelings.

When he ran into Harry in the toilets a few days later, Louis didn’t even think about the potential awkwardness of the situation, his brain homing in on the tumbleweed of brown curls at the urinal with little regard for context. “Hi,” he’d piped up, stepping far too close for comfort to Harry in the process.

Harry jumped in a flash of pale skin and tousled hair and Louis felt a few flecks of moisture hit the back of his hand and arm. He stared down at the droplets in disbelief before glancing back up to find Harry still standing there with his fly undone.

“Oops,” Harry said with a mortified expression as he stared at Louis’s arm. The arm he’d just wee’d on. In the toilets at the X Factor.

“I’ll just…” Louis said, backing away from Harry and then stumbling over to the sinks to wash himself. He was vaguely aware of Harry finishing up behind him and then joining him at the sinks, washing his own hands with less care than Louis had taken and hopping up on the counter before Louis had even finished drying his own.

“I’m really sorry,” Harry said in a hushed tone.

“It’s my fault,” Louis mumbled. His face had gone red somewhere between the incident itself and Harry deciding to perch himself between the sinks like a giant leggy bird, and he wasn’t sure exactly why. Louis wasn’t the one who had just pissed on another contestant; there was nothing for him to get so flustered over.

Louis kept drying his hands methodically even after any trace of wetness was long gone, for some reason unable to move from that very spot next to Harry at the sink. He glanced up at Harry twice,
but found himself suddenly incapable of maintaining eye contact for more than a millisecond at a time.

“You enjoying things so far?” Harry asked conversationally just before the silence would have stretched out too long. The timing was impeccable, really.

Louis nodded. “Yeah, it’s all right. You?” He tossed the used towel in the bin but made no move to leave the toilet.

Harry shrugged, and Louis could see his skin pinkening up from his collar, slowly bleeding into his cheeks. “It gets a bit overwhelming, I guess.”

“What do you mean?” Louis asked. He turned to lean back against the sink, feeling awkward just standing there staring directly at Harry while he spoke.

Harry sighed forcefully. “I didn’t realise they would, like, make me have dinner with some girl just for a segment,” he grumbled. “I actually told them I was off to the loo just to get a break from it. I’d rather be up in front of Simon, honestly.”

Louis had no idea what he was talking about, as he hadn’t been pulled aside for any of the behind the scenes filming he’d seen some of the others participating in, but Harry looked genuinely distressed by it, so Louis nodded sympathetically and took a step forward to pat the other boy on the knee.

“It’s because they can tell you’ll get through,” he said confidently. Louis meant it, too. There was just something about Harry, a presence that you could feel even when he wasn’t on-stage. If any of them was going to make it, it would be him. “I guess I should get your autograph now,” Louis joked, “while I still have the chance.”

Harry giggled like it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard and signed his name on a receipt Louis pulled out of his wallet just to be funny. The ragged slip of paper hadn’t moved from its spot since.

February 3, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis came back to himself in a darkened room, the motion-activated lights having gone down in the few minutes he’d laid there on the bed totally motionless, absorbed in feeling and memory. He felt raw despite the jaunty upbeat melody Harry had strummed, a reminder of years long past, before everything had imploded on itself. Irreparably, in some cases.

Louis wished he was at home, where the wallet Harry had left his signature in was still sitting in his bedside drawer, virtually untouched since he’d quit using it a good eight or nine years ago. Louis needed tangible proof of the memory. In some corner of his mind, he was irrationally afraid that the last decade had just been a fever dream.

Louis contemplated the remaining seventy-seven tracks left on the drive, knowing that if left to his own devices, he’d never get through them all. He’d burn himself out, fray his own nerves listening, and he’d be left as an empty husk for his efforts. ‘Take your time,’ Harry had written. ‘Whenever you’re ready,’ he’d said.
But Louis couldn’t imagine a time or place in which he’d ever be ready.
February 4, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis awoke with a start, tangled up in the silky sheets of a strange bed with a low-level throbbing just behind his eyes. It wasn’t unfamiliar territory, but there was no post-alcohol haze to accompany the discomfort this time, only the cold awareness of why he was lying there. Alone.

Louis had enough time to shower and brush his teeth before Gemma showed up at his hotel room door at just after seven in the morning, looking like she’d gotten just about as much sleep as he’d had if the dark circles under her eyes were anything to go by.

“You sleep all right?” she asked wearily.

Louis thought the answer should have been apparent in his own gaunt features, but he spared Gemma a comforting lie, even so. “Well enough,” he replied nonchalantly, taking a second to slide on a pair of shades and a hat before stepping out into the corridor.

Louis had told Mark to sleep in. He didn’t see the need to trouble his bodyguard when he and Gemma were hardly going down the street, especially when no one even knew that he was in LA. Louis was well-educated on how to blend in with the public reasonably well when the occasion required it, and this was certainly one of those times.

Gemma was dressed just as inconspicuously as him, a cotton hoodie wrapped tightly around her body like it was the only thing holding her together. Louis could understand the feeling.

The lift ride up to the third floor when they reached Cedars-Sinai was agonising. Louis stood stock-still with his arms straight at his sides. Every muscle in his body felt frozen in fear of what awaited them.

Louis wondered just before the lift doors opened if he should ask Gemma to prepare him for what he was about to see, but decided that if it were anything particularly gruesome, she likely would have warned him without having to be asked. Gemma was good that way.

Still, Louis had no idea what to expect. Rope burns? Hanging seemed to be strangely popular with
rock stars. A gun was unthinkable, and thank god—otherwise Louis would have had no reason to be there at all.

His hands started to tremble as they made their way down the corridor—sterile, blindingly white, foreboding in equal measure—and then Gemma was opening the door to Harry’s hospital room before Louis was ready, bathing them both in a bright ray of sunlight coming in through the window. Louis kept his eyes down as they walked inside and then slowly raised them, knowing whatever image awaited him would be worse than a physical blow.

What he wasn’t expecting was the sight of Harry lying pale and lifeless in bed, covered in gauze from nearly head to toe.

“What the fuck happened to him?” Louis blurted out reflexively. His face felt hot. He was slightly worried he might faint if he stayed in the room any longer. But his feet remained firmly planted on the floor at the end of the bed.

Gemma sniffed, though whether it was in disapproval at Louis’s outburst or her own emotion at the sight of her brother, Louis couldn’t tell. “They told me he tried to overdose and then just… panicked or something. He called emergency services on himself and when they found him he was lying in a bunch of broken glass. He must’ve fallen into the table.” She tucked her hand up under her chin, looking straight at Harry as she spoke.

Louis turned his attention away from her and back to Harry once again. He took a tentative step forward. Louis wasn’t sure if he was allowed to touch Harry, or if he even wanted to. If he did, there wouldn’t be any corner of his mind he could escape to where this wasn’t real.

“Could I…can I just have a moment with him?” Louis ventured, unsure if it would be inappropriate to ask. He wasn’t sure how much Harry had confided in Gemma, if she knew the extent of their relationship in the band.

Her face, pinched and bone-white, didn’t betray the answer to that even as she nodded in permission.

Louis sighed and sat down in one of the chairs closer to Harry’s bedside. He flinched when the door shut behind Gemma. Still, he didn’t dare touch Harry, but instead pulled out his mobile, hoping he would have enough time to listen to the next track without being interrupted by either Gemma or a nurse.

Louis quickly popped in his earbuds and hit play. He was disappointed to find that the second track had no verbal prelude. He’d been looking forward—perversely, almost, knowing that it would result inevitably in pain—to hearing Harry’s voice again.

He stared at Harry’s slack face as the first notes sounded on the track, sprinkled in high-pitched and tinkling like bells. Louis wondered when Harry had learned to play the piano, if he’d chosen to write on it because of Louis—and then immediately chastised himself for thinking so selfishly.

There was an acute ache whenever Louis’s mind drifted toward the possibility that Harry had done all of this because of Louis, a cognitively dissonant melancholia that Louis couldn’t fully wrap his mind around whenever his thoughts began to stray.

Louis forced his mind back into careful order, closing his eyes and letting the music occupy him again.
Louis walked in the front door red-faced and breathless with laughter, Zayn trailing along just behind him in a similar state, though he looked as if another good scare might send him into a dead faint. The other lads were out in the garden—Harry’s mum directed Louis and Zayn with a few words and a knowing smile as she worked in the kitchen preparing dinner for the whole lot.

Liam greeted Zayn with a hug as soon as the two joined the others outside. Louis was surprised to find that he had been anticipating the same from Harry even though he’d only been gone for the afternoon, unlike Zayn, who was just now joining them at the bungalow at Harry’s for the first time. ‘Family stuff,’ Zayn had said. Louis hadn’t pried.

Louis, being the only one with a license and a car—a little Renault Clio he was inordinately proud to own at eighteen—had gone and picked Zayn up himself. He’d anticipated it as a fun bonding experience; Zayn was clearly the shy one, and Louis thought some one-on-one time would get him to open up, but Zayn had remained politely reticent for most of the drive. His façade had only broken when they’d nearly had a collision on the M6. That had gotten a reaction out of him for sure.

Louis made a mental note to coax Zayn into telling the story later to the lads and then kicked off his shoes. He waltzed down the deck in bare feet over to where Harry remained sat on the very edge of the pool a little ways from the others, dragging his feet back and forth through the water. He looked a bit dejected, and like too-often before, Louis found himself gravitating toward the boy without even really thinking about it.

“All right?” Louis asked as he plopped himself down next to Harry.

Harry glanced up at him with wide eyes. “Yeah,” he replied a little breathily. “Just been bored sitting round waiting for you to get back, you know.”

“You had Niall and Liam for company,” Louis reminded him.

Harry just shrugged, but there was a tiny smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “How was the trip?”

Louis laughed, kicking off his shoes to dip his toes in the water alongside Harry. “We almost had an incident on the way back, but it turned out all right in the end.”

“What kind of incident?” Harry asked, eyebrows creasing together in concern. Louis was struck by how innocent he looked, as if he couldn’t imagine anything bad ever happening to anyone else because nothing truly bad had yet happened to him.

“The kind where your car almost hits another car,” Louis joked.

Harry’s eyes widened, but he didn’t seem to find it funny, his frown only deepening. “You should be more careful,” Harry chided, sounding far older than his sixteen years. “The whole band is depending on you now.”

Louis laughed at that, feeling it was a tad overdramatic—after all, they were still just a bunch of kids who had been put together as a last-minute decision, probably just to pull in more views because they were young, and easy to root for as a group. Louis had no doubt that they could
accomplish all that without him.

When Harry’s expression didn’t waver, Louis leaned down to scoop up some of the pool water and flung it at him, grinning in satisfaction when Harry reared back with a yelp.

“Pool time already?” Niall called out from the other side of the pool in question, all crinkled eyes and crooked teeth, brimming with excitement.

“We don’t have suits,” Louis reminded him, but Harry was already standing up and yanking his t-shirt over his head, turning Niall’s beaming smile into a slack-jawed look of disbelief when the rest of Harry’s clothes joined his shirt on the deck.

Harry jumped in with an exaggerated splash, spraying Louis with the water, but Louis was too busy trying to process what he’d just seen to even register the fact that his clothes were now sopping wet.

Harry’s head popped up at his feet a second later. “Get in,” he said, breathless and sparkling from the water dripping down his face.

“You don’t think it’s a little early in our friendship to be going starkers?” Louis asked. He could see the other three starting to strip down, albeit more hesitantly than Harry had, and behind them the silhouette of Harry’s mum through the window, still hard at work in the kitchen.

Harry didn’t seem to care about any of that. He simply stared up at Louis with a beseeching expression as he clung to the edge of the pool with his long legs splayed out behind him, gently kicking to keep afloat. “No such thing,” he replied before taking off again.

Louis watched Harry for a minute as he streaked through the water. Niall was the first to join him, jumping in cannonball-style with a loud whoop. Louis sighed and capitulated, refusing to be the odd one out.

They swam (with the exception of Zayn, who sat on the steps and watched) for what felt like hours, streaks of pale skin darting through the water. But it couldn’t have been that long, because suddenly Harry’s mum was poking her head out the back door to announce dinner was ready, putting an abrupt end to the aquatic merriment.

Harry hauled himself out of the water and onto the deck without an ounce of shame, his naked body glistening in the sunlight. Anne just rolled her eyes and tossed him a towel. “Don’t forget to wash up,” she told him as he wandered over to get the rest of the towels she’d put out for them.

Niall, Liam, and Zayn all followed suit, with Louis being the last to extract himself from the water, only doing so when Harry leaned over to offer him a hand up. “You look like you’d rather stay in there forever,” Harry remarked as he pulled Louis up onto the deck and handed him a towel.

Louis was slightly surprised to find that Harry was right in some respect. Some part of him wished the afternoon would never end. But that was too heavy to say after only knowing each other for a few weeks, so Louis just shrugged.

“Been a while since I’ve gone for a swim,” he said instead. “Not all of us are lucky enough to have a pool in the garden.” It came out slightly more bitter than he’d intended, so he smiled widely and slung an arm around Harry’s bare shoulders in a show of camaraderie as they walked back up to the house.

“Well, that doesn’t matter now, does it,” Harry pointed out. “’Cos you can just use mine.” He said it so matter-of-factly, as if he couldn’t understand why Louis hadn’t arrived at the same conclusion.
Louis laughed lightly, and Harry squinted at him in childlike confusion. “What?”

“Never change, Harold,” Louis told him, a little breathless. When Harry finally pulled away from him to take his place at the dinner table, Louis felt a hollow ache spreading from the tips of his fingers through his arms and into his chest. And maybe that ache never went away.

February 4, 2021
Los Angeles, California

The final notes of the song played out lazily as Louis opened his eyes again to find that nothing had changed around him. Harry was still lying in a hospital bed, unconscious. Louis was still alone.

He considered reaching out to Harry again, briefly, and then thought better of it. Louis stood, feeling his knees creak in a way that made him feel far older than twenty-nine, and went to the door to let Gemma back in.

“You okay?” Louis asked as she stepped inside again. He could tell from her red-rimmed eyes that she must have had herself a quick cry out in the corridor, but they were dry now.

Gemma nodded. “I feel like I should be asking you that,” she said, forcing a smile that just as quickly vanished. “I mean, it’s not the first time I’m seeing him like—” Gemma gestured toward Harry and then turned her face into the sleeve of her jacket. “Sorry,” she said, sniffling.

Louis reached toward Gemma and she fell into his arms. He held her for a long moment, neither of them breaking the embrace until they heard the door open again.

“Oh, sorry,” said the nurse as she bustled in, her dark purple scrubs a sharp contrast to the blinding white and pastel accents that surrounded them. “I’ll be out of your hair in a minute.”

Louis and Gemma stood off to the side while the nurse went over to Harry. They watched her check his vitals and note them on his chart before beginning some sort of routine examination or exercise that Louis didn’t have a name for, clinically palpating Harry’s hands and arms before moving to his legs and feet. Once the nurse was finished she turned back toward them with a polite smile and moved to go past them to the door.

Louis put out a hand to stop her. “Can you tell me exactly what he did?” he asked tentatively. “Or what his condition is, at least?”

The nurse glanced furtively between Louis and Gemma. “You’re the sister, right?” she said.

Gemma nodded. “It’s fine, you can tell him anything you’d tell me. Honestly, I don’t remember much of what the doctors even said after he was brought in.” She exhaled in a way that was somewhere between a sigh and a yawn and sat down, folding her hands in her lap and staring down at them as the nurse turned back again to Louis with a hesitant expression.

“It’s fairly straightforward,” she told him. “We found a large amount of prescription sedatives in his system along with a moderate amount of alcohol; he was already unconscious when he was brought in, so there’s not much more I can tell you beyond that.”

“Do you know when he’ll wake up?” Louis curbed himself from asking ‘if’ purely because
Gemma was still in the room. He knew full-well there was a chance that Harry wouldn’t wake up, and that the longer he was unconscious, the more that likelihood would increase.

The nurse shook her head, lips pressed tightly together. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Okay.” Louis sat down next to Gemma, feeling like all the air had just gone out of him, leaving him crumpled and deflated as he collapsed into the stiff hospital chair. He heard the nurse’s footsteps as she left, and the sound of the door opening and closing again, but he didn’t look up from the floor. The tile was so clean it almost made Louis feel like he was dreaming. He wished he could convince himself of that.

He felt Gemma’s hand come over his on the armrest and he uncurled his fingers from where they’d formed a death grip around the thin strip of wood. Louis glanced up at Harry again and searched his face, trying desperately to find any trace of life in it.

God, he felt guilty. Even if what Harry had done was really nothing to do with him at all, Louis hadn’t been there to stop it. And he felt like he should have been, even though Harry was the one who had told him to leave. It still felt like this was his fault, and no amount of rationalising was going to convince Louis otherwise.

Louis reached over with his free hand and patted Gemma’s in appreciation, though he still couldn’t bear to look her in the eye. Louis didn’t think she’d be quite so friendly toward him if she’d really known the part he’d played in all this.

It was unbearably difficult to look at Harry and only see what Louis had done to him. Louis was grateful that at least Harry’s tattoos were covered, not wanting to face the stark black reminder of their past contrasted against his milky skin. It was hard enough to look at the marks Harry had left on Louis’s own body, but Louis had never been able to bear the thought of covering them. They were reminders of how Harry had changed him, of what Louis had taken in turn.

Louis shuddered and finally moved his hand away from Gemma’s. He had destroyed Harry’s innocence in more ways than one. That sixteen-year-old boy who had once smiled at Louis like he’d never lived through a bad day in his life was gone now, replaced with the husk lying before them in a hospital bed, hooked up to all manner of tubes and machines, the only things still keeping him alive.

“He’ll pull through.” Gemma said suddenly, her voice small but fierce. “Harry’s strong. He’ll make it through this.”

Louis remained silent, knowing it wasn’t a question of whether Harry could come back from this, but whether he even wanted to.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Hope you guys enjoy this chapter, but be mindful of the tags. :)

Follow me on Twitter for more writing goodies: @vondrostes (personal) & @vondrostesupd8s (writing updates)

February 4, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis wasn’t sure why he’d even agreed to go with Gemma to Harry’s house. The closer they got to their destination, the worse he felt, until he was almost on the verge of asking her to stop so he could vomit out the side of the car by the time they pulled into Harry’s neighbourhood.

The scenery was all brand new to him, but like every upper class residential section of LA, it felt oddly familiar, like he’d been there before, even though this was the first time Louis had ever set foot in this particular suburb. This house was smaller than the last, a little more out of the way, and instead of high walls, most of the estate seemed to be shielded by trees and creeping vines.

The house itself reminded Louis of a villa he’d stayed in once while in Italy. Louis could see why Harry would have been drawn to it. The rounded architecture, the warm colours; it was far and away from the cold and angular modern architecture that was so prevalent in the Hills. It felt homelier, even if it didn’t really feel like home at all.

Both Gemma and Louis remained in the car for nearly a minute with the engine off after they’d pulled into the long, winding drive, neither wanting to be the first to face the reality of what they were about to do.

Finally, Gemma pushed the handle down on her side and slowly opened the car door. Louis followed her lead with just as much reluctance. His feet felt like they were moving through thick sludge as he walked up to the house. He could feel sweat sharply pricking the back of his neck as they approached.

Gemma unlocked the door with a swipe of her hand against the touchpad that stood in place of a more traditional doorknob. Louis couldn’t help but wonder how many people were keyed into Harry’s residence. Was it just his closest friends and family, or was anyone Harry had more than a casual dalliance with invited to let themselves in?

All Louis knew is that he wouldn’t have been able to unlock the door himself. There was a sick twist in his gut at the realisation.

The door opened with a strangely ominous hiss as the artificial climate created by the house met the open air for the first time in what must have been days. Louis stared dubiously into the darkened void ahead as Gemma stepped through, and then tentatively, he put a single foot forward.
The lights in the foyer all turned on as soon as they were inside, the door slowly swinging shut behind them in a way that would have felt ominous if it had been ten years earlier and Louis wasn’t yet used to all the bells and whistles that came with modern mansions.

Still, even with its technological wonders, the interior of Harry’s house felt just as homely as it had looked from the outside. Part of that was due to the fact that it looked like Harry hadn’t cleaned in days; just from a glance, Louis could see stray clothes lying at the foot of the stairs and discarded take-out cartons abandoned on the island in the kitchen.

“Are we the first ones through here?” Louis asked, keeping his voice low in almost…reverence. Harry wasn’t dead, but it still felt like they were standing inside a mausoleum. “Since it happened?”

“First since, Kari, yeah,” Gemma replied vaguely.

“It’s rather…” Louis started to say as they proceeded forward into the kitchen. “Messy,” he finally settled on after seeing the stack of unwashed dishes crammed into the sink. There was a basket of fruit sitting on the table, gently decaying. Louis caught a whiff of the sickly-sweet scent of rot coming off it and switched to breathing in through his mouth.

“Apparently he cancelled his cleaning service a week before—” Gemma’s mouth snapped shut as if compelled by some unnatural force.

Louis didn’t push for more. He was capable of drawing his own conclusions. Either Harry had been such a wreck in the last few weeks that he hadn’t wanted anyone to see him that way, or he’d been planning this with a considerable amount of foresight. Louis wasn’t quite sure which option scared him more.

“You mentioned Kari,” Louis said as they slowly made their way into the sitting room.

Gemma had mentioned finding closure, before they’d left the hospital on this foolhardy mission, but all Louis felt was the painful opening of old wounds as he walked through this museum of Harry’s life—one he was no longer a part of.

“She’s Harry’s emergency contact since he spends so much time here,” Gemma told him as she brushed a pensive finger against an abstract oil painting on the wall. It was hanging between two sexually-explicit typewritten texts, both framed, a hodgepodge exhibition of Harry’s eclectic taste in art.

“When was the last time she was with him?” Louis asked. He’d never met Kari in person, but he had spoken to her on occasion. She’d been Harry’s proxy during the majority of their negotiations in the fall, when Liam and Niall had been desperately conspiring to get the band back together. She’d also been instrumental in shutting that down.

Gemma shook her head and stepped away from the wall. “Before he cancelled the cleaners, I think. She was on vacation when they called her. Well, staycation, really. She was at home in Santa Monica.”

“She doesn’t live here?” Louis asked. He’d had a bungalow built in his garden for Sam at his home in London when she’d come to work for him. It seemed like a waste for her to spend her hard-earned salary on a flat she’d spend next to no time in. He’d learned that lesson the hard way for himself years ago, trying to juggle half a dozen houses across the globe while not feeling at home in a single one.
“No.” Gemma gave him a sideways glance that suggested she thought he was insane for asking. “But obviously she has access to the house, so I asked her to check in on the place before I got here. That’s when she found….” She waved her hand vaguely to indicate the flash drive she’d given Louis when he’d arrived. There was an inquisitiveness to her expression that Louis carefully chose not to acknowledge.

“Where did she find it?” Louis asked curiously.

“In his bedroom.” The curtness of her tone made it clear that it wouldn’t be one of their stops on this merry little tour through Harry’s life.

Louis nodded and leaned down to finger a book lying pages down, spine bent, in the centre of the coffee table. *A Grief Observed*, Louis noted after examining the cover. But whose grief was Harry observing?

He straightened and gazed out at the glass wall, covered by curtains, through which he could make out the faint traces of early morning sunlight from outside.

Gemma soon caught his gaze and her face turned even more morose. “That’s where they found him,” she said. “By the pool.”

By the pool, Louis repeated to himself like a mantra. By the pool. What did that mean?

“How can I see it?” he asked, regretting the words almost as soon as they’d left his mouth. He didn’t want to see it. Why would he want to see it?

Gemma looked surprised for a split second before carefully disciplining her expression into something more neutral as she nodded. Louis felt sick to his core as she unlocked the back door with a shaking hand. He hadn’t taken into consideration that this would be the first time she was seeing the scene of the crime (so to speak) as well.

There was an eerie stillness out in the garden. The ivy-covered walls shielded the whole enclosure from the wind and blocked out most of the traffic sounds from the road on the other side. Louis couldn’t even hear birdsong. The sky above their heads was still overcast, giving the whole garden an added layer of sombre ambiance as Gemma and Louis stepped out onto the patio.

Finding the evidence of what Harry had done wasn’t difficult; it was all around them as soon as they walked out the door. Far from the peaceful setting the silence would seem to indicate, the flagstone deck between the house and the edge of the pool looked like the aftermath of a massacre.

There was glass everywhere, strewn about the remnants of a shattered patio table. The flagstones around it, elsewhere a soft pink, were stained dark reddish-brown, almost black. Louis could see the trail of blood leading from the middle of the patio, where it was the most prominent, all the way down to the edge of the pool. He could imagine it flowing into the water, softly dispersing. He could imagine Harry lying there all alone, haloed by blood and broken glass, quietly dying while Louis was half a world away.

Louis felt dizzy after looking at the grisly scene for more than a few seconds. He didn’t usually feel faint at the sight of the blood, but there was a peculiar sensation enveloping him the longer he looked, like his mind was repeatedly trying to detach itself from his body and failing again and again. The dull twinge of it was jarring, though not altogether awful, and Louis finally forced himself to look away just in case his psyche ended up succeeding in managing to float away entirely.
Looking away didn’t erase the imprint of the mental image in Louis’s mind, however. He found himself running through different scenarios in his head, trying to determine Harry’s state of mind from what scant clues remained. Had he fallen in his delirium, while trying to call for help? Had he been standing by the pool because he’d meant to drown himself in a drug-fuelled haze? Louis couldn’t make sense of any of it.

Suddenly, Louis felt queasy, and for a moment he was afraid he might vomit right there on Harry’s blood-stained patio. “Can we go back to the car now?” he asked after swallowing down the bile rising in the back of his throat.

When he looked back over at Gemma, he found her standing frozen over the mosaic of shattered glass, her face bone-white. She nodded weakly.

Louis didn’t dare ask if she’d gotten the closure she’d wanted.

They moved back through the house just as slowly as they’d come in, like a two-person funeral procession. Louis was careful not to disturb anything on the way out, focusing almost solely on placing his feet one in front of the other, following Gemma’s path exactly. It was like he could erase ever being there so long as he retraced his steps.

The sun was just beginning to peek through the cloud cover when they emerged from the house. Louis wanted to rage at it, demand that it disappear. It didn’t feel right for the sun to be shining amidst all this desolation in their lives. But that was LA, never one to cater to a bad mood, never letting you wallow. Maybe that’s why Harry had fallen in love with it so quickly. They were a perfect match.

Louis was the first to climb back into the car. Gemma settled in next to him with a soft sigh and reached for the ignition. Louis’s hand shot out to stop her.

She stared at him in confusion while Louis struggled to find the words to articulate the swirling mass of thoughts going around and around his brain.

“You haven’t asked about the thing Harry left for me,” Louis finally said, stumbling over each syllable like he’d just barely learned to speak.

“Did you want me to?” Gemma asked openly.

Louis wasn’t sure of the answer to that, but regardless, he’d opened that can of worms himself and there was little that could be done to take it back now. He handed her his phone instead of answering and watched as she scrolled through the tracks with the same crease between her brows that Harry wore when he was concentrating.

“What are they?” Gemma asked after several seconds had ticked by. The colour had all drained out of her, leaving her looking more like a ghost than a living person.

“Songs,” Louis told her. “Melodies he wrote.”

“For you?”

Louis wasn’t sure if the sour note in her voice was from hurt or scepticism. Maybe it was neither, and he was just projecting, as per usual. Harry had criticised him often enough for that in the past. What had changed, really?

He settled for a shrug.
Gemma sniffed loudly. Louis abruptly looked away so he wouldn’t have to see the tears welling in her eyes.

“Have you listened to them?” she asked.

Louis shook his head. “Just the first couple,” he amended quickly.

“Would you play one for me?” Gemma asked. “Or—”

Or would it be too private, Louis guessed she was about to say. Some of them might be, he thought, after glancing through the strings of numbers, scouring his memories for the corresponding dates. His eyes skimmed over a few that had him starting to flush before he turned his focus elsewhere. But the third track was safe enough.

Louis was surprised he remembered so much from the time before the label and the tours, when they were still relatively normal, but then again, he and Harry had never really been normal, had they?

“Sure,” Louis finally told her. He waited until she’d pressed the ignition before reaching forward to fiddle with the stereo, making sure the volume was a reasonable level. He hit play just as they were backing out of Harry’s drive, his eyes laser-focused on the house as it retreated from view.

September 13, 2010

Holmes Chapel, England

Louis liked being at Harry’s house. It was usually a lot quieter than his: no little sisters running around shrieking and screaming all day long, no television constantly playing in the background, no pregnant women shuffling in and out the front door to see his mother at all hours of the day and night. It was like having somewhere he could breathe, at least when Harry’s energy levels dropped, usually leaving the two of them shrouded in a comfortable silence.

But Harry had a tendency to bounce off the walls that only seemed to increase in intensity whenever it was just he and Louis hanging out together—at least until he finally managed to wear himself out to the pinnacle of exhaustion, at which point he would promptly flump down on whatever horizontal surface was nearest available to him. They hadn’t reached that point yet in the course of their afternoon together.

Louis was sprawled out on Harry’s duvet while the boy in question skipped around the room in time with whatever song was playing on his iPod: currently something jazzy that Louis had never heard before.

“Do you ever slow down?” Louis asked, phone in his hands. He had an unread message from Hannah that he was still contemplating opening.

“Don’t be such an old fogey,” Harry said as he pirouetted toward the bed. He collapsed down next to Louis, pressing the lines of their bodies together tight so he wouldn’t fall off the edge. “Budge over, will you?” he added with a gentle shove, clearly not satisfied with the space Louis had left him on the mattress.

Louis acquiesced and moved over the few inches into the wall next to Harry’s bed, where he had
posters hung up just above their heads. Louis’s eyes lingered on the one of Freddie Mercury for a long moment before he turned back to the phone in his hand and opened Hannah’s message with a sigh.

He wouldn’t have said they were on the rocks—far from it—but spending so much time away from home had been taking its toll on the relationship, judging by Hannah’s increasingly frequent messages and their progressively desperate tones. Sometimes it was nice to have the distraction. Other times, well….

“Who’s that?” Harry asked, nodding his head toward Louis’s phone before going back to bopping his head along with the song that had just started playing.

“My girlfriend.”

Harry’s forehead creased slightly, and he rolled off the bed and onto the floor. “Ow,” he said pathetically, just a tangle of too-long limbs lying on the rug.

Louis couldn’t help but laugh. “Careful,” he warned. If they were with the rest of the lads, their roles likely would have been reversed, with Louis acting as the class clown and Harry watching fondly while Louis made a fool of himself. It was refreshing, Louis thought, to not feel pressured to be the centre of attention for once.

Harry ignored him and clambered up to his chest of drawers to change the song. The first few notes of the bassline had just started to play when Harry shot over to where Louis was still splayed out on the bed. He grabbed for Louis’s hands, causing him to drop his phone down on the bed, Hannah’s text unanswered—soon forgotten.

Louis was caught up in a dizzying whirlwind of sight, sound, and smell—he was close enough to Harry now that he could see the sheen of sweat on his brow as they spun around in circles in the middle of Harry’s bedroom floor.

They were only dancing (if it even counted as such) for less than a minute before Harry’s foot caught a stray sock lying on the ground, sending him flying. He landed flat on his back with Louis following him down less than a second later.

The song was still playing as they lay there with their limbs tangled up in each other, just trying to catch their breath. *But I’m dancing in the moonlight, it’s caught me in its spotlight*….

Louis picked himself up off of Harry and scooted back against the bed. Harry didn’t move, gazing back at Louis from his starfish-position on the rug.

“What’s your girlfriend’s name?” he asked suddenly, as Louis was still trying to catch his breath.

“What? Oh, Hannah.”

“Is she pretty?”

Louis blinked twice at Harry in bewilderment. No one had ever asked him something like that before, and he wasn’t quite sure how to respond. “Yeah? Of course.” Louis couldn’t decipher the expression on Harry’s face as he closed his eyes without replying and nodded along to the song still playing from the dresser.

*But it's a habit worth forming, if it means to justify the end.*
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay on this one, real life got in the way a little bit, but I'll try to keep updates as frequent as possible. As always, please let me know what you think! I love hearing from people.

Follow me on Twitter for more writing goodies: @vondrostes (personal) & @vondrostes (writing updates)

February 4, 2021

Los Angeles, California

“Do you think we should start breaking the news soon?”

Gemma’s quiet voice cut through the haze of memory filling Louis’s brain as the song faded away into silence. He hit pause quickly, before his phone had a chance to transition to the next track in the playlist. He hadn’t changed his mind about taking the listening process slowly. Louis knew he needed the mental buffers between each song—between each reminder.

“What do you mean?” Louis was panicking slightly at the thought that she might be suggesting going public with this so soon. “Who doesn’t know?”

“Well, I’ve only told you, really,” Gemma confessed, glancing over at him briefly with a look of chagrin. “Mum already knows because Kari called her before she called me, but that’s it.”

“Harry’s not…seeing anyone who should know?” Louis asked cautiously. He knew he needed to tread carefully here.

Gemma’s eyes hardened as she stared out at the road again. “As far as I’m aware, he hasn’t really been dating lately.”

“How long is ‘lately’?” Louis knew immediately that he was pushing it, but he couldn’t help his curiosity.

Gemma cast him a look that conveyed her annoyance with the question. “I don’t know, Louis, a year? Does it really matter? You know all those tabloid rumours about him are a load of nonsense anyway.” She sighed. “I just thought maybe someone should tell the others, you know, before we have to make an announcement or something.”

Louis wondered if telling ‘the others’ necessitated including Zayn for all of half a second before deciding it would be embarrassingly petty to neglect to tell him something this important just because of an old grudge. Harry would have appreciated the evidence of Louis’s maturity—would appreciate it, once he was awake to know about it.

“Oh okay,” Louis said. “I can ring them now, if you want.”
“I think that’d be a good idea,” Gemma replied distantly. She was focusing intently on the road, which would have been admirable if they weren’t currently sitting at a stoplight. But Louis couldn’t begrudge Gemma her small distractions.

He was already midway through pulling up Niall’s number when he realised that this might be a conversation he’d rather have privately. Though, there was also the fact that it wasn’t the best news to break in full over the phone, so he decided just after dialling to leave out most of the gory details.

It went straight to voicemail.

Louis lowered the phone from his ear with a frown.

“No luck?” Gemma asked, glancing over to check on his progress. In the split second that she looked away, someone on their left honked and passed her. “Arsehole,” she muttered under her breath. “Which one was it?”

“Niall,” Louis told her. He scrolled back up to Liam in his contacts, noting not for the first time that his address book was overly bloated and could use a trim. “ Didn’t even ring.”

“Must have his phone off.”

“Must.”

Louis lifted his phone again and hoped for better luck with Liam. Louis and Liam still kept in fairly regular contact, so he was hopeful, but there were always scheduling issues, time differences, kids, and so forth to get in the way, so nothing was guaranteed. Louis was happy with their two phone calls a month. This would be their first in February. They were starting out on a low note, it seemed.

Liam picked up after three rings. “Hey, mate, I saw the news. It’s not one of your sisters is it?”

Louis had conveniently forgotten that the cancellation of his Munich show was already public knowledge, and that Liam—being the ever-faithful hype-man during his own personal hiatus, would be watching for news about Louis more than ever.

“Right, yeah,” Louis said awkwardly. “Actually, that’s kind of why I called you. It’s not any of my sisters—or Ernie—it’s, well…. He tried to think of a way to ease into it; and came up empty. “I’m actually not home right now. I’m in LA. With Gemma.”

“Gemma?” Liam sounded every bit as bemused by the revelation as Louis had expected. “Is she all right?”

“She’s fine. It’s Harry, actually.” Louis paused, but Liam remained silent. “Something happened. He’s….not doing so well, right now.”

There was another beat of silence before Liam finally responded. “Why are you there?” He seemed to realise almost immediately how harsh he’d sounded. “Sorry,” he amended. “I just meant…is it really that bad?”

“Yes,” Louis said bluntly, without offering up any other details.

Liam sighed, and Louis could suddenly hear shuffling sounds, the faint hum of a TV in the background. “I’m booking a flight,” he replied, his voice sounding more distant now. He must have put his phone on speaker. “It looks like it’s going to be a few days, though, so just keep me
If Harry dies, Louis caught himself thinking, before just as quickly berating himself for even allowing the thought to cross his mind.

“Yeah, of course,” he said hazily. “Listen, I know we haven’t really had a chance to chat yet, but I’ve still got to call Zayn and let him know as well, so I’ll let you go now, all right?”

There was a brief pause before Liam responded. “I could call him for you if you’d rather,” he said. Louis shook his head instinctively. “No. No, that’s all right. I should do it.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Yeah, thanks, mate. I’ll talk to you soon, yeah? Just let me know when you’re getting in.”

“Good luck, man.”

Louis felt warmer after talking to Liam for even the briefest amount of time. He was always surprised after their conversations, always taken aback by the stark realisation that, yes, he was lonely. It was hard to make real friends doing what he did, and harder still to put in the work to maintain those friendships when everything in life seemed to conspire to get in the way.

It was ironic, almost, that the worst thing Harry could have done might have led to Louis finally being able to connect with someone again in a way that wasn’t at least partially professional.

That fleeting feeling of warmth vanished almost as soon as Louis dialled Zayn. It rang, and rang, and rang, and still Louis waited, until finally the call just disconnected without so much as option to leave a message.

“Fuck you very much,” Louis muttered under his breath with a pointed glare at the screen of his phone.

“Didn’t go well, I take it?” Gemma asked.

Louis looked up to discover that they had arrived at the hotel without him noticing. Gemma dutifully put on her indicator and slowly turned into the entrance for the guest parking as he mulled over how much he wanted to complain about Zayn and Niall.

He settled for less. “Only managed to get a hold of Liam,” Louis told her. “I’ll try the other two again later. Busy schedules, you know.”

Gemma hummed in agreement, but he could tell from the tension at the corner of her lips that she could probably guess that Zayn, at least, was ignoring him on purpose. Niall could very well be busy. Or asleep. Last Louis had heard, Niall was still in the process of working on his next album, so all bets were off, really.

Gemma parked her little sedan in neatly between two SUVs, but didn’t shut off the car or make any other movements at all for several seconds. Finally, her hand slid off the gear-shift into her lap and she stared straight ahead for several seconds while Louis looked over at her in confusion, wondering if he was meant to get out by himself or something.

Louis was just about ready to ask Gemma if she was all right when she finally opened her mouth to speak.
“Can we listen to one more before we go in?”

Her voice, plaintive, almost tearful, kept Louis trapped in his seat. His fingers fumbled for his phone. “Yeah,” he told her placatingly, in the same tone of voice he might have used with one of his younger siblings. “Yeah, right, of course.”

He struggled a moment longer to bring up the list of songs, quickly selected the fourth one down, and hit play.

October 19, 2010

London, England

Louis could rarely get a moment to himself in the X Factor house, but even rarer was a moment alone with just Harry where the two of them could exist quietly together without interruption or the pressure of knowing they had somewhere to be in the next ten minutes. Everything was go, go, go, all the time, and Louis could already feel himself burning out.

Louis tipped his head onto Harry’s shoulder and dutifully sent a text back to his mum. She was inundating him with messages. It was all standard fare: How are you? Are you doing all right? How are the boys? I miss you.

The hand that came up from behind to tangle itself in Louis’s hair was no longer unexpected. He and Harry were both just tactile people. It was how they communicated. Maybe it was just a consequence of growing up influenced by their mothers and sisters, but whatever the reason, it was nice to find someone who did things the same way.

“Tired?” Louis asked after Harry’s fifth yawn. He’d been reading a magazine, some rag Liam had gotten after finding out they’d been mentioned once in a miniscule blurb about the show itself, while listening to music with just one earbud in. The other one was lying loose against his chest in open invitation for Louis to put in so that he could listen too.

Louis hadn’t yet taken him up on it because he’d been expecting his mum to call, but a work thing had come up unexpectedly on her end, which meant that it would probably be another few days before the two had a chance to really talk.

Harry waved a contentious hand but yawned again immediately after and leaned his head against the top of Louis’s. “No phone call, then?” he asked. If Louis didn’t know better, he might have thought Harry sounded hopeful.

Louis shook his head and gave Harry’s shoulder a friendly shove. “Don’t be a twat, Harold.”
“No, I’m serious!” He clearly hadn’t been serious in the slightest to start, but Harry possessed a charming commitment to his jokes, particularly the ones people tried to challenge him on. “Tell me all your troubles, Lou, and I will give you my best motherly advice. I’ll even throw in a bedtime story and a lullaby for free.”

Louis bit down on the ‘I bet you will’ that threatened to escape his mouth and allowed a casual laugh to slip out instead. “I’m not gonna whine to you like I’m a child, Harry. I’m eighteen. I’m fine. I can handle it.” By the time he’d finished speaking, Louis wasn’t quite sure if he was more trying to convince Harry or himself of that fact.

Harry’s joking demeanour suddenly vanished, replaced instead by a concerned expression that pained Louis to look at for more than a second at a time. “So there is something wrong,” Harry surmised.

Louis sighed, more annoyed with himself for being roped into having a heart-to-heart he really wasn’t in the mood for than Harry for roping him into it. “It’s nothing, Harry, really.”

But Harry was never one to back down. He scrambled onto the floor, getting on his knees in front of Louis, who was still sitting on the couch with his legs askew—and Louis really didn’t want to think about the slight twinge that started at the base of his spine when Harry leaned forward and grabbed for Louis’s hands. “Please, Lou, you can tell me anything, come on. I won’t laugh if it’s embarrassing. I swear.”

Louis sighed again, rolling his eyes. But already he could feel his own reticence crumbling under the unstoppable force of Harry’s puppy-dog gaze.

“It’s just—I don’t know.” Louis exhaled roughly, trying to find anything to focus on other than Harry’s piercing green eyes as he struggled to find the right words. “It’s the solos, I guess,” he settled on after a moment, feeling just a bit breathless as he spoke. “Or well, the lack of them.” His face was burning as he continued, but true to his word, there was no trace of judgment in Harry’s eyes as he gazed up innocently at Louis. “It just feels like, I don’t know, like there’s no real reason for me to be in the band, I guess.”

Harry’s grip around Louis’s fingers tightened. He spoke fiercely. “Well, for one, I don’t know what I’d do without you around,” he said. “Promise you won’t leave,” he pleaded.

“I’m not going to leave,” Louis said with an exasperated sigh. Harry, Harry, Harry. Always with the dramatics. “I just feel like they don’t really want me to sing, I suppose. Like I’m not good enough for that.”

Harry released Louis’s hands and suddenly surged up to cup Louis’s face instead. “You are good enough,” he said fervently, and the look on his face was so deadly serious that Louis couldn’t help but laugh. “I mean it!” Harry cried out in faux-offense. His voice cracked on the last syllable and he abruptly let go of Louis to cover his own mouth.

“I know, I know,” Louis reassured him, still laughing.

Harry almost looked like he might cry. “I’d miss you,” he said through the tangle of his fingers over his mouth.

“I’d miss you, too.”

February 4, 2021
Louis had to reach further than he’d had with the others to remember the date in question. Harry and he had been together so often during X Factor that it all just sort of blended together afterwards in a muddy haze. But those moments alone with Harry…they were like diamonds strewn throughout the sand, shining brightly even from a distance.

There was a long silence from Gemma after the song finally finished, and even after she shut off the engine, Louis didn’t dare get out of the car until she was ready.

“Do you…” Gemma said slowly after nearly a minute had passed. She was staring straight ahead still, hands on either side of the steering wheel. “Do you know why he left it for you?”

Louis wasn’t sure if she was asking why Harry had left the songs for him, rather than anyone else, or why he’d chosen to leave him songs, specifically. He decided to address it as the former, since it was easier to come up with an answer he thought would satisfy her.

“We were friends for a long time,” he said. “Maybe he just wanted to leave something to remember him by. Harry’s sentimental like that.”

Louis remembered all the things Harry used to keep stashed away in the back of his closet, holey boots, a lipstick-stained coat, staunchly refusing to throw them away despite his better sense. There was nothing more on-brand for Harry than writing a collection of unreleased songs and leaving them in lieu of an actual suicide note with an enigmatic letter addressed to someone he hadn’t properly spoken to in years.

Louis was tempted to add in a jab about Harry’s narcissism and a post-humous album release, but one look at Gemma’s face told him that would be a very, very bad idea.

“He didn’t leave anything for Niall,” she pointed out.

Louis shrugged, trying to remain nonchalant. “I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not a mind-reader.” Unbidden, Harry’s voice from the recording sprang to his mind: *I’m sure you can figure it out.*

Maybe he didn’t want to, he told the little voice in the back of his head with no small measure of spite.

Gemma’s face still wore the look of someone who wasn’t buying the bullshit Louis was trying to feed her, but she didn’t push it. Finally, she stepped out of the car, and Louis followed her with a sigh of relief.

Louis wasn’t lying about not being able to read minds, but the same couldn’t be said for the Styles Clan. Harry had always been shrewder than most people gave him credit for, and the same was true for Gemma, who could sniff out untrustworthiness like a bloodhound. By the time they exited the car together, Louis felt as if he’d just undergone a particularly gruelling session with his therapist. Gemma hadn’t asked him much at all, but Louis knew that she’d seen entirely too much.

The next bombshell dropped while the two of them were walking back to the hotel lobby. “If you’re planning to stay more than a few days,” Gemma said casually, “you’ll want to rent a flat at the complex on Sherbourne. You’ll have more than enough privacy there; I already checked. It’s popular with celebs.”

Louis winced a little at the implication, but it wasn’t like she was wrong. “What about you?” he
countered. She was, after all, still staying at the same hotel she was recommending he should leave. And if anyone was in it for the long haul, one would’ve assumed it’d be Harry’s only sister.

“I’m just waiting till Mum gets in,” Gemma replied, as casual as could be.

Louis stopped cold right there in the middle of the carpark once his brain had registered what exactly she’d just said.

Anne was on her way here. Of course. Louis was a fucking idiot. He’d forgotten all about Anne. *Fuck.* He hadn’t seen Anne in years, and he couldn’t think of a worse context for a reunion than at her son’s bedside. *Fuck.* She was gonna kill him.
Chapter 5

February 4, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis hadn’t brought much of anything with him, but his arms were still burning by the time he and Mark had finished carrying everything from the car to the condo on Sherbourne that Gemma had recommended. Both units on either side of Louis were currently unoccupied, according to the landlord; Louis wasn’t quite sure yet how he’d feel knowing Gemma and Anne were living on the other side of his bedroom wall.

As he got settled in, Louis realised he was going to have to have Mark make a run to the shops for the essentials. If he was staying here longer than a few days—Louis had rented the condo out for two weeks, though there was no guarantee he would actually be here that long—he needed to make the place liveable. And he definitely needed more than the tiny travel-size bathroom kit he’d brought with him on the plane.

Louis mulled over what to do with Mark in the next few days as he set about taking the fully furnished condo apart and re-organising things to his specifications. It wasn’t that he hated having Mark around, in fact, they were as close as could be for employer and employee without bending those boundaries like Louis had with Sam, but he felt bad dragging Mark into a situation neither of them had been prepared for.

The days of Louis being mobbed wherever he went by paparazzi had faded in the last couple years, not so much due to a drop in profile but rather the tabloid industry itself becoming increasingly irrelevant and highly regulated—particularly in Europe, where Louis chose to spend most of his time these days.

Mark was on retainer for the tour, only. For the rest of the year, he was free to spend time with his sister and her kids up on their ranch in Fort Bragg. If Louis had an event come up unexpectedly, he simply flew Mark out for the week, and then sent him right back home with a hefty paycheque for his trouble.

Despite knowing that Mark was nothing like the overbearing handlers he used to have back in the days of One Direction, Louis simply valued his freedom now more than ever. And he wasn’t so
detached that he couldn’t recognise when to give his employees a well-deserved break.

Louis slid the coffee table a couple inches closer to the sectional and made a mental note to have a chat with Mark later, after he’d had a chance to talk to Sam about his plans.

But Louis had one very important thing to take care of before any of that.

He flopped down onto his back on the plush leather sofa and sighed as he pulled out his phone. Things had been perfectly civil between them now for years (and Louis didn’t really want to put too much thought into why that was) but that didn’t mean he enjoyed having to talk to Briana about anything, particularly not this sort of thing. He knew she was going to be all out of sorts if he so much as mentioned Harry, which meant lying to her, which meant coming up with a believable cover story, and Louis wasn’t confident at all in his ability to fabricate something on the fly.

Louis settled on keeping things as vague as possible. If pressed, he’d mention Fizzy, and hopefully Briana would drop it.

He pressed the phone icon next to her name with a sigh and leant his head back to stare out the blinds as it rang.

“Louis?” she said by way of greeting. He couldn’t tell if she was annoyed yet, but maybe that was a good thing.

“I’m in LA,” he said quickly. “And before you ask, no, I couldn’t have let you know in advance. It was kind of an emergency situation.”

“What kind of emergency situation?” she parroted back to him.

Louis had to swallow another sigh. “The kind that involves someone being in hospital. I’m letting you know now because it looks like I’m gonna be in town a while. I was wondering if I could drop by and see Freddie while I’m here, maybe.”

There was an extended silence on the other end of the line. “Do you know when you’d want him?” she finally asked.

“Not really. It’s all kind of up in the air right now. Remind me of his schedule?” He tried to keep track of Freddie as much as possible, but it was hard to wrap his mind around the constant time-differences. He knew Freddie had school, but he couldn’t remember what days or times off the top of his head.

It was her turn to sigh, which she did without reserve. “He has school in the mornings, Monday through Thursday. If you want to take him, just give me a heads-up at least the night before, okay?”

“Yeah, of course.”

There was another lengthy silence. “Is that all you called about?” Briana asked.

“Yeah, yes, sorry, I’ll let you go.” They exchanged stilted goodbyes before hanging up, and then Louis set his phone down against his sternum with another sigh.

One call down, two to go.

Louis was still waiting for Sam to pick up when Mark popped his head back in to check on him. “Do you want me to grab some lunch while I’m out?” he asked.
“Yes, that would be lovely,” Louis replied just as the call connected.

“Hello?”

“What are you thinking?” Mark continued.

“Sam, hang on,” Louis said before bringing his phone down again with a pensive frown. He hadn’t realised how hungry he really was until Mark had posed the question. “Uh, Mexican?” They were in California, after all. Might as well take advantage of the opportunity to eat something that could at least pass for authentic.

“Fajitas okay?”

“No,” Louis snapped, far too quickly. Even Mark looked taken aback by the response, and Louis could feel his cheeks reddening in embarrassment. “I mean, just find a good enchilada place or something. Might as well get a good sampling while you’re at it; we have the fridge space for leftovers.”

“Okay.” Mark was out the door with no further discussion.

Louis placed his phone back against his ear just in time to hear Sam say, “What’s wrong with fajitas?”

“Nothing,” he bit out. “I didn’t call you to discuss my dining choices, Sam.”

“Right, sorry. What’s the sitch?”

Louis sat up with a wince and a groan. Not even thirty and his body was already twinging in all the wrong places. “Harry’s in the hospital,” he told her. He wondered if saying it would get easier the more he had to do it. Right now, it felt like pulling out a molar with rusty pliers.

“Harry Styles?”

“No, Prince Harry,” he retorted quickly, before realising he was being unnecessarily mean. “Sorry, I’m just….”

“It’s fine.”

Louis was grateful she didn’t say something like, ‘I’m used to it’, even though that would have been true as well. “What did Gemma say to you when you talked to her on the phone?” he asked, curious how Sam had known to book him a flight when she didn’t seem to know how Harry was even involved.

“That something had happened and she needed to see you.” Sam coughed lightly. “She sounded like she’d been crying, so…. I would have just cancelled the flight if it turned out to not be important.”

Louis shook his head in awed disbelief. He wouldn’t have traded Sam for the world. “Well, you were right as it turns out,” he said, gritting his teeth against the worst he would have to say next. “Harry tried to kill himself,” he uttered, rapid-fire. “He’s in a coma right now.”

There was a short inhalation on Sam’s end that Louis couldn’t interpret, but she recovered quickly. “I can book a flight right now.”

Louis nodded even though she couldn’t see. “That’ll be a big help. I’m thinking about sending
Mark home, actually, once you get here. I’m staying practically across the street from Cedars-Sinai, so the security detail doesn’t really feel necessary.”

“All right, I’ll make a note and arrange it with him once I get there.”

“Thanks,” Louis replied. He closed his eyes as a surge of relief coursed through him. There was no better feeling than knowing that Sam would take care of whatever was stressing him out at the moment—to the limits of her own abilities, at least. She couldn’t do anything about Harry, unfortunately.

“Is there anything else you want me to take care of in the meantime?”

Louis took a deep breath. “Loop Jaime in, if you don’t mind. We should probably discuss the tour thing.”

“On it,” Sam replied without missing a beat.

Louis worried at his bottom lip while the two of them waited for the call to connect. There was a click and a loud sigh of exasperation announcing Jaime’s arrival. “What do you want now?” she demanded. Louis could hear the chatter of kids in the background amongst the sounds of pots and pans banging about. It probably wasn’t the best time for shop talk but he wanted to get this over with.

“Sam?” he said instead, reverting immediately to a helpless child in the face of Jaime’s wrath.

Jaime wasn’t having it. “You already had Sam doing your dirty work when she told me about the Munich cancellation,” she retorted before Sam had a chance to speak.

“Well, that’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about,” Louis said. Or rather, that’s what he wanted Sam to talk to Jaime about, but evidently, he wouldn’t be getting off quite that easy. “I think I’m going to be here a while.”

“In LA?”

“Yes.”

Jaime’s response was barely coherent. “You can’t just—not when I’m trying to—every time something goes right you have to—why can’t you just make things easy for once?”

Louis grimaced and tried to wait Jaime out. “You done?” he asked once there was a break in her fruitless ranting.

There was a loud metallic clang from Jaime’s end. From the complete silence coming out of Sam, Louis guessed she had either muted herself or was trying her hardest not to so much as breathe.

“Are you?” Jaime roared. “Really, Tomlinson? How the—how the devil am I supposed to spin half a leg of rescheduling so you can cavort around in America for god knows how long?”

“Family emergency,” Louis replied desperately. “Like you said. Sam, please help.” God, he wished she would calm down. Jaime was a great manager, but Louis didn’t think he would ever not be terrified of her on some level.

“Sam…” Jaime urged, more than a little threateningly. Louis shuddered to think of what her kids must be subjected to.
Sam cleared her throat and explained the situation regarding Harry as delicately as possible. Jaime, to her credit, managed to stay quiet until Sam had finished, and by the time she spoke up again, her tone had shifted to one more appropriate for business.

“We’ll keep feeding the press information about you being at home,” Jaime told them. “I’ll come up with mock dates for rescheduling—there’s a block between South and North America that we should be able to fit the remaining shows into.”

“That sounds good to me,” Louis said, though he knew he wouldn’t feel the same in a month when he was doing show after show with barely enough of a break to get to the next venue in between.

“If anything happens, make sure someone lets me know—LILY! PUT THAT DOWN!” Louis had to pull the phone away from his ear as Jaime started to scream at her kids, who had apparently begun to misbehave during their phone call. Then the yelling abruptly stopped, leaving Louis with just a dull ringing in his ears in its absence.

“Was that you?” Louis inquired, wondering if Sam had disconnected the call herself just to spare them both.

“Nope.”

“Well, thank god, anyway. I thought I was about to go deaf.”

Sam didn’t laugh.

Louis sighed. “When’s the soonest you can get a flight?” he asked her.

“Probably not till the end of the week. Is that gonna work for you?”

Louis hummed noncommittally. “I’ll make do in the meantime. Let me know if something changes.”

“All right,” Sam said. Her voice softened a little. “Good luck, Lou. I hope he wakes up soon.”

“Yeah. Yeah, me too.”

Louis felt as if what little energy he’d had was nearly depleted after hanging up with her. He set his phone down carefully on the coffee table and laid back down on the sectional again, pressing his cheek into the cool leather as he tried to measure his breathing. It didn’t help. The silence throughout the flat felt almost oppressive. The heavily insulated walls blocked out every decibel of the bustling city just outside.

Louis contemplated putting on some white noise but in the process of reaching for his phone, remembered the playlist and glanced at the next track in the list instead. He frowned at the date. It wasn’t the most pleasant of memories to recall now. He wasn’t sure why Harry would have even remembered it himself, let alone chosen it as writing inspiration. They’d barely spoken at all that day.

With curiosity now outweighing his reluctance, Louis quickly popped in his earbuds and hit play.

November 4, 2010

Doncaster, England
Louis still wasn’t quite sure what had possessed him to do this.

In a long history of dumb decisions, this had to be one of the dumbest. And yet, it hadn’t fully hit him just how stupid he’d been until he’d made it to his mother’s front stoop, hand already outstretched to knock.

The door swung open before he had a chance. Louis stepped back instinctively, ready to turn tail and run if things went south, but he paused once he caught sight of his mother’s worried visage.

“Louis?” she asked with an anxious glance to either side of him, like she expected a mob scene or the cops. He felt like a fugitive. “What are you doing here?”

Louis stepped inside without answering and remained stood in the entryway as his mum slowly closed the door behind him. He realised he was shivering even though he was out of the cold now and forced his body to remain still as he soaked in the warmer air inside the house.

Jay was still staring at him with some measure of trepidation, but it felt softer now that they were no longer standing on either side of the doorway. “Come on,” she said finally. “Let’s make you some tea.”

Louis sniffled as he followed her into the kitchen. It was almost too quiet in the house; it didn’t feel right to not hear his sisters shrieking as they chased each other around, fighting almost incessantly. “Where are the girls?” he asked as Jay filled up the kettle with water.

“Playdate,” she replied wearily. “I needed them out of the house for a few hours so I could catch up on sleep.”

“I didn’t wake you, did I?”

She shook her head. “I saw the car parked out front through the window.” Well, that explained how she knew Louis was there before he’d even knocked. “What’s wrong, baby?” she asked in a low voice, reaching out to take his hands. “I thought you weren’t supposed to come home yet.”

“We’re not,” Louis replied uncertainly. He gazed down at his mother’s hands, wondering how to articulate any of the thoughts swirling around dizzily inside his head. “I just needed a break for a little while. Get my head on straight.” He winced inwardly at the figure of speech he’d chosen without thinking.

Jay’s face creased in concern. “Did something happen?”

Louis couldn’t bear to meet her eyes for longer than a second. “I think Harry might have a crush on me?” he managed in a tiny voice.

Jay’s expression didn’t change a bit. “What would make you say that?”

“I don’t know,” Louis grumbled as his face quickly turned red. “How are you supposed to tell with boys?”

“How are you supposed to tell when it’s a girl?”

Louis gave his mother a pained look and she let out a sigh, releasing his hands to get out two mugs for their tea from the cupboard. “Is it such a big deal if he likes you, Louis? I thought I’d taught you better than that.”
“It’s not him that’s the problem,” Louis retorted defensively, pulling a critical eyebrow from Jay in response. “One of the producers called me in today to talk about our ‘behaviour’ on camera,” he told her, using air quotes to make his opinion on the matter even clearer.

Jay paused and slowly set the mugs down on the counter next to the sink. “Ah.”

“Yes.”

“But they singled you out,” Jay said slowly, “not Harry.”

Louis shifted uncomfortably, crossing and uncrossing his arms as he tried to find a position that didn’t feel stiff and awkward. “Yeah, I guess ‘cos I’m older, maybe.”

“Maybe,” she agreed easily, but there was a note in her voice that Louis couldn’t put a name to. “Are you worried about what it means for the band, Harry having a crush on you?”

“I don’t know,” Louis confessed. “I guess I’m just worried about him, what people will say if they find out.” He sighed deeply. “I’m sure he’ll get over it soon, anyway. Right now, I’m just shiny and new is all.”

Jay laughed fondly and pulled him in close for a quick hug just as the kettle started to whistle on the cooktop. “Don’t sell yourself short, baby. Anybody—boy or girl—would be lucky to have you.” She quickly poured their tea and handed Louis his mug. “Have your cuppa, then you have to go back, all right? Don’t come back here until you win the bloody thing.”

Louis savoured his tea, exchanged his tearful goodbyes with his mother (wishing all the while that he could have stayed a bit longer just to see his sisters), and headed back out to his car. But he didn’t start the engine immediately after getting in, first pulling out his phone and hitting redial on the last number that had called him, leaving a stack of missed call notifications in the process.

Louis’s heart hurt as it pounded a violent staccato rhythm against his ribcage while he waited for Harry to pick up.

He finally did so partway through the pre-recorded voicemail message, sounding hoarse and frayed at the edges. “What the hell, Louis?”

“Hey, Haz.”

“Don’t call me that,” Harry snapped. “You said you wouldn’t leave,” he added, sounding near tears already.

Louis found himself wondering if this was going to become a pattern, if every decision he made was destined to make Harry cry. “I’m coming back,” he reassured him. “I just went to my mum’s. I’m coming back right now.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Harry demanded, but underneath Louis could hear the truth. Why wouldn’t you tell me?

“I’m sorry,” Louis told him, not sure what else he could say without revealing his own shameful truth. He rationalised the omission by telling himself it would only hurt Harry more to hear it. “I’m on my way back right now, I promise.”

Harry hung up with a stifled sob, leaving Louis sat in silence once more.
Louis was still staring down at his phone, filled with some as yet undetermined emotion, when he heard the door to the condo unlocking. The sound sent him into a brief flurry of panic, ending with him stashing his phone between the cushions of the sectional before realising he was being absurd.

Mark gave Louis a strange look as he walked into the kitchen laden with burlap bags containing groceries and what smelled like fresh Mexican cuisine. Louis scooped his phone back up again and hurried over to help.

Once everything perishable had been put safely into the refrigerator, Louis and Mark pulled out two of the stools surrounding the kitchen island and began to dig into their food.

“Any plans for the rest of the day?” Mark inquired between bites.

Louis shook his head. “Nah, if you want to cut loose you’re welcome to the car.”

Mark nodded in acknowledgement and took another huge bite of his burrito. They finished eating in a matter of minutes, both of their bodies starved for a supply of energy to stave away the residual jetlag. And then almost as soon as he was done with his food, Mark was gone, leaving Louis alone again in the empty condo with nothing to occupy himself but his own thoughts.

He spared a brief moment of contemplation in favour of going back to the hospital to visit Harry, but Louis knew he wasn’t in the best state of mind. He didn’t want to subject Gemma to that. Didn’t want to subject himself to having to see Harry’s face.

So he sat quietly at the island, allowing himself to wallow in self-pity, and settled for the next best thing.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I also posted an 11k oneshot recently on AO3 so please give that a read? :) Feel free to chat with me on Twitter!

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostesupd8s
Tumblr: @vondrostes

December 3, 2010
London, England

“What are you doing?” Louis asked, glancing up at Harry as he battled the ham in the bottom of the frying pan with a pair of tongs.

Harry had his phone held straight out and pointed directly at Louis, his tongue just sticking out between his lips in concentration. “Giving the fans what they want.”

“And what’s that?” Louis inquired amicably.

“A man who can cook.”

Louis laughed and let go of the tongs for a moment. “Let me see it,” he said, beckoning toward Harry.

Harry pulled his phone in closer to his body. Never a good sign. “It’s fine,” he said. Definitely a lie.

“Let me see,” Louis insisted, leaping forward to snatch Harry’s phone out of his hands. He groaned at the image awaiting him on the screen, but it was too late to do anything about it now. Harry had already tweeted it, and it would just cause more of a fuss if it were deleted now. “I look awful,” he lamented. “I would have dressed up a bit if I’d known you were going to play photographer.”

“You look fine,” Harry argued. “I think it’s cute.”

“You think everything’s cute. You probably look at the world and only see Care Bears and rainbows.”

“Maybe so,” Harry replied with a small smile playing at the corner of his lips. “But that doesn’t mean it’s a bad photo.”

Louis rolled his eyes and handed the phone back to Harry, who quickly tucked it into his pocket for safekeeping, as if Louis hadn’t already had his chance to sabotage the tweet. “Go sit down, Harold,” he admonished. “I’m nearly finished here.”

Harry stuck his tongue out in protest but meekly trotted away on his deerlike legs after one
scolding look from Louis.

By the time everything was ready, Louis was sweaty, had singed fingers, and was pretty sure he never wanted to cook another meal again for as long as he lived, but it was done. Finally.

Harry stared at Louis almost accusatorily as he looked at the neat plates Louis set down at the table in front of him. Louis was nothing if not a perfectionist. “I thought you couldn’t cook.”

“I said I didn’t cook,” Louis corrected him, “not that I couldn’t.” Of course, now after the ordeal of his first cooking experience, Louis was pretty sure both statements could be considered true. His mother had certainly never seemed to have quite as much trouble, even with more complicated dishes.

Harry took a hearty sniff of his plate and sighed. He blinked bashfully up at Louis while Louis tucked a napkin into his lap and poured them both a glass of sparkling juice—apple, because he knew Harry would prefer it to any of the other flavours Louis had seen on the shelf.

This was all an apology of sorts, at least from Louis’s point of view. Things had been a little tense for them over the past month, both on and off camera, though they’d done their best not to show it. Louis had gotten his talking-tos from nearly everyone he knew at the X Factor, and some people he didn’t, both for his runaway stunt as well as the scrutiny on his friendship with Harry.

He’d taken it upon himself to not let that get in the way of things, particularly the band’s progress, but it had been hard. Things just seemed to get worse and worse the longer the show went on. One Direction may have been winning in the eyes of the public, week after week, but Louis felt like he was slowly losing his grasp on everything else.

Louis was worried now that things would take a sharp nosedive when this ride finally ended. Harry had somehow insinuated himself into Louis’s mental categorization of ‘best friend’, without Louis even fully realising that it had happened, and he wasn’t sure what would happen to their friendship after the show, especially if they got kicked out in their next performance.

Louis wanted to have just this one night for a memory just in case it all went to hell on the weekend.

“Can I ask the chef what he’s prepared for us this evening?” Harry questioned archly, fumbling with his knife and fork as he examined his plate, nearly overflowing with food.

“Chicken wrapped in Parma ham,” Louis recited, feeling rather like a chef on a cooking programme, “with mashed potatoes and gravy.” He evaluated Harry’s trepidatious hands, hovering over the dish as if waiting permission to eat. “Go on, then,” Louis urged.

Harry lowered his fork to scoop up a bite and then delicately placed it against his outstretched tongue. Louis watched as he chewed pensively, his eyes trailing lower to the slope of Harry’s throat as he swallowed.

“So?” Louis prompted.

Harry wrinkled his nose. “Could use a bit more salt.” Louis had just enough time to let his face fall before Harry grinned back at him. “Kidding, Lou. It’s perfect.”

“You’re not just saying that?”

“When have I ever lied to you?”
Louis huffed. He would have flicked some mashed potato at Harry if he didn’t know that Harry would instantly escalate it and that the two of them would be left scrubbing gravy off the walls of the X Factor house until midnight.

Harry gave him a cheeky smile in response and enthusiastically scarfed down the rest of his meal. Louis caught himself stealing glances at Harry throughout. Checking to make sure he wasn’t faking it, Louis told himself, though he could feel the truth of it all simmering just under the surface of his rationalisations.

When Harry finished, he sat back with a heavy sigh and gazed over at Louis’s half-finished plate. “Not a fan of your own work?” he teased.

“My mouth’s not as big as yours,” Louis shot back. It was true, if a bit mean-spirited. He shoved in a huge forkful of chicken and nearly choked, almost as if to prove his point.

“Sounds like someone’s jealous.”

“Hardly.”

Harry cocked his head to the side and curved his lips into a crooked smirk. “Do I get any pudding?” he asked wryly.

Louis did choke a little then. “I’m afraid…” he said, struggling to catch his breath, “my culinary skills don’t really extend to baking.”

Harry emitted a disappointed hum. “Shame.” He leaned his head back, exposing the long line of his neck in full.

Louis had to rip his eyes away. When he finally finished his meal and looked up again, he was startled to discover that Harry had very quietly scooted his chair closer, until their thighs were almost touching.

“Are you nervous about the performance this week?” Harry asked him earnestly. He moved even nearer, until it felt like he was occupying every centimetre of Louis’s personal space.

“Are you?” Louis replied. It was hard to breathe but he couldn’t bring himself to mind.

“I asked you first.”

Louis thought about it. He shook his head. “No,” he said. “I think we’ll pull through.”

Apparently satisfied with the answer, Harry leaned back a little and put some space between the two of them once more. “When are the others due back?” he asked, almost a little too pointedly.

“Soon, I think,” Louis replied. He scraped his fork against the empty plate in looping circles. “You know them, they’ll get bored and come running straight back here to bother us.”

When Louis looked up again, Harry had turned away, a strange look on his face. He seemed vaguely disappointed, as if Louis had failed a test he hadn’t even known about. But it passed quickly, replaced by Harry’s trademark dopey grin.

“Thanks for dinner, Lou,” he said.

And then his arms were around Louis’s neck and Louis didn’t know what to do with himself. Slowly, he reached out to return the gesture, acutely aware of how odd it was to be hugging each
other like this while sitting, with Harry’s face buried in the side of Louis’s neck; Louis’s nose pressed into Harry’s curls.

Louis was struck by the sudden realisation that, more than anything, he didn’t want to let go.

February 4, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis flung his phone down with a huffy sigh.

He felt like a proper idiot now, an entire decade after the fact, for bringing up that fucking dinner at literally every opportunity just to lie about it. It had become almost routine in the end.

*What’s the most romantic thing you’ve ever done for a girl?*

*I cooked a meal once.*

Like most of the lies Louis now regretted, it had started off with a mostly sincere desire to tell the truth without actually telling the truth. It had just gotten away from him without even realising it. And after so many years, it had become something of a sore spot for both him and Harry. Louis couldn’t even eat anything that so much as resembled chicken-Parma anymore without it leaving a sour taste in his mouth.

The worst part of it now was that at first, Harry had gone with it. And then as it had gone on, and on, and on, Harry had resented him for it.

Even now Louis wished he’d had the foresight to just make up something instead, instead of sullying one of the one good memories they’d had together with his thinly-veiled honesty.

His self-directed frustration quickly turned outward, toward Harry. Was the track meant to be a ‘fuck you’ from beyond the grave? That seemed a little too vindictive for someone who had made kindness his mantra, but Louis supposed that he probably deserved it, after everything.

Louis moved back to the sectional. He flipped on the telly, settling for the first channel that wasn’t reality TV or political garbage. It didn’t make him feel any better. He couldn’t concentrate on any of the words, all the American accents flowing from the speakers just mixing together into an indecipherable mush that was easily drowned out by the maelstrom of his own thoughts.

Overwhelming nearly everything else now was the knowledge of Anne’s impending arrival. The thought of texting Gemma to ask when she was supposed to be getting in so Louis could make himself scarce crossed his mind, but he quickly discarded the idea, realising it would be childish. He couldn’t avoid Harry’s mum forever.

Louis pushed that out of his mind and forced himself to focus on the television again, but he had already lost the plot of whatever was going on onscreen. He switched channels again, hoping for something more engaging. And then again. But nothing seemed capable of holding his attention for more than a few minutes at a time.

Louis found himself wishing he was still staying at the SLS so he could help himself to the minibar, or that he hadn’t cut Mark loose for the day so he could have his bodyguard make a quick
shopping trip. Louis mulled this hardship over for a moment before abruptly remembering that it was 2021 and he could just have alcohol brought to him with the touch of a button thanks to modern technology.

Louis wasn’t much of a drinker anymore, having cast everything but social drinking by the wayside along with the partying of his youth, but he was known to indulge on occasion. Usually to self-medicate, and this would be no exception. There were far better ways of curbing a depressive episode, of course, but Louis was nothing if not a man of tradition.

He hastily typed the order into his phone, making sure to tick the box that said ‘leave at door for pickup’—he didn’t want to run the risk of the courier recognising him when he was supposed to be at home in England with his family.

The delivery arrived sooner than Louis expected, a little ping going off in his hand to notify him that the courier had dropped his items off at the door as requested. Louis was used to waiting in LA, where everyone seemed sun-drunk and sleepy and carefree all the time.

It was nothing like the hustle and bustle of London, which he supposed would explain why Harry had instantly fallen in love with it. Sometimes they’d teased Harry that he was secretly American at heart, that he’d been switched at birth with some poor English sod who’d been forced to grow up in California instead. Even the way Harry talked was more suited to the slurring drag of American consonants, barely vocalised before they collided into the next at a snail’s pace, like a car crash in slow motion.

And while Harry had long-since given his heart away to the City of Angels, Louis had only grown to resent it with each passing year. He could see past the sparkling city lights and the breezy blue skies now, and beyond that lay a sprawling graveyard of his own mistakes.

Louis padded over to the door and peeked out the peephole just to make sure the courier was gone before he opened it. There was no one in sight, but he still cracked the door open first, like he’d forgotten a towel after having a bath, before stepping out to collect the bags sitting out on the stoop. Louis kicked the door closed again and carried his things into the kitchen, setting them down on the countertop before pulling his phone out to close out the transaction.

He hit ‘confirm delivery’ and then stared at the tip screen for a few seconds before bumping the amount up to one-hundred percent. Just for the hell of it. Louis liked knowing that some kid’s day had just been made all because he was too depressed to function without being inebriated first. It almost made it all worth it, somehow.

Louis searched the cupboards for glasses, and upon finally finding some, filled one with ice from the freezer. He poured himself a rum and coke—mostly rum—and downed it quickly before making another.

By the time he started working on his third, he could feel the tell-tale buzzing in his brain confirming the alcohol was doing its job. Louis knew if he stopped now, he could ride out the afternoon feeling comfortably tipsy and would wake up in the morning none the worse for wear.

He downed a fourth. And then a fifth. And after that his stomach simply couldn’t handle any more liquid, so he moved out of the kitchen and back to the sectional, where he flopped down with a bloated, ungraceful burp. Louis’s hip crushed the remote, flipping through the channels for him at a rapid-fire pace. He let it go for a minute, just watching the flash of colours through his drunken haze before finally reaching under himself to try and find something more tolerable.

But everything was only slightly less grating than it had been when he was sober. Where was a
decent crime procedural when you needed it?

Eventually Louis lost his patience with the intricacies of trying to navigate the on-demand function of the cable box and he pulled out his phone with a sigh. He wasn’t quite drunk enough to think that calling Niall and Zayn again was a good idea, but he was contemplating subjecting himself to another song. He pulled up the playlist and scrolled until he got to the next in the list.

Louis squinted up at the date on the screen, trying to puzzle out the string of numbers slowly with his drink-addled brain. He nearly dropped the phone like it had caught fire in his hand when he figured it out. No, that one would have to wait.

He left his phone sitting abandoned on the sectional and moved back into the kitchen, where Mark had plugged in Louis’s laptop and placed it on the island. Louis opened it and clumsily typed his password. It took him four tries, nearly enough to lock himself out for an hour.

Louis opened his browser only to be faced with all his previous tabs he’d had open the last time he’d logged in. He exited out of two shopping carts, both with over a thousand pounds of impulse buys he’d hesitated to hit purchase on and moved over to Twitter instead.

News about the tour cancellation had spread quickly, but the response seemed to be more positive than negative. Louis made a note to send Jaime and his publicist flowers, and hoped he’d still remember in the morning. He crafted a vague message of appreciation to tweet out at the general public and then spent a few minutes responding to some of the tamer messages he received in response before going back to his timeline.

He scrolled for a few minutes and then froze.

Someone on his timeline had posted a link to a compilation of Harry’s old interviews and tagged him in it. Louis felt cold. Even though he knew it had to be a coincidence, he couldn’t shake the feeling that somehow, they knew. He hovered his cursor over the video in swirling indecision, and then against his better judgment, clicked.

They were clips Louis had seen dozens of times, in circumstances not so different from the one he found himself in now, but he still reached for the bottle of rum without even thinking and poured himself another drink. The number, the better, he thought to himself as his eyes remained glued to the screen. Glued to Harry’s face as he smiled at generic interviewer and talk show host alike, almost never really meaning it.

But Louis didn’t give a shit anymore. It was the closest he could get to seeing Harry’s smile again, and he didn’t care how fake or distant any of it was, because he was desperate, and he’d take what he could get.

At some point, Louis’s vision started to blur, and he was forced to close his laptop as seeing double threatened to make him vomit right there in the immaculately clean kitchen. With Mark gone, he’d be the one cleaning it up—or choking on it.

Louis just barely managed to stumble into the master bedroom and into the shower, without smashing his own head in. He somehow got the shower working on the first try, which would have been an admirable feat even if he were sober, and then shed all of his clothes without paying attention to where they landed.

Louis stepped under the spray and stood with his forehead pressed against the tile. He stayed there, unmoving, until the water started to go cold. Black spots danced around the edges of his vision as he switched the water off and climbed out of the shower as if he were just learning how to walk.
He didn’t remember the journey from the bathroom to his bed, only regaining awareness of his surroundings again just as his head struck the pillow with a wet thwack.

And then he was out.
When Louis woke up, he was certain for nearly five whole minutes that he was dead and that his soul had simply refused to leave his body. There was no other logical explanation for how fucking shitty he felt as he slowly faded into consciousness again.

He rolled over with a groan and shielded his eyes from the light streaming in through the window with his arm, wishing he could go right back to sleep. Louis’s head felt like someone had caved it in with a sledgehammer. He felt an immediate surge of regret and shame upon recalling why.

Louis groped blindly for his mobile on the nightstand. It wasn’t there.

Louis felt a bona fide whine escape his lips. He didn’t want to get up to try to find it. He wasn’t sure he even could.

After a few more minutes of uncomfortable twisting in his sheets, Louis finally managed to drag himself out of bed and into a pair of pants. It was another ordeal entirely to stumble the distance between the master bedroom and the sitting room, where he vaguely remembered using his phone last.

It was lying on one of the sectional cushions, the notification light blinking up at him incessantly as he struggled to walk the last few yards before collapsing onto the couch with a sigh. He touched the screen to find that he had two missed calls and one text flagged as important, the former from Lottie and the latter from Niall. He resolved to check the text later, knowing if he didn’t call his sister back soon she’d be royally pissed.

But there was still the matter of his hangover to deal with. Louis could tell from his dry-mouth that if he tried to hold a conversation now, he’d sound more like a zombie than a person. Slowly, he managed to pick himself up off the couch and into a standing position once again. He lurched into the kitchen, pouring himself a glass of lukewarm water before sitting down at the island in his boxers.

Louis downed the tap water as quickly as he could stand to without triggering his gag reflex and coughed a few times, trying to clear his throat. Then he dialled Lottie.
She answered immediately, giving Louis no time at all to prepare an apologetic speech or even a good excuse for why he’d missed her calls.

“Where the hell are you?” she opened with. “Why are people sending me fucking condolences on Instagram?”

“Sam didn’t tell you I was in LA?” Louis rasped.

“She told me. I just didn’t believe it. Are you drunk?”

“Not anymore,” Louis lamented. The effort of holding his head upright suddenly became too much for him. He leaned down to press his forehead against the cool granite instead with a breathy sigh.

“Is this about the tour thing?”

“Yes and no,” Louis admitted. He was still having trouble stringing a coherent thought together, and Lottie’s questions were coming at him rapid-fire, giving him little chance to muster up more than a few words in response.

“And what’s this nonsense about a ‘family emergency’? There’s no family emergency.”

Not in their family at least. Louis sighed, gearing himself up for the explanation to follow.

“I fudged the truth a bit,” he told her. “But it wasn’t a lie.”

She’d gone quiet now, just waiting for him to continue. Louis appreciated that as he struggled to gather the words needed to express the news as delicately as possible. Lottie could come off as abrasive, but she was sensitive underneath the façade, and she’d quite liked Harry. He knew the revelation would hit her hard.

“Harry’s in the hospital,” Louis said between laboured breaths. He’d decided there was no sugar-coating that much.

“What?”

“Yeah.”

“Why? What happened?”

“It’s kind of difficult to talk about,” Louis hedged. “He overdosed on sleeping pills a few days ago. On purpose,” he added, after realizing the ambiguity of his previous statement. “He’s still unconscious right now, so it’s hard to say really, how things are gonna go.” He’d gotten through that with his fair share of grace, Louis thought, all things considered.

But Lottie was silent for so long after he’d finished talking that Louis had to check to make sure she was still there.

“Do you think he tried to kill himself because of you?”

It wasn’t the response Louis had been expecting. His head flew up from the countertop so fast it nearly gave him whiplash. “What?”

“I mean, is that why you’re still there, because you feel guilty that you aren’t friends anymore?”

Louis gritted his teeth. “Why would you say something like that?” he demanded. “Do you think he did it because of me?”
Lottie clicked her tongue as if she were considering the possibility. “Maybe,” she finally settled on. “Maybe not. Even if you were part of the reason, it doesn’t make you responsible, Louis.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?” she shot back.

Louis desperately wanted to hang up now, just to be done with this whole conversation, but he knew if he did it would only make things worse. “Yes,” he replied tightly, hoping she’d drop it. “I do.”

But evidently Lottie still wasn’t done. “You cancelled nearly ten shows because of this,” she reminded him, as if Louis wasn’t perfectly aware of that fact already. “If it’s not guilt then there must be some other reason you’re there, because god knows the two of you weren’t even civil before this, let alone friendly.”

“I’m well aware of the status of my relationship with Harry, Lottie,” Louis replied through gritted teeth. “Gemma asked me to come.”

“Why?”

Louis would have rolled his eyes if they didn’t feel like shrivelled up prunes mashed into his skull. It was like nothing between he and his sister had changed since they were in primary school. “Because Harry left something for me.”

Lottie was silent, a cue for him to continue.

“There was a playlist—not a mixtape,” Louis amended, knowing it would be her first comment despite the inappropriateness of the joke. “He wrote a bunch of songs and left them for me to…do something with. I guess.” It sounded worse to his own ears every time he was forced to explain it out loud.

“Why would he leave something like that for you?” Lottie asked, sounding eerily like Gemma had when she’d asked Louis the same thing.

“I dunno,” Louis lied. “Maybe he’s the one that feels guilty.”

Lottie snorted. “Fat fucking chance. As if Harry Styles even knows the meaning of the word.”

Louis had to concede that she was probably right about that, but he didn’t have any other excuses left. “I don’t know, Lottie,” he said exasperatedly. “It’s not like I’ve had a chance to ask him.”

“Why are you trying to give me the run-around, Louis?” she suddenly demanded.

“I’m not!”

“Like hell,” Lottie snapped back. “You’ve been slowly shutting me out ever since this whole music shit started. I think I can tell when I’m being lied to by now.”

“I’m not—”

“I have to go,” she cut in, and Louis could tell that she was near tears. “Save it.” Lottie hung up before he could think of anything to keep her on the line.

“Fuck,” Louis hissed, ripping the phone away from his ear. He eyed it in his hand for a moment, and then, on a whim, chucked the device halfway across the room in frustration, not even bothering
to check where it had landed. He felt better afterwards, but only slightly.

Louis had to resist the urge to do something stupid as he sat there trying to collect himself again, like stab his own hand with one of the kitchen knives as a distraction while the pounding in his head reached an agonising peak. He squinted at the clock on the microwave. It was later than he’d thought, but Mark was nowhere to be found. Maybe he hadn’t even come back last night.

Louis hoped that wasn’t the case. He needed a hot greasy breakfast stat, but he was clearly in no shape to handle the task on his own.

He drifted in a meandering path across the room, over to the bedroom door opposite the master bed, and gave a feeble knock. Mark’s response time seemed to imply that he had been standing just behind the door, waiting for Louis to knock. Or perhaps Louis really was still a little drunk, and he hadn’t quite mastered the correct perception of the passage of time yet.

“Breakfast?” Louis prompted.

“I thought you might end up sleeping through lunch, honestly,” Mark replied as he moved past Louis and into the kitchen. He already had a full glass of water and a couple tablets in his hand by the time Louis caught up to him. “Here,” Mark urged, watching as Louis clumsily slopped the painkillers into his mouth before washing them down with a quick swallow. “You should probably lie down again,” he continued, looking so concerned that it was starting to make Louis paranoid.

“Okay,” Louis grumbled before marching back over to the sectional and falling down onto it with a muffled grunt. He laid there flat on his stomach listening to the banging of pots and pans for a minute before it suddenly went quiet again.

Mark appeared in Louis’s vision without any warning, brandishing his mobile. “Found this on the floor,” he said nonchalantly, waiting for Louis to take it.

Louis did so reluctantly, his fingers gripping the sides as if they were made of molten rock instead of glass. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Louis rotated the phone in his hand as Mark wandered back into the kitchen, glaring at it like it would make any difference to the empty black screen. On the fourth rotation, his thumb hit the home button by accident, lighting it up to reveal the playlist sitting right there in front of him, as if Louis had just been looking at it.

He hadn’t, and if Harry had actually been dead, Louis would have probably been convinced with that one minor coincidence that he was being haunted by Harry’s ghost.

As it was, Louis took it as some sort of trick of fate. Fate was about the only thing, he thought, that could convince him to listen to the song he knew was waiting for him next. Still, he could feel the tendrils of anxiety curling low in his belly like an angry nest of vipers as he thumbed the volume down low in preparation.

Mark was in the full swing of cooking now, so Louis was confident he wouldn’t notice. And with Mark practically in the room, maybe Louis could force himself to keep it together, if only just for appearance’s sake.

He pressed play and inhaled deeply, feeling his heart plummet into his stomach with the first sombre notes emanating from the speakers. Listening to Harry’s playlist was quickly becoming an exercise in masochism, one that Louis was slightly worried he was cultivating an addiction to.
Harry had been in bed all morning, which was Louis’s first clue that something was amiss. The second had been the way Harry had looked at him last night just before they’d gone onstage, knowing that, win or lose, this was the end of their foreseeable future. Beyond lay uncharted territory, stretching into forever.

And that’s where Louis found himself now.

He’d woken up earlier than the others, which wasn’t unusual. Made himself a cup of tea, sat on the sofa, taking everything in that had just happened. It still didn’t feel altogether real. He knew he should call Hannah, his mum, Lottie, but that would have to wait until he managed to find some sort of anchor to ground him in the present again.

The X Factor was over. And Louis didn’t know what was next.

It was easier to think in terms of days. Today they would get ready to leave the house and go back home to their families. Today they would talk to producers from the show in an effort to determine what would come after. By the end of today they might know what was to come tomorrow. That scared Louis more than anything else.

For now, Louis was sitting and wringing his hands, waiting anxiously for the others to show up so they could have ‘The Talk’, as it were. There had been the ghosts of discussions round it before, but this was what it really all came down to. Louis was certain the others would want to keep going, with the exception of maybe Zayn, but he was confident they could talk him into it, given enough time.

Louis’s confidence gradually started to waver as the boys came down the stairs one by one: first Niall, then Liam, then much later Zayn. But still no Harry.

“He was still asleep when you came down?” Louis asked Zayn, picking nervously at a frayed patch of denim on his jeans.

“Think so, yeah.”

“Want me to go check on him?” Niall asked.

“I’ll go do it,” Louis interjected, jumping up quickly before any of the others had a chance to protest. He knew he looked half-frantic as he marched up the stairs, valiantly trying to keep from breaking into a full sprint. He wasn’t sure why he felt so worried. What was he expecting to find?

Louis instantly felt silly when he walked into the bedroom to find Harry snuggled up in bed, his cherubic face relaxed and open in sleep.

Or perhaps not. Louis had enough experience rousing younger siblings for school that he could tell when someone was faking it.

“I know you’re awake,” Louis said softly, sitting down on the edge of the mattress next to Harry.
Harry slowly opened one eye, then the other. “What gave it away?”

“You were breathing too fast,” Louis told him with a fond smile.

“Ah.”

Harry slowly sat up, still bundled up in a cocoon of blankets, looking so sleepy and vulnerable that Louis felt a surge of protective instinct blossoming in his chest. He was so overcome by the sudden feeling that he started to pitch forward without even realizing, intending to…shield Harry? Hold him? Louis wasn’t sure, and that frightened him more than anything else.

“Are you okay?” Louis asked, wishing now that he’d put a bit more distance between them. “The others are all waiting downstairs. You’re not poorly, are you?” He reached forward without thinking to put a hand against Harry’s forehead, but Harry swatted Louis away before he could get close.

“I’m fine,” Harry mumbled. “Just…don’t want to think about things yet.”

“Well, we have to, Harry.”

“I know that,” Harry snapped. “Sorry. It’s just.” He exhaled roughly

Louis stared down at him with a steadily deepening furrow between his brows. “Is something else bothering you?”

Harry sucked in a deep breath as if preparing himself to answer but avoided the question when he finally replied. “I’m worried you’ll be upset,” he said, wrapping his arms tightly around his knees. “I don’t want to ruin things.”

Louis could guess now what was bothering Harry so much. Part of him wanted to leave it at that, preferring the ambiguity to confrontation and the inevitable consequences that would result, but the other part of him—the part that more often than not sounded just like his mum—told him that if they didn’t at least broach the subject now, Harry would only continue to pull further away.

And Louis didn’t want that.

“You can tell me anything,” Louis promised. “I won’t be upset, I swear.”

When Harry looked up at him again, there were the beginnings of tears in his eyes. “I like you, Louis. Like, I really like you.” His expression was pleading, and Louis had never hated himself more.

“That’s all?” Louis joked, hoping he didn’t sound mean-spirited about it. “You had me worried there, Hazza. I thought it was gonna be something serious.”


“Okay, I’m sorry,” Louis said, reaching forward again to take one of Harry’s hands. “I don’t have a good answer right now,” he said in a slow voice, trying to make sure that he didn’t accidentally say the wrong thing. “And there’s Hannah, and just. I don’t even know if I like boys…like that?” he added helplessly.

Harry’s face crumpled.

“I don’t want this to change anything,” Louis said hastily, giving Harry’s hand a quick squeeze
before pulling away again. “We’ll go downstairs once you’re feeling up to it, yeah?”

Harry didn’t respond, and for a moment, Louis was worried that Harry would just curl up again and pretend to go to sleep. As if none of this had ever happened. Louis didn’t want that, despite what he’d said about not letting anything change. Louis didn’t want Harry to pretend for his sake.

Finally, Harry spoke again, after sucking in a deep breath and glancing up from under his eyelashes to meet Louis’s gaze.

“You remember when you said you’d want to live together, after the show?” Harry said meekly. He looked terrified. “Do you still want that?” His voice was higher-pitched than normal and barely audible over the sound of Louis’s heartbeat thumping loudly in his own ears.

“Yeah, of course. It’s not like we can’t still be friends, Harry.” Louis thought he was being perfectly reasonable, letting Harry down as gently possible under the present circumstances, but the look on Harry’s face was as if Louis had just shattered his entire world. And now, Louis wasn’t sure if he could ever really forgive himself for putting it there.

February 5, 2021

Los Angeles, California

The song was long over by the time Mark came back into the living room to fetch Louis for breakfast, but Louis was still curled up in the same position in which he’d been left, staring bereft at a black screen full of regrets.

“Feeling any better?” Mark asked dubiously.

“Not really,” Louis admitted, but he forced himself to get up off the couch and followed Mark into the kitchen to eat.

“I know it’s not really my place,” Mark started after they’d both broken into their meals, full English fry-ups prepared the way Sam had taught him when they’d first brought Mark on, “but I’m worried about you.”

“Why?”

Mark nodded toward the half empty jug of rum still sitting on the counter.

“Oh. Right. It was a one-off. Stress. You know.” The excuse sounded flat even to Louis’s ears. Mark’s concerned expression didn’t waver. “I just don’t want it to get as bad as it was before.”

“I’m fine,” Louis said firmly before turning his eyes back to his plate of food, steadfastly avoiding Mark’s worried gaze for the rest of the meal.
Trying to upload more often but I end up wasting a lot of time during the day just job-hunting. :( Hopefully I can find something soon so I can make a real schedule for uploads.

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostesupd8s
Tumblr: @vondrostes

February 5, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis finally recalled Niall’s unread text while sitting in the car on the way to Cedars-Sinai with Mark. It wasn’t as if moving to the Sherbourne condo had impeded their ability to walk there, but Mark had been firm about driving them ‘for security reasons’, most likely because of the way Louis had stumbled down the front steps on their way out the door.

Louis pulled out his phone and quickly scrolled through the mass accumulation of well-wishes that had accumulated in his inbox from acquaintances and industry contacts alike as they’d heard the news about his ‘family emergency’. He didn’t bother to open a single one.

Most of the senders wouldn’t expect a response anyway, Louis rationalised. It was a polite gesture more than anything, and Louis was fine with that. But it didn’t mean he was about to expend his energy where it wasn’t needed just to keep up appearances.

Niall’s correspondences, despite their infrequency, were always flagged automatically for Louis to look at just in case they happened to be important. Louis figured that after Niall had missed his call yesterday that the message would be some sort of excuse as to why. He wasn’t mistaken.

_In th studio when u called but free now if u want 2 talk_

Louis shot back another text in response, not wanting to get tangled up in a phone conversation right as they were pulling up in front of the hospital. *Ring you in a bit, leave your phone on this time.*

Satisfied that they’d at least managed to establish contact, which was more than he was expecting from Zayn, Louis tucked his phone back into his pocket and prepared himself to exit the car.

It was late enough in the day that there was a fair amount of foot traffic both in and around the sprawling medical complex. Louis felt self-conscious in his hat, jacket, and shades, trailing behind Mark and attempting to look as inconspicuous as possible—which wasn’t very.

Louis slouched automatically as they walked past a gaggle of teenage girls, suddenly hyper-paranoid that he would be caught out as they went by. He’d forgotten how his anxiety tended to spike after a night of heavy drinking.
They were already in the lift when Louis started to second-guess his decision to show up unannounced to visit Harry. What if Anne had gotten into town while Louis had been lost in a drunken stupor? What if they’d moved Harry to a different room? What if—? He stopped himself before his nervous thoughts could spiral out of control.

As it turned out, none of Louis’s invented scenarios matched up to the reality that awaited him when Mark opened the door to Harry’s hospital room. He stopped dead one step into the doorway, unsure of whether he should turn around again and leave upon seeing the trio of people standing around Harry’s bed.

Mark made his decision for him, flinging the door shut behind them with a loud thud. All three of the room’s former occupants—Harry excluded—paused mid-conversation and turned to look at the interlopers.

“Ah, there’s the man of the hour,” remarked the well-dressed man standing next to Gemma. Louis didn’t recognise him, but he could tell from the expensive suit, full Windsor knot, and smarmy grin plastered across the man’s face that he was probably a lawyer. The question was whether he was employed by Harry, Gemma, or the hospital itself.

“Louis Tomlinson, right?” the man said as he strode across the room to shake Louis’s hand. “I’m Rob, Mr. Styles’s estate lawyer.”

Well, that answered that question.

Louis took the man’s hand reluctantly but made no effort to remove the blatant grimace from his face. Gemma’s expression was a mirror image of his own, which told Louis all he needed to know about her opinion of the lawyer, regardless of the fact that he was apparently in Harry’s employ. The woman standing at Gemma’s elbow looked on much more impassively, and Louis couldn’t help but wonder at her relationship to Harry.

“We were just discussing some technicalities with the will,” Rob continued with a meaningful look aimed in Gemma’s direction. Louis suddenly understood why she looked so upset. “If I recall correctly, you happen to be in possession of something that was left for you by Mr. Styles?”

Louis glanced over at Gemma, seeking her permission to confirm. She gave a minute nod but didn’t look happy about it.

“Yes,” Louis replied without elaboration. He really didn’t care to explain the playlist to this bigshot American lawyer that didn’t seem to give a damn about Harry lying unconscious in a hospital bed just a few yards away from where they were stood.

“I hope you don’t mind my asking, but is there any way I could get a look at what was on that drive?” Rob inquired, rather boldly, in Louis’s opinion.

Louis was momentarily shocked at the audacity of the question and looked to Gemma with an expression of betrayal. She shook her head quickly, perhaps trying to communicate that it wasn’t her who had spilled the info.

“I’m sorry,” Louis replied, “but why is that any of your business?” He was doing his best to remain professional, knowing he couldn’t afford to end up in the news (again) for punching out Harry’s lawyer in a hospital of all places, but the man was really trying his patience. And the self-satisfied grin on his face—all teeth, unnaturally bright—only made it worse.

“I only ask because the contents may impact the state of the will and could possibly constitute Mr.
Styles’s last wishes. Estate planning is fairly complex, and it’s beneficial to all parties, including Mr. Styles himself, to be prepared for any and all eventualities. I’m sure you understand.”

Louis didn’t understand, couldn’t understand, how someone could be so callous about all this, even if the intention was practicality. “No,” he replied bluntly, “I don’t.” He looked to Gemma again for help, but it was the woman stood next to her who darted forward, seizing Rob’s arm and pulling him toward the door.

“I think you’ve done enough damage for one day,” she said, squeezing past Mark to make her exit with Rob in tow. “Sorry, excuse us.”

The door slammed shut behind them with an air of finality that caused Louis to exhale loudly in relief. He didn’t move toward Gemma to close the gap between them, however, still not sure if he was welcome.

“Guess I should’ve called ahead,” Louis remarked conversationally, as if the altercation with Harry’s lawyer hadn’t just taken place.

Gemma shook her head again and took a step closer to him. “I meant to text you, but I got caught up arguing with them—” She waved a hand. “I just can’t stand listening to him talk about Harry like—like he’s—” Gemma drew in a shuddering breath and her mouth snapped shut as if by its own volition.

Like Harry’s death was inevitable, Louis mused. It wasn’t, not by a long shot, but neither was his recovery guaranteed.

“I guess I should be managing my expectations better,” Gemma continued, “but I just don’t even want to consider it.”

This time Louis was the one to take a step forward to bridge the gap between them, intending to provide physical comfort where words wouldn’t suffice. But Gemma moved away before he could get close enough to touch her.

“Listen, I’ve been here all morning,” she said, her tone suddenly brusque and business-like. There wasn’t a trace of lingering vulnerability in her tone. “I’ll give you some alone time with him.”

“My you’re sure?” Louis asked. “I wouldn’t mind the company if you’d rather stay.”

Gemma shook her head. “I should probably grab something to eat anyway.”

“Okay,” Louis stopped her before she could make it through the door. “Have Mark take you somewhere,” he said earnestly, with a meaningful look aimed at his bodyguard. “It’s on me.” If Gemma was so determined to give Louis time alone with Harry, then he was going to take advantage of it. He could feel his mobile burning a hole in his front pocket.

“You’re sure?” Gemma said, echoing his earlier sentiment.

“Of course.”

She didn’t look entirely convinced by the gesture, but it got both her and Mark out of the room quickly enough to satisfy Louis. He sat down in the chair closest to Harry’s pillow once they were gone, as he had the last time he was there.

The next track on the playlist started off with an uncharacteristically long silence that hadn’t been present in any of the others so far, dragging on long enough that Louis looked down at his phone to
make sure he hadn’t paused it by accident, which was when the music finally began with a soft trumpet rapidly growing louder in the background.

January 4, 2011

Holmes Chapel, England

Louis woke up in absolute darkness, his face buried in something warm, smelling sweetly of vanilla and mint. It took him a minute to get his bearings, to realise he wasn’t in his own house but Harry’s. After another, he realised he wasn’t on the sofa anymore but in someone’s bed, and that he wasn’t alone.

Louis experienced a brief flash of panic and then tamped it down, not wanting to wake up the other occupant and alert them to his presence. He waded through the disoriented haze clouding his brain for a few more seconds, trying valiantly to keep himself from going right back to sleep again, when the body lying next to him suddenly shifted, bringing attention to the reason Louis had woken up in the first place.

He was hard. His dick had been pressed against a warm backside—one that now kept twitching in frustratingly short increments—for who knows how long, and his body had betrayed him in response.

Louis inhaled deeply, trying to get a handle on himself. He recognised the scent in his nostrils now, it was Harry’s shampoo. He supposed that was a better outcome than either the alternatives for whose bed he might have ended up in, but that knowledge was little comfort to Louis while Harry continued to wriggle closer to him in sleep.

Or was he asleep? Louis wouldn’t put it past Harry to take advantage of the situation they were in now.

They’d spent most of the day dancing around each other, both aware of the tense atmosphere hanging over their interactions. Louis had been careful not to cross any lines. They hadn’t talked about Harry’s confession since it had happened, but a trace of it still lingered, like an electric current that sparked every time they touched.

That was even worse now, with every square centimetre of Louis’s front aligned to Harry’s back. He was still frozen, unsure of how to extract himself without waking Harry or drawing attention to their predicament. Louis breathed shallowly, in and out through his nose, and then Harry rolled over to face him.

“I can hear you thinking,” Harry whispered. “It’s not—"

February 5, 2021

Los Angeles, California

“Mr. Tomlinson?”
Louis ripped the earbuds out of his ears and then frantically thumbed the pause icon, trying to mute the music still emanating from his earphones and into the quiet hospital room. “Yeah?” he replied, wincing inwardly at how rude he came off in his franticness.

The woman who had escorted Rob out before was gazing down at Louis with one eyebrow arched sceptically. She looked at him like she hadn’t quite made up her mind about Louis, though she obviously knew who he was.

“Sorry,” Louis added. “I didn’t catch your name before.”

“Kari Brown,” she said stiffly. “I’m Harry’s personal assistant.”

Louis was comforted by the fact that she was at least on a first name basis with Harry (instead of the faux professionalism his lawyer had touted during their brief conversation) in addition to the way her eyes flicked over to Harry’s bed as she said his name.

“Right,” Louis replied uncertainly. “Is there something you need from me, then?”

“Not need, so much.” She crossed her arms over her chest, her expression melting a little into something a bit softer, tinged with nerves. “Is that what was on the flash drive?” she asked, gesturing down to Louis’s phone.

He stared at her without answering.

“I opened the case it was in,” Kari admitted a beat later, “before I gave it to Gemma. But I didn’t look to see what was on the drive itself.” She pursed her lips, perhaps awaiting judgment.

Louis paused a little longer before answering. “Yeah,” he said finally. “It was a collection of unfinished songs he wrote.” He left it at that, intending to allow Kari to draw her own conclusions, but she seemed to be more perceptive than he’d given her credit for.

“Gemma doesn’t know about you and Harry at all, does she?” Kari asked, startling Louis into nearly dropping his phone.

He swallowed thickly. “And you do?”

“It’s my job to know everything there is about Harry,” Kari said simply. “Even the things he never told his own sister. Did you know he was keeping it a secret from her?”

“I guessed it,” Louis replied through gritted teeth, carefully avoiding meeting her eyes now. “We tried to keep things quiet for as long as possible.

“I see.”

Louis clenched his fist twice, trying to get a hold of himself before he accidentally blurted out something he couldn’t take back. “Is that what you came in here to ask me about?” he said as he glanced back up at Kari to find that she’d taken a step back from him at some point during their conversation.

Kari shook her head. “I came in here to tell you that there is every possibility I might be out of a job soon.” It was a cruel euphemism, one that made Louis’s gut twist unpleasantly. “And I think both of us know who should be held responsible in the event that occurs.” She stared venomously down at Louis, who remained utterly speechless, for just a moment longer before stepping past him to get to Harry.
In sharp contrast to her harsh speech, she was all tenderness as she leaned down to press a kiss to Harry’s gauze-covered forehead before gently smoothing down the linens around his body. She said nothing to Louis in parting as she left the room.

Louis stared at Harry again in her absence, bereft, feeling desperately overcome by the desire to touch him the way she had but knowing in the back of his mind that he couldn’t bear to. That it would be sullying Harry somehow to do so.

Louis forced his eyes away a few seconds later, concentrating instead on the phone still hanging loosely from his fingers, and carefully placed his headphones back in his ears to resume listening to the song Kari had interrupted.

January 4, 2011

Holmes Chapel, England

“It’s not a big deal,” Harry said.

Louis shifted onto his back, wincing at the way his pyjamas chafed against his erection. He wanted to move, to get up and head straight for the guest bathroom at the end of the corridor outside Harry’s room, but he didn’t want it to look like he was running away. Even if that’s exactly what he was doing.

“Then why were you pretending you were asleep?” Louis finally replied, his tone equally hushed, even though there was no one around to hear them.

“Why were you?” Harry shot back.

That was a good question, and it wasn’t one that Louis cared to consider the answer to. Because if he did, it meant admitting that he hadn’t wanted to disrupt the moment, that he’d wanted it to go on even longer, and that wasn’t something he could say out loud.

“You could stay,” Harry said after a moment, when it became clear that Louis didn’t intend to answer.

“No, Harry, I can’t.” Louis was glad for the darkness, glad that he couldn’t make out the look of unbridled hurt that he knew must be on Harry’s face. “It was an accident,” he continued. “I was sleepwalking. Just go back to bed and we can forget all about this in the morning.”

He knew full well Harry didn’t want to forget, and Louis wasn’t quite sure that he did either, but there was no denying that it was for the best. And if Louis happened to divert from his destination on the way out of Harry’s room to take care of his little problem in the guest bath, with the ghost of Harry’s name still on his lips, well, the boy was still none the wiser.

And in the morning, it was like it never happened.

February 5, 2021

Los Angeles, California
Louis remained perfectly still for a long while after the song came to a close.

For the first time since he’d received the flash drive, he found himself taking into consideration the fact that Harry had chosen to write seventy-eight songs—exactly seventy-eight—knowing how significant the number was to Louis, and rather than feeling comforted by the thought Harry had put into the gesture, it only made Louis angry.

Harry and his overly romantic obsession with mysticism. Everything always had to mean something. It couldn’t just…be.

Louis felt desperate, now more than ever, to know what Harry had intended for him to glean from all of this, frantically scouring his mind for any inkling of what Harry wanted from him. The number, the cryptic introduction before the first song…Harry’s infuriating hard-on for nostalgia…Clearly the songs had been meant as more than a forget-me-not, but it was driving Louis crazy that Harry couldn’t have just saved Louis the time and spelled it out for him.

His phone pinged after a few minutes more of fruitless thought. Mark was back already with Gemma, and the two were about to head back up to Harry’s room. Louis was grateful for the warning, tucking his phone and earbuds away and doing his best to look presentable before heading to the door to meet them.

Louis waited in the corridor just outside, watching for them coming in from the lifts. Gemma looked surprised to see him standing there when they finally emerged, but Louis didn’t give her a chance to say anything as he leaned toward her to give her a friendly kiss on the cheek before grabbing Mark’s arm to steer him away.

“I’ll be around later,” Louis told her quickly. “I’ve got a few things to take care of first.” Louis marched down the corridor with Mark in tow and didn’t look back.
Hey guys, sorry it's been a while since my last update. I've been too stressed to do any actual writing (still trying to find a job with not much luck & I've hit the end of my savings) but I have been working on outlines where I can. If you need something to tide you over in the meantime, I have some other finished fics on here that you might like. Thanks for your patience!

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February 5, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis decided to call Niall on the way out to the car with Mark even though his nerves already felt frayed beyond his capacity to handle. The ringing this time went on far too long for comfort, but then Niall finally picked up with a throaty ‘hello’.

Louis breathed out an exaggerated sigh of relief. “Thought I’d get your voicemail again.”

“You sound stressed,” were the first words out of Niall’s mouth in reply.

Louis forced a laugh. “Yeah, I suppose I am.” He climbed into the back of the car, wracking his mind for some way to ease into the news he needed to break to Niall. It really didn’t get any easier with either time or practise. “You in Nashville?” he asked, wondering why he hadn’t heard anything until Niall’s text about him recording again.

“Oh.” Louis hadn’t expected at all to hear that Niall was on the same side of the country as him, let alone in the same city. He flagged Mark in the rear-view mirror, signalling for him to pull over at the next inlet.

“Oh?” Niall questioned, once Louis had let the silence drag on for too long.

“Well, I’m—actually, I’m in LA right now, too,” Louis said, tripping over his words in his haste to get them out.

Mark had pulled over into a little convenience store parking lot on the corner of the intersection. He turned slightly to face Louis in the backseat with the car idling, awaiting further instructions.

“No shit?” Niall replied. “Well, we should meet up then, grab some lunch, right? There’s a little Ethiopian place Hailee introduced me to that’s near the studio if you want to meet there.”
“Sounds good,” Louis replied. He was aware of how stiff he sounded, but suddenly he was terrified at the prospect of seeing Niall in person again, especially with the responsibility of telling Niall about Harry still hanging over his head. “Go ahead and text me the address and I’ll let you know when I get there.”

“Cool, see you in a few.”

If Louis had thought talking to Niall would make him feel better, he was dead wrong. Louis felt sick to his stomach, his hand trembling as he lowered his phone to wait for Niall’s text.

“Louis?” Mark asked. “You okay?”

Louis nodded, even though he wasn’t sure that it was actually true. “Take us here,” he said as Niall’s message came in, reaching forward to bump the top of his phone against the satnav to transfer the address.

“Want me to call ahead?”

“Please.” Niall might not care about being seen in public in downtown LA, but Louis still had a cover to maintain. If Mark couldn’t secure them a private room at the place Niall had suggested, then it was a no-go.

Louis tuned out the sound of Mark’s conversation with the restaurant staff as they drove, choosing instead to take in the sights of LA that he’d been too jetlagged to absorb when they’d driven straight to the SLS from LAX upon arrival. It was eerily familiar and disconcertingly different all at the same time. Despite the bustle of city life present all around them, Louis still had the distinct feeling of being someone walking through a ghost town, as they passed by places he used to know well—some that hadn’t changed a bit, and others that were completely unrecognisable.

One such location in the latter category was the former home of the tattoo parlour the band had often frequented when they were in LA, particularly Harry, who owed a significant chunk of the body art on his body to the owner. The little hole in the wall where Louis had held Harry’s hand through more than one tattoo was gone, replaced by a vegan sandwich shop with blinding lime-green signage. More history—*their* history—erased by the inexorable passage of time.

They encountered their first major traffic incident a few minutes later when they entered the freeway, and Louis pulled his phone out with a sigh to let Niall know about the hold-up. Mark had finished up his conversation with the restaurant staff and had secured them a private table to eat at once they arrived, so Louis made sure to note that as well in his message.

Niall’s response was brief. *Still @ th studio. Be out soon.*

Louis rolled his eyes. The traffic would probably work in Niall’s favour; Louis knew full-well the man couldn’t be punctual even when he wasn’t busy.

Louis sighed and glanced up at the bumper-to-bumper traffic stretching out ahead of them before looking down at his phone again. He wanted to listen to another song. Desperately. But it was a risk. Louis was already a mess and he couldn’t afford to shatter what little remained of his sanity right before meeting up with Niall to deliver the news about Harry.

Louis put in the earbuds and hit play anyway. He’d never claimed to have good self-control.

February 18, 2011
Birmingham, England

Harry was bent over the toilet, puking his guts out.

Louis was sat right behind him, gently rubbing the small of his back like he had many times before with his younger siblings when they were ill. But Harry wasn’t poorly at all. At least not with anything physical.

“I hate that I’m like this,” Harry groaned between dry-heaves as he rested his cheek on the seat.

Louis reached up to flush the toilet for him. “We all get nervous, H,” he said reassuringly.

“Not like this,” Harry protested. “Not like me.”

“It’ll get better.”

“When?” Harry looked so purely miserable it almost made Louis tear up in sympathy. “How am I supposed to do a whole tour like this?”

Harry’s ritual vomiting before every performance had been well-established during their time on the X Factor, but ever since they’d signed up for the X Factor Live Tour, Harry’s nerves had only gotten worse. To the point where he was making himself sick nearly a day in advance of the actual show even, just after rehearsals in Birmingham, leaving Louis to try to coax him out of his funk back at the hotel while the other lads grabbed dinner and conducted their pre-tour celebrations.

Harry was in no state to join them. Which meant Louis wasn’t either. But he didn’t mind.

Before the tour, Louis had mostly just been sat at home, stewing in the knowledge that Harry was in love with him. Okay, maybe not in love, but interested, at the very least. And he couldn’t get it out of his head. He couldn’t get Harry out of his head.

He’d tried—and failed—to keep his distance for a while, but that clearly hadn’t been working. If anything, it just made the pull between them worse, the itch under Louis’s skin like that of an addict searching for his next fix.

His hands slowed on Harry’s back, and stilled. Harry meeped quietly, turning his head a little to look at Louis in question. “What’s wrong?” he asked, voice still raspy and hoarse from throwing up. When he finally made it out of the loo, Louis would have to make him some tea.

“Nothing,” Louis replied. “Nothing’s wrong.” A lie. He studied Harry’s face carefully, wondering if he was really prepared to do what he was imagining.

Harry stared back at him unflinchingly, his eyes wide and vulnerable, lashes damp with what was left of his tears. Louis wanted to kiss him, so badly. But he knew he shouldn’t.

“No, I need to tell you something.”

Harry slowly lifted his face off the toilet seat, looking suddenly apprehensive. “You’re not leaving the band, are you?”

Louis let out a sigh. “How many times do I have to tell you? I’m not going to leave the band.”

Harry didn’t look quite convinced. “What is it, then?”
Louis looked down at the floor for a long moment, steeling himself, and then looked up at again at Harry, taking Harry’s hands in his own. “You remember what you told me before we left the house at X Factor?” he said hopefully.

Harry’s expression shuttered. “I’d prefer not to, if I’m honest,” Harry replied stiffly, “but yes, I remember.”

“Well, that’s what I want to talk about.”

“Okay….”

Louis sucked in a deep breath. “I think…I think I may feel the same way,” he managed, every word feeling like it was punching all the air out of his lungs with the effort needed to expel it.

The lines around Harry’s eyes deepened. “You what?”

“Yes,” Louis replied lamely, not really sure what to add.

Harry glared at him. “This is really shit timing, Lou.”

“I know.”

“We have our first show tomorrow.”

“I know.”

“You’re still dating Hannah!”

“I know.”

“Then—” The question died in Harry’s throat. He stared helplessly at Louis, his mouth still open, struggling for words. “Why?” he finally asked instead.

“Because I couldn’t bear it,” Louis confessed simply. “I couldn’t be around you all the time, wanting to—wishing I could do something about it.”

“But now we can’t do anything about it,” Harry pointed out, referring to the fact that once the boys came back, they’d hardly have a second to themselves for the duration of the entire tour. And even during the brief moments alone, there wasn’t anything that either could really do in good conscience.

Louis still had Hannah, and he was terrified at the prospect of breaking up with her, knowing that if he did, he would really be forced to make a choice about Harry. And he didn’t think he was quite ready for that. So this would have to do for now.

“It didn’t seem fair to keep hiding it from you,” Louis continued. A half-truth. He’d done it for Harry, sure, but also for his own sake. He hadn’t wanted to carry that burden alone.

Harry scoffed. “For the record, I just want you to know that I really hate you right now.”

“I know.”

“And I think I’m going to throw up again.”

True to his word, Harry ducked his head down again into the bowl of the toilet and resumed retching, violently. Louis started to rub his back again, moving in semi circles up the ridge of his
spine, over his neck, into Harry’s hair. Maybe they couldn’t have everything, not yet, but he could have this.

February 5, 2021
Los Angeles, California

The song ended long before they reached the restaurant, but Louis was still thinking about it when they arrived. He texted Niall quickly before allowing Mark to hurry him inside, already anticipating an excuse for Niall’s extended tardiness. He was surprised when he received a reply letting him know Niall was on his way only seconds later, possibly sent even before Louis had penned his.

Once inside the restaurant, they were escorted to the second floor and then out to a private room on the balcony for dinner parties that overlooked the street below. It was strictly speaking, more space than they needed, but the privacy was the only thing Louis was bothered about.

Louis ordered a beer while they waited for Niall to show, hoping it would calm his nerves. It didn’t. If anything, the light buzz only keyed him up more as the minutes continued to tick by with no sign of Niall and no indication either by text or call of when he was due to arrive. Louis’s impatience was growing steadily, his anxiety and irritation feeding off each other until Niall finally showed up, at which point Louis was about ready to march straight out of the restaurant with no intentions of looking back.

Louis stood abruptly as the door opened to reveal Niall, bearded and beaming. Louis forced a smile onto his own face as they hugged, only to have it fall as two more people entered the room after Niall. Louis wasn’t exactly friendly with either, but he recognised them well enough to greet them both after Niall finally let him go.

“Wasn’t expecting you to bring an entourage,” Louis ventured as Niall, Shawn, and Hailee sat down at the table across from him. It wasn’t the private meeting he’d envisioned, and now Louis was looking at an hour of lunch spent trying to keep things together while still a little hungover, not to mention the cocktail of emotions perpetually keeping his brain swimming.

Louis sucked in a deep breath. He could do this. He just had to endure till he had a chance to get Niall alone. He’d be fine.

“Yeah, well, Shawn’s on the other side of town,” Niall said breezily, “so this seemed easier. It’s not a problem, is it?”

“No,” Louis replied. “Guess it’s a good thing I got us a big table.”

“Maybe too big,” Hailee replied with a pointed glance at the long canteen table that took up most of the space they were in.

A waiter came by several minutes later to take their orders, giving Louis enough opportunity to pull out his phone under the table so he could shoot Niall a text: rly need 2 talk 2 u alone

He prayed Niall would have the good sense not to read the damn thing aloud. Louis’s heartbeat ratcheted up a notch higher at just the thought.
“So what are you doing in LA, mate?” Niall asked once the waiter was gone. He hadn’t seemed to notice the text. “I thought Harry got the whole city in the divorce.” It wasn’t exactly the most delicate way to ask the question even without factoring in the current situation with Harry, but Louis was pretty that Niall had always underestimated the depth of their relationship. Harry had made sure of that.

“Ha-ha,” Louis replied dryly, feigning another smile.

“No, really,” Niall continued, before Louis had a chance to think of a safe excuse for being there that he could give in front of Shawn and Hailee, who were watching the exchange with no small amount of curiosity. “I saw you cancelled your tour and everything. I would’ve thought you’d be back home.”

Louis wetted his lips with his tongue. “Gemma asked me to come,” he said slowly, watching as Niall’s eyes widened in realisation.

Niall glanced down at his lap, presumably at his mobile, and then looked back up at Louis with a strange expression on his face.

“Excuse me for a second,” he said, carefully pushing his chair back and standing up from the table, “Louis and I need to use the loo.”

“Together?” Shawn said with a bewildered laugh.

Neither Louis nor Niall answered him. They said absolutely nothing to each other even after they’d left the room, Niall only speaking to ask for directions to the toilets from one of the staff standing by.

When they entered, there was someone standing right there at the urinal, and Louis ducked his head automatically, dipping into the handicapped cubicle before the man had a chance to spot him. He could hear Niall turn on the faucet at the sink, and then the sound of the urinal flushing.

A minute later, there was a soft knock on the cubicle door. Louis opened it to quickly let Niall inside.

“This feels like something we would have done ten years ago,” Niall remarked, glancing down at the toilet to their left almost suspiciously.

“What, like when we hid in the bread van? I guess we never did grow up.” Even while he was saying it, Louis knew it was a lie. They had grown up. They’d done more than that, they’d grown apart.

Niall examined Louis’s face with a frown. “Why did Gemma ask you to come, Louis?”

Louis sighed. Here came the hard part. “Harry’s in the hospital,” he said, watching as Niall’s face started to crumple. “He—”

The door opened, and both men froze inside the cubicle. The faucets went off again, then the hand dryer, and then the sound of footsteps going back out the door. Another second passed, and then Louis and Niall both exhaled, almost in unison.

“How come no one told me?” Niall demanded, forcing Louis’s eyes to return far sooner than he
was prepared for. He looked devastated, like Louis had just told him the world was ending. Louis supposed it was more or less the same thing.

“I tried,” Louis pointed out. “It’s not exactly the type of thing you send an email about.”

“I want to see him,” Niall proclaimed adamantly. His arms were folded over his chest, giving him the appearance—with the exception of his full beard—that he was a particularly stubborn child on the verge of throwing a temper tantrum. “I want to see him now.”

Louis raised an eyebrow. “Look, let’s just get through this lunch and then we’ll take my car to Cedars-Sinai, okay? I don’t want to make a big thing out of this in front of your friends.”

“It’s not like they’re going to call TMZ if we tell them.”

“Niall, please,” Louis said, giving him a long-suffering look.

Niall sighed. “All right, all right, we’ll do it your way. But you’re paying for lunch.”

“Deal.”

Niall slipped out of the cubicle first, peeking round the door just to make absolutely sure no one else was in the bathroom with them before motioning for Louis to follow.

They were met with twin stares of curiosity from Shawn and Hailee when they returned to the table on the balcony. Mark, however, true to his apathetic nature (at least in matters that didn’t directly involve him), was intent on eating the food that must have come out while Niall and Louis had been in the toilets. He didn’t even so much as look up.

“What fun in there?” Hailee asked pointedly as Louis sat down again.

“Loads,” he replied with a sickly-sweet smirk.

Niall was quick to shoot him a warning glance, and Louis nodded, silently agreeing to play nice. He’d never really gotten on with Niall’s other friends, but he needed to stay true to his own plan, to play it cool for the rest of their lunch. And then they could go back and see Harry.

Louis stared down at the feast in front of him, suddenly feeling like he’d lost his appetite.
Chapter 10

Niall demanded details from Louis once the two of them were safely shut inside of the backseat of Louis’s car, his friends now long gone.

“What happened?” Niall asked, flicking his eyes once toward where Mark was seated at the wheel before turning his attention back to Louis. “How come I haven’t heard anything in the news about it?”

Louis sighed, trying to evaluate how best to break down each aspect of the situation into digestible pieces so that Niall would find himself overwhelmed by it all. He’d already decided to keep the flash drive to himself for the time being. There was enough for Niall to take in without adding that into the mix.

“They think he tried to kill himself,” Louis said carefully, tearing his eyes away once Niall’s eyes started to fill up with tears. He knew if he watched Niall cry that he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from responding in kind.

“Why?” Niall asked in a tone so raw that it made Louis flinch at the sound.

Louis licked his lips, swallowing against the desert filling his mouth as he endured Niall’s wide questioning eyes. “I don’t know,” he said, knowing that he didn’t have a hope of convincing Niall of that if he couldn’t even convince himself.

When Louis looked up again, Niall was gazing down at his lap, his mouth working wordlessly as if he was trying to remember how to speak.

“How?” Louis guessed.

Niall nodded.

“Overdose,” he replied bluntly, fixing his eyes forward again, watching the glint of sun on metal as the cars on either side of them flew by. Mark was especially cautious on the rare occasions they ended up in LA due to Louis’s prior history with the LAPD. Best to play it safe.
Louis was just glad he wasn’t behind the wheel now, as he clenched his fists over his denim-covered thighs. Every time he thought about Harry it only got worse, the urge to drive off a cliff, to break something, to—

Louis wouldn’t allow himself to even think the rest. Not with Niall gazing at him from one seat over, looking like Louis had just told him the world was ending. Maybe it was.

“How long has he been…?” Niall finally got out.

“Nearly four days.” Louis was surprised how exhausted he felt every time he was forced to talk about this. It was only a few words each time, but the weight of them dragged him down, wore him out, without fail. He suddenly felt as if he could sleep for a year. “They don’t know when he’s going to wake up yet.”

Louis was grateful for Niall’s silence after that, for the opportunity to spend the remainder of the drive temporarily unburdened by responsibility. Instead, restless anxiety replaced it.

Louis was suddenly worried that something might have changed since he’d seen Harry, though Gemma would have contacted him immediately if that had been the case. He couldn’t shake the paranoia, though. It was like a live wire, threading through his veins and capillaries, keeping him perpetually on edge even in the face of rational thought.

Louis sent Mark to fill up the car after he and Niall had been dropped off at the hospital, letting him know that Louis would text him when they were ready to be picked up again. Louis wanted to give Niall as much privacy as he could under the circumstances, in case he needed a good cry when he finally saw Harry.

They’d almost made it to Harry’s room on the third floor when Louis suddenly stopped short in the corridor.

“What?” Niall asked quizzically.

Louis shook his head. “You should go in alone. Have a moment.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” It was a cowardly move on Louis’s part; he knew Niall wouldn’t mind his company, but Niall just nodded and took a deep breath before opening the door to let himself in.

Louis’s phone was out before the door had even swung shut behind Niall, his fingers working furiously to jam his earbuds in so he could get through this as quickly as possible. Louis was only-too cognisant of the fact that he was currently stood in the middle of a busy hospital corridor while he pulled up the playlist on the flash drive.

Louis felt a jolt of nervous excitement when he spotted the date and hit play without a second thought.

July 17, 2011

Malibu, California
Louis had decided to tell the boys the first day of the shoot that he and Hannah had broken up. There was the expected chorus of sympathy from Niall, Liam, and Zayn, but Harry had just gone quiet altogether and had barely said a word to Louis since.

Louis still wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting from Harry when he made his announcement, but he’d felt sick over it all day. Louis had put on a brave face though, not wanting to be the one to ruin this: their big break—or at least that’s how it felt. In the end, it was impossible to avoid letting the excitement get the better of him. It served as an excellent distraction.

It was only after the day had wound down that Harry’s silence hit Louis like a lorry carrying a tonne of bricks, his heart sinking lower and lower in his chest as they progressed from the set to a nearby restaurant for dinner, and then to their hotel afterward.

Niall was meant to share the room with them for the night, but fate intervened in the form of Zayn proposing they play some games in the room next door that he was sharing with Liam. It was expected that all of them would join in, but one look at Harry’s sullen features made it clear to the others that they shouldn’t pressure him right then.

Louis wanted to follow Harry into their room and confront him right then and there, but he also knew that he shouldn’t. It would make the other lads curious at best, worried at worst, and he didn’t want them prying into things. Not right now, at any rate.

So instead of allowing his instincts to lead him after Harry, Louis forced himself to follow the lads into their room, putting in a couple rounds of gameplay before feigning tiredness with an exaggerated yawn and begging off for the night.

Harry was pretending to be asleep when Louis slowly opened the door to their hotel room to find all of the lights off with the exception of the lamp between both beds, left on its dimmest setting. Louis could tell immediately from the too-quick rhythm of Harry’s breathing under the blankets that he was faking. Harry slept like the dead, mouth wide open as he lay on his stomach or side, sucking in air so slowly that it was hard to tell if he was even breathing at all.

“Harry?” Louis whispered, letting the door softly click shut behind him. He didn’t turn on the lights as he moved toward the bed. “Harry,” he said again, a little louder, when Harry didn’t so much as move.

Harry finally rolled over onto his back, and in the dim lamplight Louis could see that his eyes were bloodshot and swollen. How long had he been lying here alone in the dark, crying?

Louis pretended not to see and moved over to sit on the edge of the bed, staring out through the window at the beach, just a few hundred yards from their hotel. It was dark, but Louis could see the moonlight glinting off of the crests of the waves as they struck the shore. It was beautiful. Louis could see why Harry had fallen in love with the place almost as soon as they’d arrived.

Louis didn’t ask Harry why he was so upset, knowing that if he sat there long enough and waited, Harry would make his grievances known, one way or another.

He wasn’t wrong.

“What did you break up with Hannah?” Harry finally asked in a small voice.

Louis turned slightly to take in the soft curves of Harry’s face, still shrouded in shadow. “Because I felt guilty,” he answered honestly.

“Guilty about what?”
“I dunno. Everything?” Louis wished it were that simple. He knew what Harry wanted him to say, that he’d broken up with Hannah for Harry, but he hadn’t, not really. Louis had broken up with Hannah for Hannah, and for himself to a degree. Thoughts of Harry had been present—when were they not?—but in the end, Louis had just wanted clarity. Freedom.

Freedom to do this, Louis thought as he twisted at the waist and bent down to press his lips squarely in the middle of Harry’s forehead.

“What was that for?” Harry asked, blinking up at him looking wide-eyed and oh-so-innocent in that way that made Louis ache.

“I dunno,” he said again, but he didn’t pull back any farther than a few centimetres, just enough to really look at Harry under the soft yellow light. Louis reached out with one hand and gently cupped the curve of Harry’s cheek, feeling the fluttering of Harry’s pulse under his fingertips as skin met skin. With the other, he extended his arm and flipped off the lamp between the beds, without warning or ceremony.

Louis’s grip on Harry’s jaw tightened, almost imperceptibly, as he leaned down, feeling his way out with only the sound of Harry’s shallow breaths in the darkness to guide him, until finally, their lips connected.

It started off slow, and Louis was determined to keep it that way. Harry’s movements were clumsy, unsure, inexperienced. Louis still didn’t know what he wanted. This. More. But he still had enough sense to know they shouldn’t go any further.

They kissed softly in the dark for a few moments, and then Louis finally broke away, the strain in his back becoming too much. He flicked the lamp back on to find Harry looking dazed, his pupils blown and lips blooming a bright red to match the swollen rings around his eyes.

“What was that for?” Harry asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“For you,” Louis replied, and he meant it.

February 5, 2021
Los Angeles, California

When he pulled his earbuds out, Louis wasn’t sure any longer if Harry’s songs were the only thing keeping him sane, or the one thing pushing him toward the edge, but he wasn’t so sure he cared anymore.

There wasn’t time to think it over. He jammed his phone back into his pocket and gave a polite knock on Harry’s door before slowly pushing it open to find Niall sitting at Harry’s bedside, closer than Louis had ever dared to be, looking utterly distraught.

“What happened to him?” Niall demanded. “I thought you said it was an overdose.”

Louis realised that he hadn’t adequately prepped Niall whatsoever for the sight of Harry, pale as a ghost and covered in bandages, before he’d sent him into the room alone. Louis sat down next to
Niall quickly, and hurried to explain.

“He fell,” Louis said rapidly, the words tumbling out all in one long stream. “There was a table out on his patio, a glass table, and he fell into it, and I guess he tried to call for help? And that’s how they found him.”

Niall licked his lips and swallowed a few times as his brows drew closer together over his nose. “Do you think that means it was an accident then? Maybe he didn’t mean to do it?”

Louis wished he could believe that. He wished he could let Niall believe it. “He took a lot of sleeping tablets,” he explained slowly, thinking all the while of the flash drive, of the note Harry had left, of the message that had played just before the first song. And still he couldn’t bring himself to tell Niall any of it. “He might’ve…changed his mind,” Louis continued, the words making him sick even while they were coming out of his mouth, “after, but I don’t think it was an accident.”

Niall turned away from him once Louis finished speaking. He didn’t utter a single word in response, but Louis could feel his sweaty palms, damp from anticipation, gradually soaking into the thighs of his trousers. He was tempted to text Gemma, suddenly worried that she or Anne might show up at any moment, though it wasn’t like Niall and Louis didn’t have the right to be there.

Still, he could feel his heartrate ratcheting up incrementally with every tick of the clock behind them on the wall. Louis stood abruptly with a loud squeak as his chair slid across the tile, making Niall jump.

“I’m gonna go grab some coffee,” Louis announced to the room at large, though it was only himself, and Niall, and Harry occupying the space. “You want anything?”

“Sure,” Niall said, giving Louis a strange look but thankfully deciding not to question his unusual behaviour. “Just a latte if you don’t mind.”

Louis nodded. “Course.”

Louis could feel the rush of panic fully setting in as soon as he got into the lift. He hit the button for the ground floor furiously, not wanting to be stuck in a confined space with another human being for even a second. His throat felt like it was starting to close, and his limbs were rapidly growing numb. Louis let himself wonder for a brief second if he was having a heart attack, whether that was even possible.

He got a handle on himself again just before the lift chimed and the doors opened again. Louis squeezed out while an entire team of nurses filed in past him. He took a few deep breaths once he was free of the confined space before heading out past the main reception area over to the Starbucks located in the far corner of the ground floor.

There was already a queue stretching out past the little café tables and into the flow of traffic by the side doors, which normally would have pissed Louis off (ever the impatient one), but in this moment, he was actually grateful for the wait. He stepped into the queue behind an old woman who didn’t look like she had much time to waste waiting around for coffee, and stared intently up at the menu without actually seeing any of it. He was already running his order through his head on repeat, not wanting to stumble over it when he finally reached the counter.

“Um, Lou…is?” said an uncertain voice from behind.
Louis turned to find a short girl with dark brown hair and wind-chafed skin standing behind him, her hand outstretched hesitantly, as if she’d meant to tap his shoulder before thinking better of it.

“Yeah?” he replied, a smile spreading across his face automatically even as his mouth went bone-dry with realisation.

“Sorry,” the girl said, a blush spreading fast across her cheeks. She glanced down, and then back up again, and then down at her feet once more like she was afraid to maintain eye contact with Louis for too long. “I realise this probably isn’t the best place to approach you, but—actually, I really shouldn’t have come over here, I’m sorry, I’ll leave you alone now, I’m—”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Louis reassured her quickly. The girl looked like she might burst into tears if Louis happened to say the wrong thing. He could feel his blood pressure spiking again. “What are you here for, if you don’t mind me asking?”

It was a stupid thing to do: inviting the girl—the fan—to ask why he was there in turn. But Louis couldn’t think of anything else to say. The queue moved a metre or so forward; Louis and the girl moved with it.

“Oh! Oh.” She seemed surprised that he would even ask. “My mom’s doing chemo right now, so. I’m just kind of waiting around so I can drive her home after.” Her face was still bright red, and she seemed slightly out of breath, but no longer looked like she was about to cry, so Louis counted that as a win.

“Ah,” he said in understanding. “Well, I wish her the best.”

“Thank you,” the girl replied quickly. “I’m, um, I’m Nadia, by the way?”

“Nice to meet you.” He held out his hand for her to take. “Do you… want me to sign something while we’re here?” Louis asked, gesturing to the queue behind him, still moving at a snail’s pace. It was a question that never failed to make him feel like an absolute bell-end, but he knew if he didn’t offer, she might regret not asking for it later. And she’d already recognised him at any rate. It wasn’t like there was much more harm that could be done.

“Could I maybe get a picture, actually?” Nadia asked instead.

Louis took it back. There was definitely more harm to be done. “Well, I…” he started to say, searching desperately for an excuse that wouldn’t make him sound like an arsehole, or worse, a liar.

Nadia sucked in a quick breath, putting a finger to her lips. “I, um, I know you’re not technically supposed to be ‘here,’” she said quietly. “I just want the picture to remember later, I won’t put it up on Twitter or anything.”

Louis was charmed by her thoughtfulness and agreed, deciding it would be better to take Nadia at her word rather than give her a reason to possibly resent him. He leaned down to pose for the photo, doing his best to ignore the odd looks they were drawing from the other patrons around them.

“Good?” he asked, waiting for her to examine the picture to make sure one of them hadn’t closed their eyes or something equally unflattering.

Nadia nodded. “Thank you so much,” she said brightly, going in for a hug before Louis had a chance to say anything else. Louis returned it earnestly, and fervently hoped Nadia’s mother had a long and full life ahead of her.
“Right,” Louis said as he finally broke the hug. “Well, I do still have to get that coffee,” he reminded Nadia with another forced smile.

“Right, yeah, sorry,” she replied hurriedly. “I should go too, actually, but thank you again!” She rushed off with a little wave, and Louis followed her with his eyes through the crowd until she finally disappeared from his sight.

When Louis turned back around, the old woman in front of him was gazing at him in undisguised interest. “Are you famous or something?” she asked without any regard for propriety whatsoever.

“Oh yeah, I actually used to be a big Youtuber,” Louis replied smoothly, watching with smug satisfaction as the woman nodded, her eyes glazing over with disinterest as she turned back around.
February 5, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis began to feel uneasy about his fan encounter as he walked back to the lifts from the Starbucks with two coffee cups clutched in his hands. He could feel his fingers trembling, and he had to will himself not to drop them.

Louis wasn’t sure why he felt so anxious again, especially since he couldn’t have asked for better circumstances in the inevitable event he ran into a fan. He didn’t know Nadia beyond their brief meeting, but she’d seemed trustworthy, sincere. And yet Louis couldn’t help but worry that temptation might get the better of her, that he would open Twitter later that day to find that the entire world knew he was half a world away from where he’d allowed them to believe he was.

Louis was grateful for the decision to pick up some caffeine when he finally returned to Harry’s room on the third floor. He felt drained and sipped his drink eagerly in the hopes that he could replace some of his lost energy. Niall merely accepted his latte and then put it down on the floor next to his feet without a second glance.

“How long are you planning on being in town for?” Louis asked, wincing immediately at how… odd it sounded. It didn’t seem right to make small talk just metres away from Harry’s sickbed.

Niall sucked in a deep breath before answering. “Another week at least, to work on the album, but now…. I don’t know.”

Louis felt almost offended that Niall was still thinking about recording when Harry was in a fucking coma, when the evidence of that was right there in front of him, but he also knew that wasn’t fair. He couldn’t expect Niall or anyone else to drop everything to wait hand and foot on Harry. Especially when there was very little any of them could do, except just… be there, in case he woke up, and it wasn’t like Niall really owed Harry anything. Not like Louis did, anyway.

Louis downed another third of his coffee in one go, ignoring the burn as it slid down his oesophagus and into his stomach, where the liquid sat with an unpleasant heaviness, as if it had instantly congealed. He felt sick again.

Niall continued as if the extended silence after his last statement hadn’t happened at all, his eyes
still focused on Harry’s slack face. “I want to be here when he wakes up,” Niall said. “But I can’t stick around forever.”

“I know,” Louis said quietly. He didn’t know what he was going to do if Harry didn’t wake up in the next few weeks before his tour was due to resume. Was he really prepared to just throw his entire career away to languish at Harry’s bedside? Louis was too afraid of the answer to dwell on the possibility for more than a second.

“I should probably head back soon,” Niall finally said with a quiet sigh as he shifted in his chair to glance up at Louis.

Louis set down his coffee and pulled out his phone to text Mark. “I’ll have Mark give you a ride to the studio,” he said, pointedly avoiding meeting Niall’s eyes as he quickly typed the message.

“That’d be grand,” Niall said hollowly as looked back at Harry one more time.

Louis could tell that Niall truly didn’t want to leave, and that only made Louis feel worse. He wished his relationship with Harry had been so untainted that he didn’t feel like he was suffocating every time they were in the same room together, even though Harry couldn’t see or hear him. Couldn’t speak, couldn’t blame him. Harry was safer to be around comatose in this hospital bed than he’d ever been, and yet Louis still felt like he was being slowly pulled apart whenever he visited.

His phone lit up just a few minutes later. Mark was waiting outside.

Louis elected to walk Niall down to the ground floor to meet him. They said their goodbyes, strained awkward things made tense from lack of practice.

Niall was bigger than Louis remembered, he thought to himself as he patted him on the back and waited the appropriate amount of time before ending their hug. It was hard to tell in photos, but his build was closer to Liam’s now. A lot had changed in three years.

Any buzz Louis had attained because of his coffee vanished almost as soon as Niall stepped away from him and climbed into the backseat of the car. Mark sped off quickly, and it was only seconds before they disappeared from Louis’s sight.

Louis felt like a puppet whose strings had been suddenly cut. It was like Niall’s presence had been the only thing keeping him upright. It was difficult to face the realisation that Louis had been depending on everyone around him—Gemma, Mark, Niall—to keep himself afloat. And now with no one around except for the ghost of Harry lingering in the suite on the third storey to keep him company, Louis felt anchorless.

He forced himself to turn around and walk back inside the building even though his feet felt like they were wading through sludge as he instructed them to move step by step toward the lifts. He wasn’t sure why it was so much harder every time he had to face Harry alone. Shouldn’t he have gotten used to it by now? Shouldn’t it only be easier? Exposure therapy, he told himself. But no psychiatric strategies could account for the way that Harry only seemed to burn brighter the longer you were around him.

Louis stood outside Harry’s door for a long moment before going back inside, drawing in a series of deep breaths with his hand curled around the handle in an effort to prepare himself even though he already knew what to expect.

Absolutely nothing was different when Louis finally gathered the courage to walk in, but there was
no relief in that realisation. He sat down heavily in the chair that Niall had formerly occupied and squinted intently at the planes of Harry’s face, haloed in warm sunlight, trying to memorise every detail as if this were his last chance to do so.

He’d wasted so much time, Louis thought mournfully. He’d wasted so much goddamn time.

When he pulled his phone out, he did so without taking his eyes off Harry, not wanting to miss a single moment, even though the longer he looked, the more it felt like he was being burned up, consumed, from the inside out. It was like the way they described angels in the bible, so bright and glorious and powerful that human eyes couldn’t stand to look at them.

Harry would hate knowing that Louis thought of him like that, like something otherworldly. Superhuman. He would fucking hate it. And Louis didn’t care.

He glanced down long enough to select the song he wanted and hit play, staring at Harry as the music softly floated into his ears.

July 30, 2011

London, England

Louis wasn’t sure he’d ever been happier in his life.

That was saying a lot, considering the amount of elation he’d felt when he’d been told he wasn’t getting kicked off the X Factor after all, or when they’d made it through to the final three, or when they’d found out that even though they’d lost, their journey was just beginning.

But having Harry draped across his lap while they watched some banal romance flick on Netflix that Louis had had no hand in picking out—that was a different kind of happiness: a bone-deep contentment soaking through his entire body, making Louis feel lighter than a feather with only Harry’s weight keeping him pinned to the ground.

If someone had asked Louis to describe what it was that he saw in Harry, he wasn’t sure he would have a good answer. Harry was unmistakably a teenager, a late bloomer, with parts of him still too big for the body he hadn’t quite grown into yet. His limbs were gangly and awkward still, and his body was a patchwork amalgamation of sharp bony joints and soft baby fat, dressed up in stiff designer coats meant for a man twice his age.

And Louis knew Harry hated them. But he wore them anyway. They all did what they were told, but Harry was the worst of the bunch, Louis thought. He was afraid to disagree with anything, his confidence easily shattered even if his resolution was stronger than the rest of them combined. It was another one of those oxymoronic quirks that Harry seemed to be entirely constructed of, somehow managing to be all of one thing and its opposite at the same time.

Sometimes Louis wished he had the power to speak on Harry’s behalf instead, to use his seniority to Harry’s advantage for once, but despite all the reassurances he’d received from Harry and the rest of the lads, Louis knew he was still the weakest link in the band, that he could be easily discarded, easily replaced. The only thing he cared about more than making Harry was happy was making sure that didn’t happen. Louis didn’t know what he would do if management decided to get rid of him. Die, maybe, he thought to himself, realising even so how dramatic he was being.
But with Harry pressed against him, it didn’t feel nearly as theatrical as it should. Louis had never been as into girls as the rest of his mates, though he’d pretended to for their sake as well as his own, but there was never anyone who’d made him question the fact that maybe he wasn’t into girls because he was into boys instead. Until Harry, that is.

Maybe he was only into Harry. It was a silly thought, but Louis could almost believe it was true, even though he wasn’t even out of his teens either and he knew a lot could change in the next five, ten, twenty years. He knew full well that teenage romances didn’t often work out. And he could only imagine the odds were worse when it was two teenage boys who weren’t even allowed to be honest about how they felt for fear that it might ruin everything else in their lives.

They were a regular Romeo and Juliet, Louis thought bitterly.

Harry shifted suddenly in his lap and angled his head up to look at Louis with narrowed eyes. “I can hear you thinking,” he said, almost accusatorily. “It’s distracting.”

“Oh, well, excuse me, Princess,” Louis mocked, thoroughly enjoying the way that Harry blushed from his hairline to his collar at the nickname. “I’ll try to think more quietly from now on.”

“What are you thinking about?” Harry asked as he stared up at Louis curiously. He hit pause on the movie without a second’s hesitation, clearly expecting an answer.

Louis shrugged. He didn’t want to admit to the depth of consideration he’d given their relationship in the last half-hour, not when they’d only kissed the once and hadn’t even talked afterward about what it meant.

They were both still feeling out every type of casually intimate situation as if it were the first of its kind. Was Louis allowed to touch Harry’s lower back like that, or was it too much? Would it be weird for Harry to lay his head down in Louis’s lap to let him play with his curls? Everything was new, and alien, and oh-so-fragile, and Louis was deathly afraid of disturbing the status quo for fear of losing what they already had.

“You look like you’re about to fall asleep,” Louis told him, gently poking at Harry’s nose as Harry blinked lazily up at him.

Harry wrinkled his nose in response. “You didn’t answer my question,” he whined, instantly going full-brat because he knew Louis would give in. “Is it—are you upset about the Caroline thing?”

Louis’s breath caught in his throat. They hadn’t talked about this either, not really, and certainly not since the What Makes You Beautiful shoot. Harry had brought it up once the first time Caroline had asked him out to dinner, and there had been a few of those since, though so far it seemed to be nothing too serious.

Louis wondered if that’s what this was about, if Harry was trying to ask permission to take things further, and if that was the case, Louis wasn’t sure he wanted to be held responsible for what Harry did or didn’t do in his personal life.

Louis shrugged again, feeling suddenly cornered. “Rich and Harry were all right with it, weren’t they?” he said in lieu of a straight answer.

Harry scowled. “I don’t care about management,” he said.

‘I care about you’, Louis thought, filling in the blanks himself. He wished Harry had just said the words, weightier now for being left unspoken.
“If they want you to do it, then you should keep doing it,” Louis said even though he hated himself more and more with each word that left his lips. “I mean, you are actually friends, right? She’s not…making you uncomfortable, is she?”

“No!” Harry protested. “No, of course not.”

Louis also hated himself for wishing that Harry had said yes just so he would have the excuse to put a stop to it once and for all. Maybe it wasn’t right for him to judge, but Louis hated seeing them together, hated the way his skin crawled whenever she put her hands on Harry’s still baby-chubby cheeks. Harry might not have been uncomfortable with it, but Louis certainly was.

“If it ever gets to be too much,” Louis said uncertainly, his hands trailing through the back of Harry’s hair of their own accord, “just…just tell me, all right? And I’ll figure something out. But in the meantime, it can’t hurt to make it look like things are—you know.”

Louis still hadn’t forgotten the talking-to he’d received at the X Factor for the way he and Harry had acted, and he could already tell that their new management would act similarly if they had any reason to suspect that Harry—innocent little Harry, so undeserving of the sex-object status they’d practically draped him in before parading him around for the whole world—wasn’t the ruler-straight teen heartthrob they were trying so hard to manufacture.

Harry pursed his lips, looking like he might argue, but in the end, he said nothing and turned back around, snuggling into Louis’s chest again before hitting play on the movie. Louis’s eyes burned, and he hoped that when the movie finally ended, it would be a sad one, so that Harry wouldn’t know that Louis had cried because of him.

February 5, 2021
Los Angeles, California

“Louis?”

Louis opened his eyes and then squeezed them shut again instinctively, the light filtering into the hospital room too bright and too sudden to comfortably tolerate. When he opened them again, he could still barely see, but he managed to keep them open long enough to turn to find Harry staring back at him, his green eyes wide and sparkling.

Louis would have fallen out of his chair if he’d been able to move, but his limbs felt slow and alien, like they were stuck in molasses. He wanted to reach for Harry, wanted to do anything, really, but it was like his body hadn’t caught up with his brain just yet.

“Louis?” Harry said again. He was practically glowing, but there was something off about him, something that Louis couldn’t quite identify.

Louis opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

“I forgive you,” Harry said, as clear as a bell. He turned away then, and closed his eyes, and fell back into a peaceful slumber.

Louis stumbled out of the chair and swam toward him in a haze, needing to touch him, to know he was real, and there, and alive. He never made it.
Louis woke with a start, sweaty and disoriented, and nearly fell out of the chair in his haste to check on Harry, who was exactly as Louis had left him, when he must have fallen asleep. Caffeine crash, he realised. Or an adrenaline crash. In the end, the amounted to the same thing.

Harry hadn’t woken at all. He was still unconscious, hooked up to all manner of tubes and needles, none of which had been disturbed by even the tiniest movement to indicate that there was even the slightest bit of hope that Harry would wake up.

Louis launched himself out of the chair and toward the door, surprised by the sudden burst of energy propelling him forward. He fled the room in a panic, heading straight for the toilets, knowing as he streaked past nurses, doctors, patients, and visitors milling about in the corridor that he must have looked like an absolute loon.

He couldn’t breathe by the time he reached the toilets, which were thankfully empty. Louis hurled himself into the nearest cubicle and collapsed onto the floor without bothering to lock it behind him, relying on his back against the door to hold it closed as he knelt down gasping and retching on the floor.

What was wrong with him? What was wrong with him?

He was dying. He was having a heart attack in the cubicle of a hospital toilet and he couldn’t even pick himself up off the floor to get help. There would be headlines about this, Louis thought manically. The tabloids would have a field day. Twitter would explode.

Louis heard the door to the toilets opening and did his best to gulp down the bile that was threatening to eject itself from his throat.

“Sir?” said a timid voice. “Is everything okay in there?”

“I’m fine,” Louis called out in a voice that was definitely anything but convincing. He wasn’t fine, not by a long shot, but he wasn’t sure he could bear to have anyone, even a medical professional, see him in this state without immediately dying from the shame.

Whoever had just entered was oblivious to Louis’s dying wishes, however, and burst into the cubicle without warning. Louis glanced up at the male nurse blearily and tried to wave him off.

“I’m fine,” Louis insisted, growing cold when the other man’s eyes narrowed in confusion, as if he’d seen Louis before but couldn’t quite place him….

Louis found himself suddenly possessed of the ability to walk again and sprinted past the nurse back out into the corridor, not sure yet where he was intending on going. Louis just knew that he had to get out of there quick, before the nurse put two and two together and finally realised who Louis was. It was beginning to look like Louis wouldn’t be able to remain incognito in LA for much longer.

He roamed the halls aimlessly like a restless spirit, averting his eyes from passers-by wherever he went and receiving odd looks in return. Louis tried his damnedest to keep away from Harry’s room only to fall into an autopilot pattern, his feet taking him straight to Harry’s door before he had a chance to course-correct.

Louis brushed his hair back from his eyes and yanked the door open quick, like a plaster. He knew it wouldn’t hurt any less.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

A certain someone finally makes their appearance! Hope you guys enjoy this chapter.

Also I guess I should start letting people know that I will be at Harry's LA shows on July 13th & 14th. If you're also attending and want to say hi, drop me a line on Twitter or leave a comment if you want another way to contact me. I’d love to meet anyone who’s going!

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostesupd8s
Tumblr: @vondrostes

February 5, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis stood in the doorway to Harry’s room in a state of acute shock, feeling more like a deer in the headlights than he’d ever felt before in his life, even during his disastrous audition process for the X Factor, or the show in Leeds where they’d been literally booed off-stage.

Coming face to face with Anne Twist in this moment was worse than all of that, and Louis didn’t know whether to run or cry. Maybe both.

They stared at each other in silence for nearly a full minute, Anne with her arms folded over her chest, her gaze unyielding. Louis felt like a reed in a hurricane as she stared him down, but he remained frozen in place all the while, confident that he would be unable to move unless compelled by some outside force.

“Gemma didn’t say you’d be here,” Anne said quietly.

Suddenly, it was as if the invisible shackles holding Louis hostage had all come loose. “That’s because I didn’t tell her I was coming,” he replied honestly.

He should have. He should have. Why hadn’t he?

But likewise, Gemma should have known to text him to check on his whereabouts, particularly if Anne had been asking, which must have meant she hadn’t warned Louis on purpose. So perhaps she’d wanted this encounter to happen, or hoped for it, at least. But why? Punishment wasn’t really her style, but that’s what being subjected to Anne’s cold disapproval felt like.

Anne was still staring at him expectantly. Louis didn’t know what to say.

“I brought Niall over to see Harry for a bit,” Louis explained, “since he’s in town already.” He still hadn’t moved from the doorway, and now he was afraid to. He still felt like a prey animal cornered by a predator, terrified of moving in case it spurred a chase.
Anne stared at him unflinchingly for a few more seconds before moving away without any explanation to go and sit at Harry’s side. She was fearless in her attentions in a way that Louis envied, and of course she would be; she was his mother, and she had no reason to feel guilt over what Harry had done.

Louis bit into his bottom lip until he tasted blood as he watched Anne fuss over Harry, softly carding her fingers through his hair and petting his face in the places where it was safe to do so. He wanted to leave, desperately, wanted to sprint through the halls of the hospital and not stop until he reached the flat on Sherbourne.

But Anne already thought him a coward. He didn’t need to give her more reason for it.

“You know he did this because of you, right?”

Louis wasn’t expecting the words, and they hit him with all the force of a speeding car, leaving him blind-sided.

“What?”

Anne turned ever-so-slightly to glare at him. “Don’t play dumb with me, Louis. You’re not a kid anymore.”

Technically hadn’t been a kid since before Anne had even met him. He’d only ever acted like one. And that had worked, until it hadn’t. Harry had grown up too fast. Louis hadn’t grown up at all.

“I haven’t spoken with Harry in years,” Louis said carefully, the admission burning on its way out. It was true, and he hated it.

“I know,” Anne said heavily. Her fingers stilled against the side of Harry’s cheek.

Louis couldn’t imagine what it was like for her to be in the same room as her son, practically on his deathbed, as well as the person who put him there.

“I’m sorry,” Louis said quietly, knowing even as he said it that it couldn’t possibly be enough. He wondered if Gemma had told her about the flash drive Harry had left for Louis, and whether that had factored into her hatred for him as well, or if this anger stemmed purely from blame.

“I’m sure you are,” Anne snapped as she turned away from Louis again to focus on Harry.

Louis could only see her in profile as she attended to her son, but it was enough to tell that the angry lines in her face had softened, replaced by an overwhelming tenderness.

Anne was just like Harry in that way: one moment soft and sweet, and the next, venomous. And Louis had provoked the very worst of her righteous fury, regardless of his intentions, and even Louis had to admit that those had been less than pure.

But he’d never meant for things to end up like this.

“If I could—” Louis started to say, and then stopped, realising it would only make things worse.

It was too late. Anne whirled on him, fire in her eyes. “You don’t even know—” She faltered as well, looking near tears.

“What?” Louis pressed, knowing he would only regret knowing the answer.

“You broke him,” she hissed. “He was in love with you, and you—you couldn’t—”
It hurt more than Louis had expected to hear someone say it so directly. That Harry had been in love with him. That he’d wasted it, cast it aside, like it was worthless. And he hadn’t realised how much he’d needed it until it was gone.

Louis looked past Anne, at Harry’s gaunt face, and mused on the past three years without him. Every square centimetre of Louis’s existence was filled with work. If it hadn’t been, he supposed it would have been him lying in that bed.

A regular Romeo and Juliet love story, he recalled bitterly.

Louis hadn’t responded, but Anne wasn’t done, and she barrelled onward as if he’d meant to argue with her. “I had to watch my child wither to nothing from thousands of miles away,” she accused, “because of you.”

Louis could have told her that he’d tried to reconcile with Harry and it would have been true, but he didn’t. He said nothing at all. Because he already knew that he hadn’t tried hard enough. He knew Harry inside and out, knew that if he had flown to LA at any point in the last three years, showed up at Harry’s doorstep, and begged Harry to take him back, that Harry probably would have taken him. But Louis was too stubborn to be the first to pick up the phone when it was his fault they were apart, and he’d never quite gotten the hang of orchestrating the grand romantic gestures that Harry needed.

At some point, Louis had convinced himself that it wasn’t meant to be. That they were better apart. And that was the biggest lie of all.

There were so many things he wanted to say. *I wanted things to be different. I would’ve been there if he’d asked. I didn’t know.* All flimsy excuses that Louis couldn’t even convince himself to believe.

So still, he said nothing. He bowed his head, allowing Anne to cast silent judgment on him with her eyes, like the stare of an avenging angel.

The silence grew.

“I hate you,” she said minutes later in a broken voice, and when Louis looked up at her, he saw that she was near tears. “I hate you so much.”

“Me too,” Louis said miserably, his voice barely audible as Anne began to cry with hiccupping sobs.

Louis stood there watching her for as long as he could stand to do so, but when he turned to leave, the door opened. In walked Gemma, her arms laden with take-out bags.

“Oh! Hey Louis, I didn’t realise you were—here….” She trailed off as Louis stalked past her to get to the door, to escape the stifling atmosphere filling the room the longer he stayed trapped in there with Anne and Harry and the reminder of all his past mistakes. “Mum?” he heard Gemma ask as he twisted the door handle. “Are you all right? What happened?”

He didn’t stay long enough to listen to the answer.

Louis texted Mark on the way out of Cedars-Sinai to let him know that he would be back at the condo by the time Mark finished dropping Niall off at the studio. And then he queued up another song to listen to while he walked.
“How do you feel?”

Harry was sweating through his cotton t-shirt, his curly brown hair slicked to his forehead and around his ears. Louis was perched on his feet, holding them down while Harry struggled to complete a set of sit-ups after demonstrating his utter lack of prowess at both push-ups and pull-ups. But Louis could see the potential in him. He was weedy still, but not skinny, like Zayn. Harry could probably bulk up a bit if he tried.

“Like I’m gonna puke,” Harry muttered as he forced himself up once more, nearly touching his knees with his elbows before ducking back down again for another.

“Good. Then it’s working.”

Harry only grunted in response before finishing out the set. He slumped back down to the floor with an exhausted sigh once he was done. He was more sweat than boy at that point, melting into a warm puddle right there in the middle of their hotel room.

“Where did this even come from?” Louis wondered aloud. It wasn’t like Harry to randomly suggest working out, especially not between radio appearances when they were supposed to be resting.

“What d’you mean?” Harry said, his hair still hanging limply around his head like a curly halo against the rug.

Louis shrugged. “You just seem…I don’t know, out of sorts. So I was wondering if this had anything to do with it.”

Harry jerked his feet out from under Louis’s knees and rolled over onto his front without answering. He reached for his phone instead and started to load up Twitter, and Louis knew that once Harry got going on social media, he’d have a hard time turning his attention elsewhere.

Louis reached forward and plucked the phone right out of Harry’s hands.

“Hey!” Harry protested, twisting around at the waist to try and snatch it back. “You can’t just—”

“I’ll give it back when you tell me what’s wrong,” Louis told him calmly, keeping the phone just out of reach, and Harry pinned down by Louis practically sitting on his thighs.

Harry’s cherubic face twisted into a scowl. “I’m not a baby, Lou.”

“Then don’t act like one,” Louis countered, even while simultaneously acknowledging that he wasn’t acting much more mature either, with Harry trapped beneath him and Harry’s phone dangling above both their heads like a playground taunt. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Let me up!”

Louis relented, handing Harry’s phone back as the younger boy sat up with an exasperated huff. He stared at Harry expectantly.

“You know the phone call with my mum this morning?” Harry asked, staring down at his own lap instead of up at Louis. “Before we went down to the studio?”
Louis nodded, and then realised that Harry still wasn’t looking at him. “Yeah,” he amended, “I remember.”

“Well,” Harry continued haltingly, “it didn’t exactly go well.”

“What do you mean?”

Harry had seemed perfectly fine during the debut of their first single on BBC Radio 1 earlier that day and the accompanying interview segment. In fact, if it hadn’t been for this whole ‘exercise’ thing, Louis wouldn’t have known that anything was wrong with Harry at all.

Harry wrinkled his nose, grimacing slightly as he answered. “My mum’s been asking about things. And I don’t like lying to her.”

“What kind of things?” Louis asked cautiously.


Louis raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything until Harry finally broke and glanced up to check Louis’s reaction.

“Did you tell her about Caroline?” Louis asked. He wished desperately that the question didn’t feel so loaded. It should have sounded like a reasonable inquiry, not a jealous accusation, but Louis couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his voice no matter how hard he tried.

Harry’s scowl deepened; he’d caught on to the acidic note in Louis’s tone, and he wasn’t happy about it. “I’m gonna take a shower,” he announced, standing up abruptly without bothering to give Louis an actual answer.

“H—”

But Harry had already turned his back on Louis. He marched straight into the loo without a second glance, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Louis sighed, giving it a few seconds before he got up to try and reason with Harry. He heard the shower turn on just as he reached the door. “Harry,” Louis pleaded, leaning heavily against the door. “Let me in.”

“The door’s unlocked,” Harry called out over the sound of the running water.

Louis tried the handle, surprised despite Harry’s statement when it opened easily. He must have expected that Louis would chase after him, or at least hoped for it.

The reason Louis was so shocked that Harry hadn’t locked the door was due to his sudden shift in behaviour over the last month. Harry had become noticeably shier since they’d kissed for the first time, to the point of even changing his clothes in the bathroom with the door locked so Louis wouldn’t see him. It was a stark difference from the boy who had shamelessly stripped his whole kit off on the third day Louis had spent with him outside the X Factor.

Harry was already in the shower when Louis stepped inside, the curtain drawn closed. Louis sighed and took a seat on the toilet. “Are we gonna talk about this?” he asked.

Harry said nothing.

“If you don’t talk to me,” Louis pointed out, “then I can’t fix it.”
“There’s nothing to fix.”

Louis pursed his lips in frustration. He didn’t want his temper to get the better of him. “Obviously there is, or else you wouldn’t be so upset.”

“I’m not upset.”

“Harry,” Louis said, his exasperation plainly permeating each syllable. “Please.”

When still Harry didn’t respond, Louis finally decided he’d had enough of his games. He shed his clothes in a flash and tore open the shower curtain, ignoring Harry’s startled yelp as he stepped into the tub and crowded the other boy against the tile.

“What are you doing?” Harry demanded, pink-cheeked and breathless.

“Why won’t you tell me what’s wrong?” Louis countered. He grabbed hold of Harry’s soap-slicked biceps, preventing the other boy from fleeing the conversation prematurely.

Harry glanced away. “Because I know what you’re gonna say,” he mumbled. He was prettier than ever with water coursing through his hair, beading on the tip of his nose and clumping his eyelashes together, but Louis refused to let that distract him.

“Just tell me,” Louis pleaded.

Harry wriggled out of his grip and took a step back, even going so far as to cover himself despite the fact that Louis had already seen his fair share on numerous occasions. “Get out first,” Harry ordered, blushing profusely. “Then we’ll talk.”

Louis smirked. “You sure you don’t want me to scrub your back?”

“Louis, get out!”

“Okay, okay.”

Louis climbed out of the shower and left Harry to it, towelling off quickly before hopping into bed to wait for Harry to finish up. It was nearly half an hour before the door opened again, a wall of steam billowing out into the room.

“You gonna tell me what’s bothering you now?” Louis asked as soon as Harry emerged from the bathroom with a towel around his shoulders, the other wrapped around his head, like a girl. He nodded and tip-toed over to the bed Louis was sat on, plopping down next to him with a resigned sigh.

“I wanna tell my mum about us,” he said quietly.

Louis’s blood ran cold. It wasn’t the admission he’d been anticipating, and he didn’t have a good response prepared.

“We haven’t even—” Louis floundered. They hadn’t even done anything more than kiss yet. They hadn’t told anyone else in the band that this was even going on, whatever ‘this’ was. They hadn’t even had the ‘boyfriends’ conversation, to make things official, because Louis was still too damn scared to broach the subject. And Harry already wanted to tell their parents about it? “I don’t know if we’re ready for that yet,” he finished lamely.

“I am,” Harry replied, his eyes blazing as he curled up on his side over the duvet next to Louis.
“Well, I’m not,” Louis retorted. It came out harsher than he’d intended. “It’s just—this is a big decision. Really big.”

“I know that,” Harry said, his tone turning acerbic.

“Then don’t you think we should wait?” Louis asked, hoping that Harry would give up purely for the sake of avoiding an argument, so they could go back to their lazy afternoon of doing nothing but enjoying each other’s company.

“What are you so afraid of?” Harry challenged, shattering any prospects of peace until the issue had been firmly resolved.

Louis sighed, swiping a hand over his face. “Management finding out? The fans finding out? I dunno, it’s just. It’s too much to think about.”

“It’s not like my mum would tell anyone,” Harry replied defensively.

Louis turned to look at him with wide apologetic eyes. “That’s not what I meant,” he said hastily. “It’s just that the more people know, the riskier it is, you know?”

Harry didn’t respond, continuing to stare at Louis like he’d punched an ice cream cone out of Harry’s hand.

Louis sighed again. “Can we just not do this right now? I don’t know what to tell you.” He’d meant for it to be ameliorating, a promise to resume the discussion another day, but Harry’s head snapped back as if Louis had physically hit him.

Harry stared at Louis for a long moment and then emitted a loud huff of frustration, quickly rolling away from Louis. “I knew you’d say that,” he proclaimed as he shut his eyes, lying flat on his back on the bed with the fluffy white hotel towel draped around him like a burial shroud.

“Hazza—”

“Could you maybe just leave me alone for a little while? I just. Yeah.”

Louis sat up and stared at Harry, trying to puzzle out in his head the best course of action that would lead to Harry not hating him for the rest of forever. In the end, he opted to avoid the fight instead of standing his ground and trying to come to an actual resolution with Harry.

It would be years before he realised he’d made the wrong decision that day.
Chapter 13

February 5, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis couldn’t help but wonder how different things might have been if he’d agreed back then to at least a degree of honesty—obviously not with the public, but with their family? Friends? The band? Maybe things wouldn’t have been tainted by all the secrecy, the endless number of festering lies that had gone on for far too long.

Louis was perspiring a bit by the time he reached the condo despite the cool February air. He didn’t think he’d ever get used to California weather—not that he’d have much of a chance to. He was only here until Harry woke up, or duty called. Whichever came first.

Louis collapsed onto one of the stools in the kitchen with a sigh as soon as he walked in. Then he stood up again a few seconds later, deciding on a whim that he was hungry and needed something to eat right then and there. The anxiety seemed to have burned through his calorie reserve for the afternoon, leaving him not only drained emotionally, but also physically famished.

It wasn’t until the smell of leftover Mexican hit him just as Louis was raising the fork to his mouth that he realised his stomach still hadn’t settled after the violent retching brought on by his earlier panic attack in the bathroom. Louis cursed and pushed the carton aside, swallowing thickly to keep the nausea threatening to overwhelm him at bay.

He put the leftovers back in the fridge, hoping they would survive another round of radiation in the microwave when he got his appetite back, and rifled through the cupboards for a box of tea instead. Louis decided on herbal rather than Yorkshire; he didn’t need a repeat of his earlier experience caused by another influx of caffeine.

Once Louis had a warm mug in his hands he retreated into the master bedroom and dragged his laptop up onto the bed. He laid back against the padded headboard and closed his eyes for a minute, thinking.

The urge to check social media was overwhelming; he couldn’t shake the fear that Nadia had broken her promise and outed him as soon as she’d left. He wished he hadn’t taken the picture. Maybe then, the pit of unease sitting heavily in his gut would have lessened over time instead of only growing stronger.
Louis opened Twitter and scrolled a bit, sticking only to browsing rather than posting this time. His eyes carefully scanned the screen. Louis was still afraid he might find a photo of his face against a Starbucks backdrop plastered across every update account. But there was nothing. Nadia had kept her word after all.

Louis really needed to calm the fuck down. He nursed his tea with that goal in mind and exited Twitter, pulling up Netflix instead to treat himself to a true crime documentary. He needed something engaging enough to keep his mind occupied without distraction for at least an hour or so.

Louis heard Mark come in about halfway through the programme. He popped his head into the bedroom just long enough to greet Louis, who barely had the energy to return the wave, before disappearing again and leaving Louis to his own devices.

That was a minor reassurance. If something out of the ordinary had happened with Niall on the way back to the studio, Mark would have told Louis straightaway.

Louis pushed thoughts of Niall out of his mind and turned his attention back to the documentary. Somehow it was easier to focus on graphic images of dismembered corpses and gut-wrenching witness testimonials than it was to spend even just a few seconds dwelling on the events that had transpired earlier in the day.

When the show finished, Louis felt marginally more relaxed than when he’d started. He decided to get up and try to eat. Mark was tucked away in his room when Louis walked into the kitchen to reheat his leftovers (again) and Louis texted him to let him know he could go and pick up dinner whenever he felt like it, not wanting to bother him if he was talking to his family or something.

Louis had always been rather self-sufficient even after becoming famous. It was something that didn’t go quietly after growing up the oldest of a single mother in a working-class home in Doncaster. Finding out there was certain things that he simply couldn’t do for himself anymore had actually been one of the harder parts of the job. Louis had hated feeling so…dependent on other people for all the normal everyday aspects of his life.

So he compensated where he could. Reheating take-out, making his own tea, chilling in bed watching Netflix; it all helped to a degree, made him feel a bit more grounded than he might otherwise. It was impossible not to get caught up in the fame when he was out on tour or doing promo day in and day out, but Louis appreciated the little breaks from all that when he could get them. It was a shame this break had come at such a high price.

Still, Louis felt loads better after he finished eating.

When he was finished, Louis cleaned the kitchen meticulously, refusing to acknowledge the fact that he was still just trying to kill time. But afterwards, there was nothing left to do but look at the clock and acknowledge that it was still far too early to go to sleep.

Louis contemplated the idea of going back to bed and watching more Netflix but quickly discarded it. If he laid down now after having stuffed himself, he’d inevitably doze off, and then his sleep schedule would be utterly fucked.

If Sam were there, she would have told Louis to take a nice bath. He paused; considered it. Might as well, he decided. What was it she was always going on about? Self-care. Baths were apparently integral to all that. Louis thought he definitely deserved some self-care after the day he’d just had.

Louis’s grocery list for Mark when he’d moved into the condo had included a massive supply of
toiletries and other assorted bathroom items. Anything he didn’t end up using, he would just donate before they left, so Louis had spared no expense in the name of comfort and convenience.

There was a pack of bath bombs stashed under the cabinet. Louis examined them with a frown, remembering that he had added them to his standard shopping list ages ago, though he rarely used them now. Harry had been the one to introduce them to Louis in the first place.

Louis pushed that thought out of his mind and grabbed one at random from the set. Some sort of tropical scent, he decided after giving it a cursory sniff. It was a pale orange, but when he’d filled up the tub and dropped it in, the water turned a bright sunshine yellow, with some stray glitter mixed in just for the hell of it. Louis frowned. Not exactly the most appetising aesthetic, but the smell was nice enough.

He got the water just where he wanted it—which had always been too cold in Harry’s opinion—and climbed in, setting his phone down after spinning up a playlist of soft indie-pop to listen to while he soaked. It kept his brain settled in a warm fuzzy haze for a while. Until it didn’t.

Louis couldn’t help but let his eyes drift over to the phone sitting on the lid of the toilet right next to the tub as he laid there in the bath. He shouldn’t, he knew he shouldn’t, and yet the temptation was stronger than he could imagine.

Listening was like an itch he couldn’t scratch, like the smoking habit he’d spent years trying to kick.

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August 16, 2011

Coventry, England

Harry was unusually quiet in the car on the way back to their hotel, a noticeable absence in the middle of the other boys, who couldn’t seem to shut up. They were all high off the energy of another radio interview in the bag, adrenaline pumping just from knowing that the band was actually going places, that people really liked the song—that none of this was ending. But Harry wasn’t taking any part in the celebrations.

It was a moment before Louis noticed something was wrong, and then he withdrew too, sidling up to Harry and getting as close as he dared in front of the other three.

“What’s wrong?” Louis asked softly, noting Harry’s almost glassy eyes, like he was on the verge of crying. He seemed paler than usual.

Harry shook his head minutely.

Louis knew what that meant. Whatever was bothering him, he didn’t want to talk about it in the car around the others.

He sat back against the seat and scanned through the events of their Mercia Radio interview, trying to figure out what about it could have left such an impression on Harry. It wasn’t like Harry’d been the one who had to endure the whole world finding out his mum used to call him ‘Boo Bear’ when he was a baby. In comparison, the whole makeover thing had seemed like a piece of cake. And Harry had even volunteered for that. Well, before he’d known what it was, at least. He’d whinged and moaned as soon as he’d found out, but still. It hadn’t been that bad.
Maybe it was the fact that Louis had picked Harry’s curls when they’d been asked to name something that made one of the other members beautiful? Louis had done it as a sort of peace offering to Harry, since things were still a little tense between them. No, Louis decided, Harry had probably been chuffed about that. That couldn’t have been it.

Louis glanced down at Harry’s hands, noticing now the white-knuckles as Harry twisted and pulled at his fingers. He could see the blue nail varnish, already chipped from Harry’s fiddling, but still very much there. Was that really what was bothering Harry so badly?

Louis wished he could reach over and grab Harry’s hands, force him into stillness, but he couldn’t do anything at all but watch and wait for the trip to be over, agonising over Harry’s glum silence all the while.

“Are you okay?” Louis asked quietly, the second they were alone together in the corridor outside their hotel room while Harry fiddled around in his wallet for the key card.

Harry shrugged as he let them both in, waiting until Louis had walked past before shutting the door and bounding over to the nearest bed to flop down on it with a loud sigh. “Would you have been put out if they’d wanted to put makeup on you?” Harry asked, angling his head up far enough to watch as Louis changed his clothes right there in the middle of the room.

Louis gave Harry a puzzled look as he wriggled out of his shirt. “That’s what you’re hung up on?” He felt immediately bad after he’d said it, watching Harry’s face redden in embarrassment. “No, really, H, why’d it bother you so much? It’s not because I made you do it, is it?” Louis was suddenly worried that it was him who was the problem, not the innocent Irishwoman who’d just wanted to have a bit of fun.

Harry shook his head quickly, sinking back down onto the bed with another exaggerated sigh. He put his hands over his eyes—Louis couldn’t tell if he was trying to hide his expression or making an attempt to calm the blush that was still spreading across his cheeks.

Louis waited until Harry had put them down again before stepping closer. He snatched up Harry’s wrist with one hand and pulled him up off the bed, examining the light blue shimmer of Harry’s nails while Harry blinked up at him dazedly, expectant.

Louis released Harry’s hand. “I think it looks all right,” Louis reassured him, hoping it would do the job. He wasn’t like his mother. He never knew the right things to say when it counted, but he still had to try. All Louis knew is that the one thing he hated more than sounding like a fool was the way Harry’s face scrunched up when he was sad or angry and trying desperately not to cry. He’d been close to that in the car, but it was softer now.

“What do you really?” Harry asked hesitantly. He looked like he wanted to believe Louis but wasn’t sure if he could be trusted.

“Yeah, of course,” Louis said. “It suits you. But we can ask for some acetone or something if you want to take them off before bed.”

Harry stared down at his hands silently for a long while before replying. “No,” he said quietly.

“No?”

“No, I want to keep it on for a while, I think.” Harry looked very small, absurdly vulnerable, and it scared Louis to see him that way.

Louis took a step back without thinking. Harry looked alarmed, like he was afraid Louis was going
to suddenly bolt out of the room after hearing the admission. “Harry,” Louis said slowly, “why did you really put up such a fuss back at the studio?”

Harry looked petrified. Louis hated knowing he was the reason for it, but clearly this was important to Harry in some capacity.

“I’m not going to be upset or, like, judge you or anything,” Louis added, hoping it would console the other boy enough that he would feel comfortable sharing his true feelings about the incident. “I swear.”

Harry’s shoulders came up around his chin as he replied, like a turtle trying to hide in its shell.

“Gemma used to paint my nails when I was little,” he said softly. “She’d put our mum’s makeup and stuff on me like one of those makeovers on the telly. Mum would always clean off the lipstick and eyeshadow, but she’d leave the nail varnish on because....” He trailed off, leaving Louis to wonder at the reason. “But then I got made fun of at school for it,” Harry continued, “so I just... stopped letting her paint them after that.”

Harry was red-faced and breathless after his confession, enough so that Louis felt legitimately bad for coaxing it out of him.

Louis wasn’t sure how he felt about the idea of Harry—this Harry, not the primary school version of him—wearing makeup of all things, but he didn’t have any trouble wrapping his head around a bit of nail varnish. Even Lottie had practised on Louis herself often enough. It wasn’t that weird.

“So you were afraid me and the lads would rib you for a bit of nail varnish? I mean, we were with you Harry, we know it was for a laugh.”

Harry didn’t look up, didn’t look at all comforted by the words. If anything, he looked even more sullen, and once again Louis felt like he’d done something very wrong, even though he’d only meant to help.

“No,” he replied in a voice just barely above a whisper, “I was afraid you’d have a go at me for liking it.”

Oh. So that was it.

Louis squatted down till he and Harry were eye level, taking Harry’s hands in his, slowly rubbing his thumbs over Harry’s knuckles like he’d do if Lottie or Fizzy were having a bad day and needed a bit of cheering up.

“You know, I wasn’t lying,” Louis told him, “when I said you looked beautiful. I still think that, no matter what you like.” He waited until Harry’s eyes drifted back up to meet his and then leaned forward, softly connecting their lips for the first time since they’d kissed in that hotel room in Malibu.

February 5, 2021

Los Angeles, California

It had been a few months before Harry’s...proclivity (Louis didn’t like calling it that, but he wasn’t
sure still what to call it really) came up again. The second time it happened, Louis had offered to paint Harry’s nails himself, and Harry had accepted. It had happened on occasion after that as well, but never too much or too often, and always in private. And then when Harry had garnered up the courage to want to show them at shows or in interviews, there had been an intervention by their managers themselves to make sure that didn’t happen.

It would ruin Harry’s image, they’d claimed.

When Harry finally stepped out in public, every fingernail on both hands painted a stark black, it wasn’t Louis that had done it for him. Louis had been shocked at the time over how such a small thing could feel like such a massive betrayal. But it had. It had hurt him.

It was strange to think about how the last time Louis had carefully applied nail varnish to Harry’s hands, he hadn’t known it at the time—that it was going to be the last time. And at some point after that, he’d touched Harry’s hands for the last time, and he hadn’t known it then either.

Louis had always been fascinated by Harry’s hands, hadn’t wanted to ever stop touching them. There was just something about the contradiction of them—the same way that all of Harry was one walking contradiction—how they seemed to be both huge and delicate all at the same time.

Louis was confident he knew the back of Harry’s hands better than his own. He’d spent enough time in the last decade staring at them, stroking them, watching as Harry ran his fingers through his hair, wrapped a hand around his cock, curled his fingers inside himself….

Louis threw his head back and groaned, feeling himself starting to get hard just thinking about it. He really didn’t need this right now. It had been ages since he’d last had a wank. He just hadn’t been in the mood for it, understandably, but now wasn’t the time either. Not when he was chubbing up in the bath thinking about Harry’s hands while Harry himself was still in a goddamn coma.

Louis tried valiantly to ignore his own erection, now bobbing insistently up to the surface of the water as he shifted to resume the previous playlist on his phone. But no matter how hard he tried to think of something else, anything else, his cock just wasn’t having it.

Louis could feel his restraint thinning with each passing second. And then finally, he gave in, curling a hand around his dick and gasping out loud on the upstroke. He was surprised at how sensitive he was, but it had been a while.

He tried to think about porn in an effort to keep Harry off the brain, and then when that didn’t do the trick, Louis tried to blank out everything else completely while his hand did all the work. It was a feeble effort, but his torment didn’t last long.

Louis came within less than two minutes, and under any other circumstances, he would have been disappointed, but this time he just felt relieved. He sighed, continuing to pull himself off for a few seconds until it started to hurt, and then he opened his eyes and sat up, intending to drain the water in the bath.

For whatever reason, it wasn’t until Louis saw the cloud of white floating through the bathwater that what he’d just done finally hit him.

Louis retched, violently, scrabbling with his phone and the toilet lid to quickly pry it open in case anything came up with it. It was a false alarm, but the nausea lingered even when Louis finally decided it was safe to pull back from the toilet so he could pull the drain in the tub.
What the fuck was wrong with him?

He dragged himself out of the bath and into a towel, stumbling his way into the bedroom to find something suitable to pass out in before heading into the kitchen with every intention of pouring himself a very large drink. He didn’t make it that far.

Mark was waiting for Louis by the island as if he’d sensed his distress telepathically. Once Louis emerged from the master bedroom, no doubt white as a sheet and looking as if he’d seen a ghost, Mark transformed seamlessly into caretaker mode, procuring a few Xanax and a glass of cold water before Louis fully managed to stagger over to him.

Louis downed the tablets without question, neither one of them exchanging a single word in the process.

All Louis knew is that he just didn’t want to think anymore.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Hope you enjoy the update! Since a few people have asked, I'm going to elaborate on Harry waking up in the end notes. If you'd rather not be spoiled for anything, don't read them!

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostesupd8s
Tumblr: @vondrostes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

February 6, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis didn’t wake up remotely hungover or disoriented, but he knew immediately upon opening his eyes that he’d slept for far too long. His body felt achy all over from disuse. He climbed out of bed and quickly ran through some stretches using a routine he’d learned from his personal trainer but rarely followed.

It helped a little. Louis felt marginally looser in his limbs as he walked into the kitchen to pour himself a bowl of cereal.

It wasn’t until after he’d finished eating that he remembered his phone, still sitting abandoned on the bathroom counter next to the toilet. He washed up quickly and then went back in to retrieve it. It was just after dawn, he realised upon turning the phone back on, and he’d received far too many messages since he’d passed out the previous afternoon.

Louis ignored all but one: a text from Gemma. I feel like such a bitch for saying this, but could you not come by the hospital just for today? Mum wants some time alone with Harry.

Louis sent back a brief affirmation and set the phone down again before stepping into the shower to clean up. He realised under the warm spray that he now had a full day ahead of him with nothing to fill it, and there was accompanying spike of panic in Louis’s chest at the thought.

Not that he wasn’t glad for the excuse to keep his distance from Anne. After the fiasco yesterday, Louis was confident they’d all get on better if she never had the misfortune to run into him again.

And even if his meeting with Anne hadn’t been a colossal disaster, Louis wasn’t sure how he could ever stand to even occupy the same room as Harry again after what he’d done in the bath last night. He felt his face heating at the memory and scrubbed harder with the bar-soap.

After nearly an hour, Louis finally felt clean again and emerged from the shower a new man. He’d decided not to trim the beard that was gradually thickening along his jaw, hoping it would help him avoid being recognised in the future.

But Louis was at a loss again as soon as he was dry and dressed, the day extending out ahead of
him, empty of any obligations or excuses to waste time.

It took Louis a few minutes to rifle through his options before remembering that he was in the same city as his own son, which made him feel like a royal arsehole for it not being the first thing he’d thought of. And well, Briana had told him to give her a day’s notice before taking Freddie out, but if she really refused to budge on that rule, Louis could always plan ahead for tomorrow.

It wasn’t like he was looking forward to seeing Harry again anytime soon.

Louis sat down on the bed and pulled out his phone, taking several deep breaths before he hit call. Talking to Briana was always stressful, even now that they’d arrived at some sort of happy medium regarding their relationship with one another. Their temperaments just weren’t compatible; Louis too cold and Briana way, way, way too hot. Freddie had mellowed them both out, Louis supposed, but it had been a journey getting to that point, and both were still sceptical of the other.

Briana’s tone once she answered wasn’t promising. “Let me guess,” she said long-sufferingly, “you got some unexpected time off and you want to take Freddie out.”

“Got it in one,” Louis replied weakly.

“What did I tell you?” she demanded.

“I know, I know. If you want me to wait until tomorrow then I will, I just didn’t know how things were going to shake out until I woke up this morning is all.”

Briana sighed heavily. There was a long pause before she answered, leading Louis to believe his request was going to be denied. She surprised him. “I’ll let it slide on the condition that you bring him home before six. And text me exactly where you’re going, okay?”

“Yeah, of course. Is it all right if I head over there now? It’ll probably take a while with traffic but —”

“It’s fine, Louis. Just give me a heads up when you’re close.”

All in all, the conversation had gone a lot better than Louis had expected. With a new goal in mind, Louis felt invigorated. He was excited to see Freddie, too. He didn’t often have the opportunity. It was something that bothered him in his darker moments, when he let himself worry that he’d turned into his own biological father, but he’d made an effort to provide for Freddie, at least, even if he couldn’t always be there for him in the flesh.

Louis got up and stretched again, quickly, before walking out of the bedroom to knock on Mark’s door. Mark answered almost immediately and was already dressed and ready to go even though they had no set schedule for the day.

“Breakfast?” Louis questioned. “I think I can manage to fry up some eggs without burning the place down.”

“Sure,” Mark replied easily as he slipped out of his room to follow Louis into the kitchen. “Anything planned for today?”

They weren’t talking about Louis’s emotional breakdown the night before, and Louis knew that Mark wouldn’t say a word about it unless Louis brought it up first. And Louis wasn’t about to do that.

“I thought we’d take Freddie to the beach,” Louis proposed as he reached into the fridge to pull out
a carton of eggs from the back. Mark had done an amazing job of stocking up on groceries; so far Louis couldn’t imagine wanting anything other than what they already had on hand. “Briana already okayed it,” he explained. “But we have to make sure he’s back by six, so we shouldn’t stay longer than four, probably, just in case.”

“Cabrillo?” Mark asked as Louis cracked the eggs into the pan on the stove.

“Mhmm.”

After Carbon Beach had been turned over to the public nearly six years ago, the rich and famous had gotten more creative with their beachside escapades, leading them to scatter across the coast in search of more secluded areas to swim and soak in the sun.

The matter wasn’t of much concern to Louis personally, but Briana had consulted him about it back when she’d wanted to take Freddie to see the ocean for the first time, preferably without the prying eyes of the paparazzi. The handful of times he’d joined them, or taken Freddie on his own, they’d stuck to the less populated side of Cabrillo on weekdays only, and they hadn’t had a bad experience yet. Louis had never even been recognised on those past trips. He was hoping the streak would continue.

Louis finished up breakfast with minimal conversation after that and then turned on the TV while they ate, leaving it on a local news channel just for the sake of having white noise in the background. The eggs were a little burnt on the undersides and the yolks not quite as runny as Louis would have liked—a traitorous voice in the back of his head reminded him that Harry’s eggs had always been irritatingly perfect—but they still tasted all right, and both Louis and Mark dug in without hesitation.

Louis was feeling almost zen as he got close to finishing his plate, which was of course when his mind decided to turn on him once again. All of a sudden Louis realised that Gemma and Anne were potentially eating breakfast on the same street, possibly even in the same building, and he froze with his fork lifted halfway to his mouth.

“Louis?” Mark inquired gently. “You okay?”

“Fine,” he replied quickly. He coughed and quickly shovelled in the forkful of egg he’d been about to eat before he’d gotten unnecessarily distracted. He almost wished he could leave and go back to London instead of waiting things out in LA. It was like being in such close proximity to Harry, to his family, for so long was gradually poisoning Louis’s brain.

They finished breakfast quickly after that, sparing just enough time for Mark to get the dishes soaking in the sink while Louis changed and packed a bag before heading out. Traffic was already bustling by the time they entered the freeway; Louis sent Briana a short text with their ETA and then settled in for the long haul.

He didn’t even try to resist the urge this time to pull up Harry’s playlist, eager almost as he examined the next track in the line-up. He recognised the date easily enough. He remembered the day better than he would have liked. But there was less anxiety associated with this one than there had been with some of the others. Perhaps because, for once, Louis hadn’t been the one at fault.

September 10, 2011

London, England
Louis had known from the second Harry started his solo that they were in for a disaster; he just hadn’t anticipated quite how bad the aftermath would really be.

Harry was near tears as soon as they left the stage after their ITV performance—their first live televised performance after the X Factor itself—and Louis couldn’t blame him. And he didn’t know what to say to make it any better, either.

Louis regretted his silence when he got back to the house. He watched helplessly as Harry retreated to a far corner away from everyone else, even while Louis and the other boys were being congratulated on their performance by the producers and crew. It was a few minutes before Louis was able to break away to get to him, and by the time he did, Harry looked completely destroyed, his face hollow, eyes filled with unshed tears.

Louis was afraid to touch him, worried that if he so much as laid a finger on Harry, the boy would simply crumble to little pieces. He sat down next to Harry at the bottom of the staircase and folded his hands over his knees, waiting to see if Harry would say anything.

He didn’t.

“It was just a bit of nerves, Harry,” Louis reassured him, finally deciding to speak up. “There’s nothing wrong with your voice. It’ll go better next time.”

“I’m not upset about that,” Harry snapped. “I mean, I am, but—” He peeled his fingers apart, revealing his phone screen for Louis to see.

Louis leaned over and squinted at the small text filling the screen. It didn’t take him long to identify the source of Harry’s distress. “Ah,” he said quietly. He wasn’t sure what else to say.

Louis had gone through his fair share of bullying in school: for his clothes, his height, his voice—and most of it had been accompanied by a particular word that had left a foul aftertaste in his mouth the handful of times he’d had occasion to utter it himself. Faggot. The same word that had shown up repeatedly in tweets about Harry’s performance that night, sometimes as an afterthought to the individual’s criticism, other times as the main attraction, repeated big and bold in capital letters.

For some reason, throughout all the months that Louis had spent agonising over his feelings for Harry, Louis hadn’t really put any thought into what the reactions would be from the general public. After seeing the things people were saying about Harry over a bad performance, Louis felt even more determined to keep their relationship out of the spotlight, even if just to shield Harry from all of that nastiness as much as he could.

Louis covered Harry’s phone with his hand and slung an arm around Harry’s shoulders, giving him a little squeeze. He knew there were still cameras around even if no one seemed to be filming them right at the moment, so he was careful not to let things stray out of friendly territory.

“Close twitter,” Louis instructed, “and ring your mum, all right? I’ll fetch us some tea for when you’re done.” Louis felt horribly powerless now, but he knew that the best thing was just to do whatever he could to keep Harry’s mind off what people were saying about him.

“Okay,” Harry agreed quietly.

“There’s a lad,” Louis said, quickly ruffling Harry’s hair as he stood up to go the kitchen.
If they’d been alone, he might have kissed Harry—on his forehead, his cheeks, the tip of his nose. Maybe that would helped somehow, made Harry feel like Louis was there for him no matter what, that Louis cared more about him than what other people might say. But they weren’t alone. And Louis couldn’t do anything at all.

February 6, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis was already starting to feel a little sun-drunk just from the long car ride by the time they pulled up to Briana’s McMansion (purchased with Louis’s money, though he hadn’t had much of a say in the actual selection process) and he was a little worried he wouldn’t last the day out on the beach. Louis hoped Freddie’s boundless reserves of energy would be enough to keep him from nodding off on the sand like a geriatric.

“Want me to wait here?” Mark asked after they’d stopped. Louis hadn’t even unbuckled his seatbelt yet, too overcome by the realisation that he was minutes away from seeing his son again for the first time in months.

“Yeah, that’s probably best,” Louis replied vaguely. He forced himself to get out and then stood there squinting up at the house silhouetted against the blinding sun for a few seconds before finally convincing his feet to move.

Louis’s nervousness hit him in full-force as soon as he started up the long stone-paved walk to the front door. He called and facetimeed Freddie when their schedules allowed, but he didn’t think he would ever fully overcome the niggling fear every time he visited in person that his son suddenly wouldn’t recognise him anymore.

Louis held his breath as he rang the doorbell. But Freddie wasn’t there when the door opened, only Briana looking frazzled in her pyjamas. She’d long gotten over the phase of always making herself presentable when Louis stopped by.

“What happened to Rose?” he asked quietly, not wanting Rose’s replacement to overhear. “I liked her.”

Briana’s response was blunt, her expression unchanging as she replied. “She tried to sell pictures of Freddie to The Sun to pay her boyfriend’s bail.”
Ah. Well, Louis hadn’t always been the best judge of character.

He turned away from Briana, not really sure what the appropriate response to that revelation was and deciding not to risk starting an argument by accidentally saying the wrong thing.

Louis walked over to meet Freddie at the bottom of the stairs and crouched down to put himself at the same level as Freddie’s wide staring eyes. Freddie clung to his nanny’s hand like a lifeline and didn’t smile back at Louis.

“Hey bud,” Louis said quietly. “Remember me?” His heart was pounding furiously against his ribcage. Moment of truth.

Freddie nodded, and Louis felt the crushing weight on his shoulders vanish just like that.

Louis’s smile widened. He extended his arms toward Freddie, feeling his chest burst when the boy finally pulled away from his nanny to climb into them. Louis heaved him up with a very real grunt of exertion. “Boy, you sure have gotten big,” he told Freddie, who bashfully buried his head into the crook of Louis’s shoulder. Louis rubbed his back. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around in a little while,” he told him.

It wasn’t fair to Freddie really that most of Louis’s visits had been incidental, almost always due to work-related commitments that he had no choice but to attend. If he hadn’t been such a coward—still was—maybe Louis wouldn’t have missed so much of Freddie’s childhood. But Louis was still determined to make it up to him where he could.

Freddie mumbled something that might have been an ‘it’s okay’ but Louis couldn’t be sure that he wasn’t just hearing what he wanted to hear.

“We haven’t met,” Louis said, turning his attention to the nanny after shifting Freddie onto his hip to free up his right hand for her to shake. “I’m Louis.”

“Stace,” she replied sheepishly. Louis had been right; she was taller than him.

“Ready to go?” Louis asked her. He noted the large duffel bag over her shoulder and wondered what it contained. It wasn’t like they were leaving the country.

Stace nodded.

Louis turned to Briana and crooked an eyebrow. “Anything else I need to know before we leave?”

Briana shook her head minutely. “Stace has everything he needs. Just make sure you bring him back before six,” she reminded him.

“Yeah, got it. Well, see you tonight then, I guess.”

It was abysmal as far as goodbyes went, but neither of them could expect much better. Louis led Stace out of the house with Freddie still in his arms, pausing just long enough for Briana to give the boy a quick kiss on the cheek. They walked side-by-side back down the path to the car where Mark was waiting, and then Louis helped Stace get Freddie settled into the backseat, closing the door on them once they were both safely buckled in.

“So where are we going?” Stace asked as Mark pulled away from the curb.

“Briana didn’t tell you?” Louis replied. He had to lean back around his headrest to look at her, and when he turned he could see a tablet already resting in Freddie’s lap, the duffel bag lying unzipped
in the empty seat next to them.

“She said something about the beach, but I didn’t ask which one. I do know you’re not technically supposed to be in LA right now, so I didn’t know if there was like, some secret celebrity beach where we might run into Tom Hardy or something, or if you were just planning to take him to like, Zuma or whatever.”

Louis snorted. “You know Tom Hardy doesn’t live in LA, right?”

Stace flushed. “Oh. Yeah.”

“How long have you been working for Briana?” Louis asked curiously. He hadn’t exactly planned on interviewing the girl over the course of their trip, but she seemed plenty nice enough. Not star-struck or socially awkward like some of the other nannies Briana had gone through when Freddie was still a baby. Just normal, really.

“A few months? I’m not really a ‘nanny’ per se—shoot, maybe I shouldn’t have said that—but my mom is Briana’s hairdresser and suggested me when the last girl left.”

Louis shook his head. “It’s fine,” he assured her. “If you weren’t cut out for the job, Briana would have fired you the first week.”

“How many nannies has Freddie had?”

The boy in question looked up at his name for just a second before going back to finger-painting on the screen of his tablet, not a care in the world.

Louis sighed. “More than I can count.”

He turned away from Stace, his neck starting to ache from the awkward position. It was quiet in the car, but Louis didn’t really want to listen to a local radio station. He’d fallen out of the habit of doing so years ago in an effort to avoid not only hearing his own songs playing out in the wild, but also to minimize the number of times he had a small heart attack throughout the day whenever someone mentioned Harry’s name unexpectedly.

Louis spun back around again. “What music do you like to listen to?” he asked her. “I’ve got Spotify, so just hit me with whatever comes to mind, and I’ll put it on while we drive.”

Stace eyed him calculatingly. “Will you kick me out of the car if I say One Direction?”

Louis was surprised when that got a quiet chuckle out of Mark, but he kept his own expression completely deadpan. “Yes.”

“Then Hurts, please.”

“Hurts it is.”

Chapter End Notes

SPOILERS:

Harry will wake up well before the end of the fic. I have the entire thing planned out
already and there is a significant amount of interaction between Louis and Harry after he wakes up (and yes there will be smut). However, when I say this is a slow burn, I mean it! This fic is written in a very experimental style for me in that it's very much about Louis's character development through the bulk of this crisis. It will be a while longer before Harry does wake up.
Chapter 15

February 6, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Despite her purported inexperience, Stace was actually a godsend. She seemed to know exactly when to leave Louis and Freddie to their own devices versus when to step in and take the lead to compensate for Louis’s lack of familiarity with his own child’s needs and wants.

Louis spent the first few hours playing with Freddie in the shallows, just splashing about, or helping the boy hunt for crabs and other treasures in the sand. Louis was lucky in that entertaining children was virtually effortless for him; the natural consequence of having so many younger siblings, some of whom hadn’t even been born until he was an adult. It helped, even though Louis didn’t quite have the connection with Freddie that he wished he could have had, the kind of connection he’d had with his own mother.

Louis was surprised at how comfortable Freddie was in the water even though he was only five. Louis had to stop him from trying to swim out farther into the ocean more than a few times. Eventually he propped Freddie up on his hip and waded into the deeper water as a compromise.

“Are you having fun at school?” he asked. They were looking for fish. Well, Freddie was looking for fish. Louis was almost certain they weren’t going to see any this close to shore, but he wasn’t about to needlessly crush his son’s dreams of finding Nemo.

“Mhmm,” Freddie replied absently, still focused on the gently waves rolling toward them.

“You like your teachers? Your friends?”

Freddie shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“Only sometimes?”

Freddie shrugged again but didn’t answer. Louis let it go for the moment, not wanting to spoil their fun, and resolved to ask Briana about it later.

He changed his mind a few hours later over their picnic lunch and Freddie’s subsequent nap under their beach umbrella (as it turned out, Stace’s oversized duffel had come with all kinds of useful necessities).
“Can I ask you a question?” he posed, aware that he was already doing so even as he said it. Hopefully Stace wasn’t such a smartass that she’d point it out.

“Sure,” she replied easily.

Stace was sprawled out on the blanket between Freddie and Mark, who had taken the opportunity to sunbathe undisturbed practically all morning. Now that it was quiet, Louis could just make out the faint sounds of hard rock emanating from Mark’s earphones.

“Is Freddie having any problems at school?” he asked her.

Stace froze up, her body language betraying the casual tone of her response. “Problems?”

“Yes,” Louis replied firmly, making it clear he expected a straight answer. “Problems.”

Stace glanced down at Freddie to make sure he was still asleep before continuing. “It’s not a big deal, really, but there was an issue with a teacher at Freddie’s school a couple months ago who kept trying to ask him questions.” She didn’t meet Louis’s eyes as she spoke, instead picking at a stray thread in the blanket underneath her.

“Questions? What kind of questions?”

Stace glanced up briefly. “The kind she shouldn’t have been asking a four-year-old.”

Louis could easily guess the nature of the teacher’s inquiries, but some masochistic part of him wanted confirmation. He stared at Stace hard, his brow furrowed, waiting for her to crack.

Stace sighed loudly. “She was asking him stuff about Harry, I guess. When Briana found out, she made a big stink about it to the school board and they fired her like, the next day, pretty much. There haven’t been any problems since then. It’s fine. Freddie probably doesn’t even remember.”

Clearly, Freddie remembered more than anyone thought. Louis felt sick to his stomach. He was barely even a part of Freddie’s life and he still managed to ruin it from thousands of miles away.

“That’s the only issue there’s been?” he asked, hoping there wasn’t more than Briana had been keeping from him.

Stace nodded. “As far as I know, yeah.”

That wasn’t much comfort to Louis, who now knew that he was due for a long talk with Briana about the necessary disclosure of information when something happened that involved Freddie. It wasn’t like he only wanted Briana to pick up the phone for holidays or a potential lawsuit.

Stace roused Freddie from his nap some twenty minutes later, and it was like watching a computer come back to life. He was instantly ready to go, tugging sweetly on Louis’s hand as he ran back down the beach into the water.

The relatively secluded shore started to crowd up only an hour or so after they’d eaten, coinciding with a sharp dip in Louis’s energy levels. It was so hard being nearly-thirty. Louis decided it was best to take a break from swimming for a while just so he could catch his breath with the added bonus of hiding under the umbrella from anyone who might have a chance of recognising his face.

“You mind taking over?” Louis said to Stace as he trudged through the sand with Freddie tucked under his arm. “I’m knackered.”
She laughed. “Sure,” she said, waiting until Louis had set Freddie down before reaching out to take the boy’s hand. “Come on, Fred, let’s go build a sandcastle and give your dad a break for a little bit.”

Louis breathed a sigh of relief as he sat back down, watching Stace and Freddie skipping back down to the shoreline to make an attempt at a sandcastle. He spent a long while just staring after them as they traipsed up and down the beach to collect accessories for the exterior of the building, seashells and kelp for décor, sand-crabs to function as temporary inhabitants.

It was nice to be able to lose himself in something so simple, but as the afternoon wore on, Louis felt himself itching to listen to another song.

Louis hadn’t intended to listen again until after he’d dropped Freddie back off at home, not wanting the day to be sullied by any unexpected recollections, but Louis was slowly starting to accept the fact that Harry’s pull was simply too strong for him to resist, even by proxy.

He only allowed himself a few minutes of dithering before giving in without much of a fight at all.

September 12, 2011

London, England

“So,” Louis announced with a happy sigh as he stared up at the lofty ceilings of their brand new flat. “This is it, I guess.”

“Sound less excited, yeah?” Harry jibed from behind, lugging in his last bag from the road and dumping it at their feet right there in the entryway.

“I’m sorry, did you want fireworks, Harold?” Louis turned just in time to see Harry roll his eyes.

“I’m just tired,” Harry said with a sigh. He combed a hand through his thick curls and Louis couldn’t help but track the minute movement with his eyes. “I hate sleeping in hotels.”

“Well, you finally get to sleep in your own bed tonight,” Louis told him.

Harry made a noncommittal noise, examining their surroundings with a minimal level of enthusiasm.

“Now who’s not excited?” Louis teased.

Harry didn’t even acknowledge him.

Louis wrinkled his nose. That was the last straw. He pounced, taking Harry by surprise and straining to heave the taller boy over his shoulder like a sack of spuds.

“What are you doing?” Harry squealed against his back.

“It’s a little late to carry you over the threshold,” Louis grunted as he trudged into the sitting room, “but I will not have you besmirching our new home with your bad attitude.”

“Don’t you think you’re taking this a bit too seriously?” Harry protested.
“Nope.”

Louis squeezed Harry tighter around the back of his thighs and received a sharp pinch in retaliation. Louis yelped and dumped Harry unceremoniously onto the couch, climbing over him before Harry had a chance to get up.

“You can’t just pinch my bum and not expect a little revenge, Hazza,” he said mischievously, moving his hands from Harry’s wrists up to his armpits and giving them a teasing jab.

Harry jolted as if Louis had electrocuted him and stared up with a wounded pout. “Tickling’s not fair,” he whined.

“I don’t play fair,” Louis told him, reaching down again to dig his fingers into Harry’s ribs, eliciting an uncontrollable giggle from the younger boy.

As Harry squirmed and wriggled underneath him, Louis realised he hadn’t thought at all about the effects that tickling Harry would have on him.

Louis reared back and jumped off the couch, hoping his trousers were baggy enough that Harry wouldn’t be able to tell why he’d suddenly stopped. “D’you want some wine?” he asked manically, spinning around to make for the kitchen. “I think we should have a glass of wine. To celebrate.”

“I’m not old enough to drink,” Harry reminded him.

“Never stopped you before.” Louis poured them both a glass without waiting for a response, nearly spilling the bottle everywhere as he moved it to pour the second. The glasses were overfull, but that had been intentional; Louis needed the distraction of a solid buzz.

He wasn’t sure yet how he was meant to survive living with Harry for a whole year. They’d been paired together because Louis was the oldest—and probably because the next candidate in line, Zayn, valued his space too much to endure Harry bouncing off the walls whenever they had a minute to spend at home—but Louis had been afraid when the issue had first come up that their managers would put Harry with Liam instead just to keep Louis away from him. Now Louis almost wished that they had. It would have been easier.

“Here,” Louis said, sitting down heavily on the couch next to Harry and handing him one of the glasses. He watched as Harry lifted it carefully to his lips in both hands, like he was afraid of dropping it, and took a careful sip. Harry wrinkled his nose at the taste. “Bad?” Louis asked, already halfway through his own glass by the time Harry had touched his.

“No, just stronger than I’m used to.”

“Drink a lot of cheap wine, then?” Louis ribbed, pleased when it elicited a deep blush from Harry’s cheeks. “And here I thought you were a good little boy, Harold. Always doing what you’re told.” He should’ve known before he said the words that it was a mistake, what it would lead to, but he couldn’t stop himself.

Suddenly, Louis had a lapful of Harry, his green eyes all blown out and hazy and far too close. Louis could smell him well enough to know that he needed to shower and brush his teeth. They were both a little ripe still from hours sat in the back of a car together. Louis wasn’t the least bit disgusted by any of it, quite the opposite in fact, and the gravity of that realisation terrified him.

“I’m good enough,” Harry said, his already syrupy-slow voice turning to glue under the slightest influence of the wine in his hand.

“Say please.”

Louis didn’t even know what he was asking for. “Please.”

Harry’s mouth was hot against his, wet and sloppy from inexperience, and Louis still didn’t care. He wanted this, right now, more than anything else in the world, and Louis knew somewhere in the back of his wine-addled brain that if he wanted more, he could have it, that Harry would give himself to Louis entirely if he just asked.

But Louis couldn’t ask that.

“Harry, love, come on,” Louis murmured, pulling away as far as he could, which wasn’t much seeing as how Harry had him pinned against the couch. He pushed gently until Harry rolled off him and then scooted over to the next cushion, putting some space between them just in case Harry decided to attack him again.

“I’m sorry,” Harry choked out. His cheeks were shiny and pink, his hands clutching at his collar like he wanted to yank his shirt up over his head to hide.

“For what?” Louis stared at Harry helplessly, unable to cope with the boy’s mood swings. He’d been up and down like this all day—yet another reason for Louis to act like the adult and exert some self-control.

Harry shrugged. “I know I’ve been—I’m just a little homesick, I guess.”

Louis hadn’t thought Harry seemed homesick last night when he’d been bouncing off the walls in excitement over the prospect of them living together at last, after all the times they’d fantasized about it during the X Factor and after, but he supposed reality must have set in fast.

“Come here,” Louis urged. He held his arms out to Harry, refusing to back down even when Harry glanced at him hesitantly for a few seconds before finally sliding back over to curl up in Louis’s lap like a cat. Louis wrapped his arms around Harry tight, breathing softly into the top of his head, nose buried in his curls. “It’s okay to be sad about leaving home, but you’re not alone, yeah? You still have me.”

February 6, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis had been aware of the text from the second he received it, the vibration cutting through the song about a minute from its conclusion, but he was determined to finish it out before checking his inbox. He was pre-emptively annoyed, expecting something from Jaime or someone at the label maybe. Whatever it was, Louis was definitely anticipating some sort of hassle.

The text was from Liam.

*Just landed. Where do you wanna meet?*
Louis sighed and signalled for Mark to take off his headphones. “Liam’s here,” Louis informed him. “Can you make reservations somewhere for tonight?”

“Any preference?” Mark asked, already pulling out his phone to start working on the task.

“Somewhere close to Briana’s. I don’t want to deal with any more traffic than we have to.”

Mark nodded his acknowledgement as he typed. Louis turned his attention back to his own phone, and after a few seconds of deliberation, hit the call icon on his conversation with Liam.

Liam’s tone when he answered was one of cool annoyance. “You know, there’s really no point in having a phone if you never use it, Louis.”

Louis had his reasons, but he still felt compelled to dole out an apology. “Yeah, yeah, I know, I’m sorry. I was busy with Freddie.”

“Oh, give him my love,” Liam remarked, his tone lightening considerably at the mention of Louis’s son. He was such a softie, really.

“I will, yeah. Listen, I’m having Mark make reservations somewhere, but do you know where you’re staying yet?”

“Figured I’d just crash with you if that’s all right.”

“Yeah, absolutely. I was gonna suggest it, honestly.”

“Great,” Liam said. “Where are we doing dinner?”

Louis checked the time and almost dropped his mobile. “Shit. I’ll have Mark text you the address.” He jumped up to his feet and scrambled to pack their things while Mark looked over his phone at Louis in bewilderment.

“You all right, mate?”

“Yeah, just gotta get Freddie back to Briana’s before she kills me.” It was later than Louis had thought, and it would take an eternity to get back to the house with rush hour nearly upon them. “I assume you can find something to occupy yourself with for a couple hours?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

Louis waved to Stace, trying to get her attention. “Great. See you soon, then.”

“Good luck,” Liam replied, hanging up after letting out an ominous chuckle. He knew better than most the extent of Briana’s wrath.

It took a few minutes longer than Louis would have liked, but eventually he and Mark managed to get everything folded up and packed into Stace’s oversized duffel while Stace got Freddie reasonably clean in the outdoor showers. Louis carried the boy, swaddled in a towel twice his size, back to the car and kissed him on the forehead as he helped Stace buckle him in.

“Why do we have to go home?” Freddie asked through a yawn.

“Mommy wants to eat dinner with you,” Louis told him.

“Are you gonna eat dinner with us, too?”
Louis’s smile was pained. “Not tonight, buddy.”

“Okay.” There wasn’t any hint of disappointment in the word, only matter-of-fact acceptance, and somehow that made it hurt worse.

“You manage to find something?” Louis asked Mark as he climbed into the passenger seat.

“There’s an Italian place a few miles away from Briana’s,” Mark told him as he backed out. “Didn’t get a chance to call yet.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Louis picked up Mark’s phone from where it was resting in the cupholder and quickly pulled up the details of the restaurant. He made reservations for an hour from the time of the call, knowing that they would likely be late even still. Hopefully it would at least give Liam enough time to get there ahead of them so he wasn’t stranded at the airport for too much longer. He texted Liam the relevant information and received a couple thumbs-up emojis in response. Classy.

Not that Louis had much room to talk. Harry’s contact name in his phone was a literal skull emoji after all.

The drive back took just about as long as Louis had anticipated; they just barely made it in time. That didn’t stop Briana from waiting on the front steps with her arms crossed, clearly ready to tear Louis to shreds if he’d dared to show up even a millisecond later than six on the dot.

Louis ignored her for the time being and helped Stace pull a very drowsy Freddie out of the car. It took some doing, but eventually they managed to get the boy to stand on his own two feet. Louis shouldered Stace’s duffel, refusing to let her take it, and then stopped her before she could start up the walk to meet Briana at the front door.

“What is it?” she asked, looking a bit worried.

Louis reached for Stace’s hand and pushed a crisp hundred into the centre of her palm. “Don’t tell Briana, all right?”

“Oh no, you don’t have to—”

“Put it towards something practical, okay? Think of it as a consolation prize for not seeing Tom Hardy at the beach.”

Stace’s mouth twisted up into a bashful smile. “Thanks,” she said as she covertly tucked the bill into the front pocket of her shorts before starting up the path again.

Louis had decided he liked her better than any of the nannies Freddie had previously. He only hoped she lasted longer than the others. If he couldn’t be there for Freddie himself, he could at least take solace in knowing that Freddie was surrounded by enough people who cared about him to make up for Louis’s absence in some small part. Even though deep down, he knew it wouldn’t really be enough.
Chapter 16

February 6, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis was starving by the time they made it to the restaurant—practically around the corner from Briana’s, which of course in LA terms meant it took nearly twenty minutes to actually get there—which only made him more annoyed when they arrived to find Liam seated at the table, already halfway finished with his main course.

“It was a long flight,” Liam rationalised through a mouthful of pasta, and well, Louis couldn’t really fault him on that one.

“Are you gonna put the fork down long enough to give me a hug, at least?” Louis asked with a put-upon air.

Liam scrambled to comply. Louis found himself being suffocated to death in mere seconds, Liam’s larger frame pushing into him from all sides, kind of like a warm trash compactor that smelled like pine needles and mint.

“I see you finally acquired the infamous father weight,” Louis remarked, jabbing Liam into the forgiving softness of his belly.

Liam just shrugged. “You stop caring so much after the second one. You’ll see.”

Louis snorted. “Fat chance of that.”

“It could happen,” Liam countered as the two of them sat down with Mark in between them on the other side of the table, silent like a sentinel. “It’s not like you planned the first one.”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure you need to be having sex for accidents to happen, Liam.” It probably should’ve felt weirder to be discussing his lack of a sex life with his former bandmate while his bodyguard was inches away, but nothing in Louis’s life had been normal for a long time.

“Really? Nothing at all?”

Louis wasn’t sure why Liam was so surprised. He hadn’t had a steady girlfriend in more than a
year, and he hadn’t ever been that keen on flings. “Been working too much lately to bother with
dating.”

“Good for you,” Liam said agreeably, and there was no trace of insincerity in the comment. “But
surely you get lonely.”

Louis shrugged. He was used to being alone.

The waitstaff was there in the next second, saving Louis from having to come up with an actual
answer, and by the time they left with his and Mark’s orders, it was clear Liam had moved on to a
different train of thought.

“So,” Liam said slowly. “Harry.”

Louis swallowed roughly. He had been appreciative, at first, that Liam hadn’t even asked for
details before boarding a plane from London to LA, but now he wished he’d broken the news
beforehand, not sure how he was going to handle telling another former band member in person
that Harry was practically on his deathbed.

“Yeah,” Louis replied dully. He could feel Mark’s eyes on him as well as Liam’s and wished they
had a bit more privacy for this, even though Mark already knew what Liam didn’t.

“How bad is it, then?” Liam asked worriedly before Louis had a chance to come up with a good
way to deliver the news.

Louis opened his mouth; hesitated. “Really bad,” he admitted. “Really, really bad.”

“All right.” Liam looked down at his fork, twisting it around and around in his pasta without lifting
it to his mouth. “Well, maybe we should wait to talk about it until after we eat.”

Louis nodded. He could live with that.

While Louis and Mark waited for their food to come out and Liam finished his, they tried to catch
up on things. It wasn’t as strained as the first conversation they’d had to end the year they’d spent
not speaking at all—and Louis hated to even think about that now—but still, Louis had been busy
with work, and Liam was quietly living out his homebody dreams after the new baby, resolving to
take a break from his solo stuff after the reunion plans had fallen apart.

Liam’s daughter, Rachel, was just learning to walk now, and he couldn’t help but gush about how
much of a little genius she was. It made Louis smile to watch as Liam animatedly recounted the
mischief she’d quickly gotten into after becoming fully ambulatory; and with Bear’s help, of
course.

Liam finally paused when the waitstaff returned with the rest of their meal, and turned the
conversation over to Louis, even though there wasn’t much to catch Liam up on that wasn’t already
in the news before Louis had a chance to tell him.

“I’ll have to squeeze the rest of the European leg in during the break,” Louis told him between
bites of his carbonara. “But it should be doable.”

Liam nodded along, and Louis wondered if he’d taken that to mean that the situation with Harry
would be resolved by then. Louis hoped it would be, but there was no guarantee.

“We should get in the studio together,” Liam replied, surprising Louis. “After you’re home again, I
mean.”
“Thought you were enjoying your time off,” Louis shot back.

“I am. Doesn’t mean I still don’t want to write. I wouldn’t hate helping you with the next album.”

Louis shook his head with a fond smile. “How kind of you.”

“You know I’ve always got your back,” Liam teased in return, but it was true. He really did. Louis hadn’t appreciated it as much as he should’ve sometimes.

Liam ended up ordering dessert while Louis was still working on his entrée, a sampler of gelato that Louis would have been tempted to order for himself if he had enough room in his stomach. As it was, even the carbonara he’d ordered was too much to finish, and he ended up having it boxed up to take home while Liam battled his way through the remainder of the gelato on his own.

Liam looked offended as Louis shook his head in mock wonder. “What?” he crowed. “It’s bloody difficult having a kid. They make you finish everything.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s why you’re stuffing your face. Like you never did it when we were in the band.”

Liam scoffed but didn’t reply, instead shovelling another spoonful of spumoni into his mouth with a feigned scowl.

By the time they finished up and headed out of the restaurant, Louis had almost put the reason for his reunion with Liam out of his mind entirely. It wasn’t until they’d gotten in the back of the car together and headed back toward Beverly Hills that reality crashed into Louis again, leaving him suddenly cold and a little breathless.

Liam noticed the sudden shift in his demeanour instantly. “Louis? You all right, mate?”

Louis sucked in a quick breath. “So Harry’s at Cedars-Sinai.” It was a poor introduction, but he couldn’t be bothered to think about elegant rhetoric with Liam of all people.

“Okay.”

Louis was somewhat grateful Liam was letting him take this at his own pace instead of pushing for details. “I’m staying in a condo practically down the street, and we can go see him tomorrow, but I’ll need to let Gemma know beforehand what our plans are.”

Liam arched an eyebrow. “Gemma doesn’t seem like the micromanaging type.”

“It’s not Gemma,” Louis explained. “It’s—Anne and I are trying to keep out of each other’s way.”

“Ah.” Liam knew better than to press on that nerve. “So he’s in hospital still,” he said instead.

“Yeah,” Louis replied. “Look, I’d rather just wait until we get back to talk about that, all right? It’s gonna be….” He trailed off. He wasn’t sure how that discussion was going to go, but it wasn’t going to be like with Niall. Liam knew too much. It would be stupid for Louis to try to skim over the gory details, even the stuff he hadn’t talked about with Gemma.

“Okay,” Liam agreed easily.

“Niall’s in town,” Louis added clumsily, in an effort to steamroll past any potential awkwardness. “We should meet up with him again tomorrow.”

“You already talked to him?” Liam asked.
Louis nodded. “Brought him over to see Harry yesterday,” he told him.

“You get a hold of Zayn?” Liam’s tone didn’t imply that he’d be surprised by Louis’s answer.

“No.”

“You want me to try?” Liam’s mobile was already in his hand.

Louis had to suppress a bitter scowl. “Don’t bother.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, Liam, I’m fucking sure. If he can’t pick up the phone, that’s his problem, not mine.”

Liam pursed his lips, looking a bit hesitant, but his mobile disappeared back into his pocket without further argument.

Louis pulled out his own phone instead, feeling slightly embarrassed now that the altercation had finished that he’d gotten so heated about the Zayn thing. It shouldn’t have irritated him as much as it did. It wasn’t like Zayn knew the reason Louis was trying to get in touch, but…still. It stung.

“Listen,” Louis said as he pulled up his text messages, “it’s going to take a while to get back to the condo, so I’ll just text Gemma and let her know our plans for right now.”

“Do you want me to clear out the guest room?” Mark asked, angling his head back slightly to address Louis. It was always a little unnerving to be reminded that Mark was always listening to Louis’s conversations even when he wasn’t saying anything at all, but Louis took it in stride.

“No, you’re fine. Liam can bunk in the master with me.”

“Aww,” Liam crooned. “That’s sweet. It’ll be just like old times.”

There was a pang in Louis’s gut at hearing those words that he staunchly ignored. He snorted. “Yeah, except I’m not sharing the bed with you.” At Liam’s kicked-puppy look, he added, “There’s a futon in the closet, you’ll live.”

“But my back—”

“Oh, shut up, I’m the one who’s pushing thirty here.” After that, Louis turned his attention back to his phone again, sending a quick text to Niall to assess his availability the next day and a longer one to Gemma detailing their tentative plans.

Niall was the first to answer with a swift affirmative and a smiley face to boot. Gemma took a while longer, and when she finally replied, it wasn’t the easy answer Louis had hoped for.

*Are you asking my permission??*

Louis gritted his teeth. He wasn’t in the mood to play this game with Gemma when they both knew full well why he was letting her know his plans in advance. *I just want to make sure there aren’t any problems.*

Her next reply followed only seconds later. *If you aren’t going to be straightforward, then don’t even bother, Louis.*

*Fine. Make sure your mum isn’t there tomorrow pls. xoxo*
It was bitchy, and childish, and Gemma didn’t even respond afterward, but Louis was confident it had gotten the job done even though it would undoubtedly sour his next encounter with Gemma, whenever that happened to be.

Just hopefully not tomorrow.

Louis sent another text to Niall to confirm approximate times of arrival and then looked up again to let Liam know—only to find that the other man had fallen fast asleep in the mere minutes that Louis had been occupied.

“Unbelievable,” Louis muttered to himself.

“Something wrong?” Mark called back. He had supersonic hearing. It was incredible.

“It’s fine,” Louis told him. “Liam’s just passed out in the back. You might have to carry him inside.”

Mark chuckled. “Shouldn’t be a problem. Even with the extra dad pounds.”

Louis laughed along with him and then turned back again to survey Liam’s sleeping form. He couldn’t really blame him for conking out after the flight and the meal, but Louis knew that the longer he had to wait to tell Liam what had happened to Harry, the worse his anxiety about it would get. And Liam was practically catatonic under the influence of jetlag. Louis hadn’t been kidding about possibly having Mark carry him inside. But there was no helping it now.

Louis examined Liam’s face, envying the lack of tension that he knew must’ve lingered under his own skin even in sleep. He owed it to Liam to let him have these last few minutes of peace, at least.

Louis sighed and settled back against the plush leather seat, aimlessly flipping his phone around and around between his fingers.

There was opportunity to listen to another song before they got back to the condo, but Louis wasn’t sure he was ready to explain things to Liam if he woke up before the song was over. He stared at Liam for a while, contemplating, and then decided: fuck it. He was going to have to explain the playlist to Liam sooner or later.

September 21, 2011
Manchester, England

Louis could feel himself sweating straight through his flimsy cotton t-shirt. He was viscerally aware in every square inch of his body as Harry sat next to him, the younger boy practically vibrating from his own nerves. Louis wished he could reach over and grab his hand.

He couldn’t; they were in a public café of all places, and even though it seemed as if no one inside recognised them, Louis knew better than to risk pissing management off in light of their reason for being there.

The hammer had already come down on them once. And Louis should have seen it coming, to be fair. He hadn’t, and now both he and Harry were going to pay the price.
He’d known when Modest had called him in—alone—for a meeting that he was in trouble, and he’d known why before the rep had a chance to even open his mouth. Louis just hadn’t expected the solution to be this.

It was something out of a bad romance film; Louis hadn’t even known fake relationships were really a thing in the entertainment industry until he was being told having one would help his ‘image’. But now here he was, waiting to meet the girl Modest had set him up with to curb rumours that he and Harry had grown a little too close—something Louis hadn’t been aware was even a problem until they’d pointed it out to him.

Leeds Fest had been the final nail in the coffin apparently, but Louis couldn’t find it in himself to regret any of that, even if this was what it had gotten them.

“You all right?” Harry murmured, bring up his hand to chew anxiously at his thumbnail.

Louis could have asked him the same, but he just shook his head. “I’m bricking it, honestly.”

That got a laugh out of Harry, at least. “Yeah, me too.”

Louis glanced down at the phone to check the time. The girls were already late. Louis sighed and slouched further into his chair. He really didn’t want to do this.

“It’s only a couple months, right?” Harry piped up timidly, as if reading Louis’s mind.

Louis nodded. “Yeah, but still.”

He wasn’t sure if Harry really understood the position Louis was in. There was the thing with Caroline, of course, but that wasn’t manufactured, just blown out of proportion. And even if Modest hadn’t had a hand in it, Harry’s oddly intimate friendships with people twice his age were the type of thing to make headlines no matter what.

“What’s her name?” Louis asked suddenly.

Harry gave him a bewildered look. “Eleanor?”

“No, you bell-end, the girl from the bakery.”

Modest had done their research in finding someone who had enough ties to the band to give them a reasonable backstory. Louis almost had to applaud them for that. Apparently one of Harry’s former co-workers from the bakery was an acquaintance of Eleanor’s, which was why Modest had orchestrated this whole contrived double date thing that, to Louis, really seemed like overkill. But he supposed they were the experts.

“Oh,” Harry replied dumbly. “It’s Sophie.”

As if Harry saying her name had summoned her, the bell over the door to the café suddenly jingled, and in walked two girls, one of whom Louis recognised immediately from the headshots he’d been shown earlier that week.

She’d been cute enough in the pictures, more so in person, but Louis was too keenly aware of Harry shifting nervously at his side as the two girls sat down across from them to give her his full attention. She didn’t know about Harry. Not even Modest really knew, only suspected. Eleanor was even more in the dark. She thought this was just a benign PR thing, to help cement Louis’s image
in the band as sweet and wholesome. The kind of guy you’d bring home to meet your parents.

The first thing Louis noticed as they made their introductions—the burden falling mostly on Harry to do so—was that Eleanor looked nearly as nervous as Louis felt. He soon learned that the reason for that was because she’d watched them on the X Factor from the start, thanks to her friendship with Sophie, who had tuned in to follow Harry’s progress.

“This is weird, isn’t it?” Eleanor said after a few minutes of the four of them making small talk.

Louis focused on her, forced himself not to look left to gauge Harry’s reaction to her statement.

“Weird? What d’you mean?”

She shrugged, a pleasant smile playing at her lips. “Just how normal this is, I guess. I mean, you’ve been on the telly, but we’re having a date in a coffeeshop like it’s nothing out of the ordinary.”

Louis shrugged, feigning casualness despite every muscle in his body feeling taut as a bowstring. “I’m nothing special,” he told her. “Sorry to get your hopes up.”

Louis wasn’t sure why that interaction had stood out to him amongst everything else, but he couldn’t help but replay it in his head over and over after they’d left the café, on the way back to London, while sitting on the sofa next to Harry late that night, passively ignoring the images flashing on the TV.

“That went well, right?” Louis asked suddenly, his voice cutting through the dull buzz of the television speakers on low.

Harry turned his head slowly to look at him. “Sure,” he said, not even trying to sound like he believed it. “I mean, you seemed to like her.”

Louis wasn’t sure why that felt like such a slap in the face, but he turned away quickly, staring at the TV screen until his eyes started to water and he could convince himself that the reason was the flashing lights and not the green-eyed boy sitting next to him: too close and too far away all at once.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I am now back to dedicating the majority of my time to working on this monstrosity of a fic, which has now reached 100,000 in my MS Word draft. Whew. And that's only with 30 chapters completed. So yeah, this is going to be a long one.

Hope you enjoy the update! I do not plan to take any further extended breaks from writing this as I would desperately like to see it completed so more people can enjoy it!

Sidenote for people who are interested: I saw Harry at the Forum, courtesy of my sister, and it was amazing. I am very grateful to have been there for the final shows and it was really awesome meeting some mutuals from Twitter as well as making new friends. I also had the privilege of meeting Phoenix (aka objectlesson on AO3) and she is just as friendly and charming in real life as one would expect from reading her work. If you're not familiar with her for some reason, I highly encourage you to read her fics!

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February 6, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Liam slept solidly through the entirety of the drive back to Louis’s condo, which came as no surprise. Louis was shocked when Liam actually regained partial consciousness upon being shaken awake; he’d fully expected to have to march him inside Weekend-At-Bernie’s style with Mark’s help.

“Wassit?” he demanded groggily as Louis helped him out of the car and onto shaky legs.

“You okay there, mate?” Louis said with a laugh, helping to steady Liam a bit before letting go. “You can sleep once we get you inside.”

Liam made a noise worthy of a zombie extra in a B-movie and shambled forward at Louis’s behest. Louis watched his progress toward the door, slowly shaking his head in fond exasperation.

Mark clapped a hand on Louis’s shoulder and breathed out a chuckle. “Want me to help set up the room?”

“No,” Louis replied easily. “I’ll take care of it.” He was used to tucking Liam into bed. Despite all the assertions of Liam being ‘Daddy Direction’ at the start of the band, he was really rather helpless at times. Louis had the benefit of being the oldest and growing up with an abundance of younger siblings. Caretaking was in his nature. “You all right, mate?” he said softly once he caught up to Liam and let him inside the condo.
“Brilliant,” Liam grunted. He seemed a little steadier on his feet now, but Louis carefully steered him toward the master bedroom with a hand between his shoulder blades, just in case.

“Pop yourself down on the bed there,” Louis instructed, pushing him toward the destination in question. “I’ll go get the futon set up for you. Don’t fall asleep again in the meantime.”

“Not gonna,” Liam protested through a loud yawn, not very convincingly at all.

“Sure.” Louis walked out and met Mark in the sitting room to collect Liam’s bags. He’d packed light, and Louis wondered if that meant he wasn’t intending to stay much longer than a day or two. He wished that didn’t worry him, but Liam being there had already helped steady him more than Louis cared to admit.

Louis set up the futon on the floor in front of the TV; technically the sectional was large enough to sleep on, but Louis didn’t envy Liam the experience of sinking into the gaps overnight. The futon was probably more comfortable.

By the time Louis finished up and returned to the master bedroom, he fully expected to find Liam passed out in Louis’s bed. Instead, he walked in to find Liam manically pacing the length of the bedroom, and Louis stood in the doorway with his arms crossed, waiting for Liam to look up and notice him.

“It’s too early to go to bed,” Liam explained after a few seconds. He stopped suddenly in the middle of the room and cocked his head like a dog. “Can I use your shower?”

Louis sighed dramatically but walked Liam into the bathroom without complaint and showed him where everything was and how to actually use the faucet—he wasn’t a savage. Then he left Liam to his own devices, knowing he was likely going to be in there for a while.

Louis changed out of his day-clothes and into a pair of boxers and a shirt before leaving the bedroom entirely to wander into the kitchen. He ran into Mark just as he was grabbing a bottle of vodka from the freezer, along with a jug of cranberry juice and some glasses. He liked to keep a well-stocked fridge wherever he went. Variety was the spice of life, after all.

Mark raised an eyebrow at the items cradled against Louis’s chest. “Planning on making it a late one?” he asked pointedly.

“I’ll go easy, I promise,” Louis replied quickly before turning around and heading straight back to the master bedroom. He hadn’t been fibbing either, but he still felt a bit guilty with Mark’s judging stare following him all the way through the door. He had to remind himself that there was nothing wrong with having a drink or two to celebrate meeting up with an old friend.

It took him all of a minute to decide that it was also acceptable to pregame his drinking with an old friend, but he still managed to make his cocktail in moderation, pouring no more than a finger of vodka into the glass before adding the cranberry. He savoured the bite of it nonetheless, the two bitter flavours somehow working together to produce something greater than the sum of their parts, and settled further into his pillows with a sigh, listening contently to the muffled sound of the shower going through the bathroom door.

Restlessness and temptation won out against Louis’s battered patience only a few minutes after that, and his phone was in his hand almost as soon as the thought crossed his mind. It really was becoming a fix. Louis wasn’t sure how he was going to cope when he finally made it through the entire playlist. Not that anyone could in good conscience call what he was doing ‘coping’.
“You’re banning me from the kitchen,” Louis said deadpan, making his displeasure very clear. He didn’t appreciate being infantilised, even if his cooking skills were every bit as subpar as Harry had made them out to be.

“No,” Harry said patiently, “I’m asking you to chop the bell peppers and the onions in the dining room so I don’t accidentally burn the meat because I can’t see through my own tears.”

Louis snorted. “Baby.”

“Prick,” Harry shot back without missing a beat.

“Fine,” Louis finally agreed, for the sake of furthering the conversation so dinner would actually get made. He was starving. “I’ll chop the damn veg.”

“Thank you, dear,” Harry said faux-sweetly, handing Louis the cutting board and knife.

“You’re welcome, honeybuns.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Boo Bear,” he taunted.

Louis’s expression didn’t change. “Clever,” he remarked before turning on his heel to go about prepping the vegetables for fajitas at the dining room table. He seated himself off to the side and set up a little workstation from which he could watch Harry through the entryway into the kitchen.

Harry had an annoying habit of doing absolutely everything in just his pants—including cooking. Louis shouldn’t have cared. It wasn’t that unusual really. They’d seen each other naked before, it wasn’t anything special.

But Louis’s eyes always drifted to the exposed planes of Harry’s skin without fail, eagerly drinking in the soft swell of his bum in his briefs, the endearing baby fat on his hips that Louis couldn’t help but hope that he never grew out of, the endless expanse of milky thighs, the dimples in his back—

Louis ripped his eyes away and focused on the array of bell peppers and onions in front of him, determined to maintain some semblance of focus if only just to prove Harry wrong about his usefulness in the kitchen. And well, it might be a bit weird to try and eat dinner together with a hard-on that had been caused by the person who had cooked his meal.

Louis gritted his teeth and started to methodically chop, desperate to push everything else out of his mind.

Harry was an awkward seventeen-year-old who hadn’t even made it out of the initial throes of puberty yet. He was by all accounts, still a kid. It was one thing for Louis to justify his attraction to David Beckham, objectively the fittest man on the entire planet, but wholly another for him to get turned on by his reedy adolescent bandmate. What had he done to deserve this?

“Doing all right?” Harry called out from the kitchen.

Louis could hear the meat simmering in the pan and chopped faster. “Give it a minute,” he called
back, resolutely resisting the temptation to glance up at Harry as he replied.

Louis finished slicing the veg in what he thought was record time and sauntered over to Harry, twining himself around the younger boy as he leaned over the stove to toss the peppers and onions in with the cooking meat, dividing it neatly between the pan of beef (for Harry) and chicken (Louis).

“This doesn’t seem like proper kitchen etiquette,” Harry remarked even as he pressed into the line of Louis’s body along his back.

“No?”

“Not very safe,” Harry continued, squirming a little against him until he successfully yanked a hiss from between Louis’s teeth. Harry turned his head a little to look back at him, enough that Louis could see the smirk painted on his face.

Louis desperately wanted to spin them around and bend Harry over the island in the middle of the kitchen. He wanted to kiss that stupid smirk off of Harry’s face, wanted to make him breathless and hoarse from moaning out Louis’s name.

Louis also wanted nothing more than to walk away.

He knew—not so deep down—that he should stop doing this to himself. More often than not, they ended up in these situations because of him, but Louis was weak-willed and gave over easily to temptation. But there was a line, one that Louis was afraid to cross no matter how many times he teased both Harry and himself by invading Harry’s space like this.

Maybe it was ridiculous to be drawing lines in the sand when Louis was already this far gone for Harry, but there was something about the idea of taking it further that Louis couldn’t help but shy away from on principle. It was like…if they went that far, there was no taking it back.

All the kisses, the flirtations, they could wipe that away if this all went tits up and one of them decided they weren’t really into it after all. Sex was different. Louis knew that first-hand. And he also knew that Harry didn’t. That made it matter even more somehow.

And maybe that was part of it too. Harry was special. And Louis was afraid of ruining him.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Harry asked, jolting Louis out of his frustrated musings.

Louis looked Harry up and down. “Don’t look like you’ve got any money to speak of, love,” he replied, staring pointedly at Harry’s briefs, now drawn perilously tight over his semi.

“We could work out another form of payment,” Harry said hopefully.

Louis forced out a light laugh and gently pushed Harry away. “The chicken’s starting to burn,” he added helpfully.

Harry let out a curse and turned back to the stove, successfully distracted as he attempted to rescue the strips of browning chicken breast in the bottom of the pan.

Louis leaned back against the counter and watched Harry while chewing pensively at his lower lip, wishing that for once, things could just be simple for them.
Despite Louis’s head start, Liam was the one who still looked a little hazy when he stumbled out of the bathroom a few minutes after Louis had set his phone aside, wearing nothing but a towel.

“Pants are in the top drawer,” Louis informed him.

“Thanks,” Liam replied. He walked straight up to the bureau, dropped the towel onto the floor, and then opened the drawer to rummage around for a suitable pair of boxers.

Louis was oddly relieved that Liam didn’t seem to feel awkward about his nudity, even with the new softness around his belly and thighs. He’d been self-conscious about his weight at times before, in the band, but maybe becoming a family man really had re-sorted Liam’s priorities for the better.

Liam didn’t bother to put on a shirt before walking up to Louis and plopping straight down next to him on the bed, wearing a pleading expression.

“What?” Louis asked with a long-suffering sigh.

The response surprised him.

“Can I get another hug?”

Louis rolled over to face Liam and blinked twice. “Yeah, mate, of course.” He waited for Liam to envelop him in his arms. Louis closed his eyes as his face was mashed into Liam’s chest and focused on trying to breathe.

Out of nowhere, Louis felt himself starting to tear up. He held his breath, refusing to cave to the impulse. He was twenty-nine-years old. He wasn’t going to cry into his best friend’s chest like a child.

“You done yet?” Louis asked once he was confident his voice wouldn’t betray him.

Liam murmured something unintelligible into Louis’s hair. “Let’s just stay like this for a minute,” he added, pulling away slightly to make himself heard.

Louis didn’t respond but made no attempt to break the circle of Liam’s arms around him either.

It was a few more minutes before Liam finally released him, moving back a little to examine Louis’s face with a concerned expression plastered across his own. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“You’re the one that asked me for the hug,” Louis reminded him. Was it that obvious how broken he really was?

“I know but, just, you looked like you needed it.” Apparently so. “Are you ready to talk about Harry now?”

Louis rolled away from Liam and stared straight up at the ceiling. “Harry tried to kill himself and now he’s in a coma. I think it’s my fault.”

“Why?” There was nothing sinister behind the word, no judgment from Liam, only a pure desire to
know Louis’s feelings.

Louis couldn’t answer. Liam didn’t pressure him for one. Louis considered telling him then about the playlist, but he still felt raw all over, like the slightest push would send him over the edge. He couldn’t handle breaking down in front of Liam right then and there. He needed to keep himself together for the sake of maintaining his own sanity if nothing else.

“It’s okay to cry over him,” Liam said quietly, as if reading Louis’s thoughts. He’d always been scary good at that.

“Don’t you think I’ve done that enough?” Louis shot back. He refused to meet Liam’s eyes, continuing to stare up at the light overhead until there were spots of blue and black dancing wildly in his vision. He sighed loudly. “You want a drink?” he asked, already leaning over to retrieve the vodka from the nightstand without waiting for Liam’s answer first.

“Sure.”

Louis poured them both a glass, adding a little bit more vodka to his own this time. They nursed their drinks quietly, until the silence started to get to Louis and he felt compelled to play some music through the bedroom speakers just to dispel it. The whole thing was a far cry from the rowdy all-nighters they used to pull while on tour together.

Once again, Liam’s mind had gone to the exact same place. “Remember that time we stayed up all night drinking in the hotel in Mexico and Paul reamed us out the next day because Niall could barely even walk?”

“Yeah. Was just thinking about that actually.” That had been one of those nights Louis could barely remember, but the memory of Harry’s whiskey-slick lips around the mouth of a bottle had been the one thing burned into his mind. “Do you think we were happier then?” It was probably too deep of a question for someone who was only on his first drink, but Louis couldn’t help but ask. He’d tried to convince himself so many times since going solo that he was happier than he’d ever been in the band, but now he wasn’t sure.

Liam shifted slightly over the duvet, and Louis could feel the full force of his gaze without even looking. “I wasn’t,” Liam answered bluntly. “But we’ve always been different people. Don’t take this the wrong way, Lou, but—I think maybe you’re just lonely.”

“Maybe,” Louis breathed out, lifting his glass again to down the rest of its contents in one go.

“Can I ask what happened?” Liam said vaguely as he scooted a bit closer to Louis. “To Harry?”

“Drugs,” Louis explained. “Sleeping tablets. They only found him because he hurt himself—on accident—and he tried to call emergency services.”

Liam didn’t say anything for a long while after that. Louis set his drink down and closed his eyes, listening to the sound of Liam’s heavy rhythmic breathing, loud enough that he could cling onto it as a source of stability even with the music playing softly throughout the room.

“We don’t have to talk about him if you’d rather not,” Liam said finally.

“Okay.” Louis couldn’t muster up the energy for a better response.

Liam scooted even closer, fully pressing up against Louis’s side once more. “I can show you some pictures of the kids,” he suggested, dangling his mobile over Louis’s head like a dog-treat.
Louis reached up and plucked it out of Liam’s hands, opening the photos app to find the aforementioned pictures. “Is this from Bear’s birthday?” he asked, scrolling through Liam’s family album at his own pace, pausing on the picture of Bear and his baby sister splashing around in a kiddie pool in what appeared to be Liam’s back garden, if the giant dinosaur statues were any indication.

“Mhmm,” Liam answered.

Louis could tell Liam was starting to fall asleep but continued to scroll through his pictures instead of forcing him to get up and move to the futon instead. It was rare for them to have the opportunity to catch up like this. Louis would take what he could get.

Louis continued to ask Liam questions about some of the photos, but only got a few more half-hearted answers before finally turning to find Liam out cold next to him on the bed. Louis shook his head fondly and extricated himself from Liam’s instinctive cuddling. He could’ve woken Liam and had him move; it wasn’t like Liam to throw a fit over something like that, but Louis had sympathy for the younger man, who’d just spent half a day on a plane and probably appreciated a soft bed more than Louis would.

So Louis tucked Liam in, as he’d done in the past when Liam was struggling with his drinking and needed someone who could be there for him without judgment when he stumbled back to his room in the early hours of the morning.

Satisfied that Liam wasn’t going to suddenly wake up and demand that Louis take his bed back, Louis turned the lights off in the master bedroom and went out into the sitting room to take Liam’s place on the futon. It was only slightly less comfortable than the bed, and Louis could feel his body starting to take on the light and floaty feeling of exhaustion that tended to set in out of habit whenever he was horizontal for more than a few minutes.

He slowly slid his phone back and forth across the sheet next to his pillow, contemplating the idea of listening another song before trying to fall asleep. Not tonight, he finally decided as he closed his eyes with a quiet sigh.
Louis was unexpectedly roused from his slumber the next morning by an unholy cacophony emanating from the kitchen. He poked his head out from under the blankets and blinked owlishly at the source of the noise: an all-too chipper Mark and Liam, who seemed intent on making enough waffles to feed a small sovereign nation.

“What time’s it?” Louis asked drowsily, his voice still hoarse from sleep.

“Time to eat,” Liam replied with far too much cheer as he set down a stack of plates next to the array of toppings laid out across the island. “Nialler’s already on his way over,” he added. “And then we figured we’d head straight from the hospital from here instead of dealing with going out somewhere to eat.”

Louis had to admit it was a better plan than what he would’ve come up with, but then again, most of Louis’s plans were specifically designed to avoid cooking anything at all whenever possible.

“All right,” he replied with a yawn, finally emerging from his nest of blankets and crawling off of the futon. “Let me get dressed, at least.”

He changed his mind when he stripped off his sleep shirt and caught a whiff of the stench under his arms. Shower it was, then.

Louis decided to give himself a small pep talk as he stood under the warm spray. He could face Harry again. It was fine. With Liam and Niall there, it’d be more than fine. He’d be okay.

By the time he emerged from the shower and got dressed, he could almost convince himself he believed it.

Niall was waiting in the kitchen when Louis left the master bedroom. Niall greeted him with a warm hug, due to Liam’s presence more than anything else, Louis suspected, but he appreciated it anyway.

“Hope you didn’t start without me,” Louis joked as Nial pulled away.

“Just walked in the door, actually,” Niall replied, taking the seat next to Liam and leaving the one
on the end for Louis.

They prepped their plates in relative silence, Louis heaping his waffles with nearly every topping available and drenching the whole mess in strawberry syrup at the end. Niall hadn’t skimped much either, but Liam was noticeably more conservative, and kept alternating bites of his waffle with a sip of some toxic-green sludge filling the glass in front of him.

Louis made a face. “What the hell is that?” he asked, gesturing pointedly with his fork.

Liam looked at him for a moment, confused, before realising what he meant and going a little pink as he answered. “A kale smoothie.”

“A what?”

“They’re good for you,” Liam replied defensively. “Besides, they taste better than they look.”

Louis was tempted to make a teasing remark about Harry’s influence on Liam’s eating habits, but even mentioning his name in anything less than a one-hundred percent serious manner still felt taboo.

“Well, as long as it isn’t part of one of those bullshit pyramid scheme health programs,” Louis settled for instead.

Liam gave him a wounded look in response, but Niall just laughed.

Far from the hollow echo of last night, their breakfast genuinely felt like a hearkening back to the good old days, even if there were still two people missing. Maybe that was why Louis suddenly felt compelled to bring up the reunion they were meant to have as soon as Mark was out of the room.

“We should have done this months ago,” he said quietly, not even sure the others had heard him until Liam’s fork clattered onto his plate.

“Yeah, well, things don’t always work out the way we think they should,” Liam replied solemnly.

“The timing wasn’t exactly the best,” Niall offered, ever the one to play devil’s advocate on Harry’s behalf—apparently, even when Harry wasn’t there to benefit from it.

Louis shifted back in his chair to give Niall an assessing look. “Really, Niall? We’re using bad timing as an excuse now? We all know why Harry said no.” Louis was ready to full-on deck either one of them if they tried to argue with him on that point.

Niall glanced back down at his waffles, face red as he stuffed another bite into his mouth to avoid having to reply.

Liam sighed. “You know, I almost got Zayn to agree to come back before Harry bailed on the whole affair.”

Both Niall and Louis’s heads whipped around to stare at him in disbelief. “You never told me that,” Louis said, a bit accusingly.

Liam just shrugged. “It didn’t matter anymore,” he pointed out.

“Still,” Niall chimed in, “if we’d had Zayn, maybe we could’ve….” He trailed off.

Louis couldn’t even fathom where the thought was headed. They could’ve what? Had Zayn convince Harry to go along with it? Gone on as another four-piece without him? Both options were
equally ludicrous.

Niall seemed to realise as much and clammed up before finishing, quickly wolfing down the rest of his breakfast to avoid having to complete the sentence.

Louis wasn’t interested in pursuing an argument when he knew full-well that he was every bit the reason Harry had turned down the idea of reuniting at the end of 2020, even though that had always been the long-term plan—had been Harry’s plan, in fact—but that was before Louis had gone and fucked everything up. Irrevocably, as it turned out. Louis had cried wolf one too many times.

Louis was the first to finish eating despite having the most food on his plate. He ran his dishes under the sink for a quick rinse and then left them there to take care of later before heading over to Mark’s room to let him know his plans for the day.

“I’m gonna take the car,” Louis told Mark as the older man continued his rigorous push-up routine on the bedroom floor as if Louis hadn’t interrupted. “Feel free to order in or call a cab if you want to go somewhere while we’re out.” He received a grunt in acknowledgement, which was good enough for him, and closed the door again.

Louis could tell the boredom was starting to eat away at Mark a little bit. He wasn’t used to this whole…homebody thing, playing nanny to Louis essentially during his time off. Louis hoped Sam got in soon so Louis could cut Mark loose for a bit, let him spend time with his family before the next leg of tour started up again.

Louis closed the door and grabbed his shoes, already lacing them up before Liam and Niall had even vacated the kitchen.

“Ready to go?” he asked pointedly, making it clear he wasn’t keen on wasting any time.

To their credit, they both hurried to catch up with him after that, and within fifteen minutes, all three were out the door.

It was a torturous crawl up Sherbourne to Beverly. Louis could tell from the minute the pulled out on the street that it would have been faster to walk, but he wasn’t willing to risk that kind of attention. Then, because it was just their luck, Louis realised that the hold-up wasn’t typical morning traffic at all when they approached the intersection, but the result of an accident blocking most of the road. He sighed and prepared to follow the police officers directing people away from the scene.

“Guess we’re going around,” he muttered to himself.

Niall and Liam paid it no attention. Louis could hear them chattering away in the backseat—Niall probably getting the same treatment from Liam that Louis had the night before in the form of endless pictures of his kids—but he couldn’t make out enough of it to actually join the conversation. He found he didn’t really want to either.

Louis waited until they got to the next stoplight before yanking out his phone and covertly jamming his earbuds in. He hit play quickly, without bothering to even glance at the date on the track first.

November 17, 2011
Harry had been in a foul mood ever since he’d found out the plans for the day.

It wasn’t Louis’s fault, or Niall’s, and they both knew that, but it didn’t stop Harry from acting like an absolute twat the morning of. By the time Louis returned to their flat late in the evening, it seemed as if Harry’s mood had only darkened in his absence.

“What have you been doing?” Harry asked pointedly as Louis re-entered. He was sat at the dining table, a mug between his palms and wearing a bitter scowl on his face.

Louis wondered how long Harry had been there and if he should lie in response to the question just to make Harry feel better. He decided Harry didn’t deserve it. “Yes, actually.”

“Good for you,” Harry spat back brattily.

Louis had had just enough of Harry’s shit. He wasn’t sure what had possessed him to do so, but suddenly he was marching right over to Harry, grabbing him by the arm, and pulling him into the sitting room. Harry squawked loudly when Louis pulled him over his lap and landed a quick swat on his bum in one swift movement.

“What the hell are you doing?” Harry shrieked, wriggling around uselessly in Louis’s lap.

“You’re acting like a child, Harold,” Louis told him calmly. “So I’m treating you like one.” But he released Harry immediately after that single smack, feeling as if he’d made his point well enough.

Harry retreated to the other end of the couch, curling his legs up under himself and staring at Louis with wide eyes, red-faced and breathing hard. For a moment, Louis thought maybe he’d gone too far.

Then Harry launched himself across the couch and back into Louis’s lap, practically knocking the wind out of him. Louis barely had time to react, but his hands reached up almost reflexively to frame Harry’s thin waist.

Their kisses together were always sparing, calculated, and initiated by Louis nearly every time. This one wasn’t any of those things.

Harry surged up to meet Louis’s mouth with angry biting kisses, all stinging heat against Louis’s lips until he was drowning in it. They were at it for all of thirty seconds before Louis could feel Harry hard against his stomach, and knew he wasn’t faring much better with Harry’s arse pressed into the cradle of his hips.

“Maybe I should make you mad at me more often,” Louis remarked when Harry finally pulled away long enough to let him breathe. He kept his hands on firm Harry’s hips, holding him at a few centimetres’ length now that they’d separated. Louis wasn’t convinced he could make himself stop if Harry kissed him again.

“Wasn’t mad at you,” Harry retorted, still pouting. At Louis’s gentle urging, Harry rolled off the older boy’s lap and slouched down against the couch next to him. “It’s not fair.”

“If you want to go on the London Eye so damn bad, I’ll just take you myself.”

Harry turned his head to glare. “You know that’s not it, Lou.”
Louis sighed, shutting his eyes briefly as he leaned back into the cushions. “Yeah, I know,” he said with a trailing sigh.

It wasn’t something he particularly wanted to discuss, seeing as there was fuck-all either he or Harry could do about it, but clearly they needed to talk if Harry was going to throw a glorified tantrum every time this sort of thing happened.

It had started shortly after the whole Eleanor debacle. Management had deemed the date itself relatively successful, but determined they needed to minimize Harry and Louis’s interactions with each other outside of interviews and events. Their close friendship seemed ‘strange’ to the public, apparently, and they wanted to make sure the band’s bonds of brotherhood were viewed as unilateral.

So what it boiled down to is that Louis had been set up on a date with Niall of all people. Not a romantic date, of course, but an outing, for publicity purposes—which meant it really wasn’t a whole lot different than the ‘date’ he’d been on with Eleanor.

They’d gone on the London Eye together, which was fun enough, met some fans, and so on. It had been fine, but Louis hadn’t been able to shake the undercurrent of guilt that plagued him throughout the entire day, knowing that Harry desperately wished that he could have been there with him instead of Niall.

“It’s not fair,” Harry said again, leaning over to nuzzle into Louis’s shoulder.

Louis lifted his arm and slung it around Harry’s shoulders, pulling him closer until he could tuck Harry’s head under his chin. He buried his nose in Harry’s curls, taking a deep whiff and letting the familiar scent of Harry’s shampoo help clear his mind.

“It’ll get easier,” Louis told him, infusing the statement with enough confidence to ease Harry’s fears. Louis was older, he was wiser, he could read the writing on the walls. “We just have to wait it out a little longer. Once the band is more established, they’ll ease up on us. Things will get better, I promise.”

It never got better.

February 7, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis’s cheeks were a little warm from the memory when the song finished. It might not have been the best decision, in hindsight, to conjure up some of those particular mental images right before seeing Harry again, particularly after the mortification that had resulted after Louis’s bath-time indiscretion.

It hadn’t been much of a distraction, either.

Louis could feel his nerves setting in again as they pulled into the car park outside the hospital, leaving his hands slick with sweat against the steering wheel. He pulled his earbuds out before unlocking the doors, still not sure how to handle either Liam or Niall finding out about the playlist though he knew he’d have to tell them sooner or later.
Sooner, most likely.

“You all right, mate?” Liam asked quietly as they walked into the building and headed toward the lifts. He placed a grounding hand between Louis’s shoulders, the other in the middle of Niall’s back.

Louis could see now that Niall wasn’t faring much better, the dread getting the better of both of them as they ascended to the third storey. Liam looked to be doing the best out of the three of them, which Louis attributed to the fact that he didn’t yet know what to expect. Nothing Louis could say would encompass the reality of what it was like to see Harry lying there in a hospital bed, unresponsive. Totally unreachable.

Maybe that pep talk in the shower hadn’t been as effective as he’d have liked.

Louis sucked in a deep breath when the lift doors open and held it all the way down the corridor to Harry’s room. He refused to exhale until after he’d opened the door for Liam and Niall to go through, even when his lungs felt like they might burst.

The floaty feeling of temporary oxygen deprivation helped a little as Louis finally stepped into the room. No one said a word as they stood around Harry’s bed, and Louis kept his eyes focused on the floor for nearly a minute, not wanting to intrude on the personal reactions of the others as they took everything in.

Finally, Louis declared it safe to look up again. He glanced up at Niall first.

Niall’s face was contorted into a pained grimace as he stared down at Harry. He shook his head quickly upon catching Louis’s eyes. “It doesn’t get any easier the second time,” he mumbled, and Louis couldn’t tell if he and Liam had even been meant to hear it.

Liam looked similarly disturbed, but his expression was harder to read. His eyes didn’t move, didn’t even blink as he looked at Harry, and then finally he turned slightly to face Louis. “I was expecting it to be like it is in the movies,” he said with an unexpected lightness to his tone.

Louis nodded, wishing he could’ve mustered up the energy for a proper response. He just wanted to sit down. Or leave entirely.

He forced himself to linger a few minutes more while the three of them remained stood there blanketed in a devastating silence. It was too heavy. Louis couldn’t take it anymore.

“I’m gonna pop out for some air,” Louis declared, completing the sentence with a shaky inhalation. Only Liam’s head swivelled to acknowledge him. “Maybe I’ll have a go at calling Zayn again.”

That got Niall’s attention, but Liam was the one to speak up. “Are you sure you don’t want me to try calling him?” he asked.

Louis shook his head and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I don’t know,” he replied. “It just…it feels like it’s my responsibility to tell him, I guess.”

Liam pushed his tongue against the inside of his mouth, making a contemplative noise, and then reached into his pocket to procure his phone. “Try mine instead, then,” he suggested. “You might have better luck if he thinks it’s me.”

Louis wasn’t convinced Zayn wouldn’t hang up on him the second he heard Louis’s voice even if he did answer, but it was worth a go, at least. “All right,” he replied evenly as he plucked the phone from Liam’s fingers. “Be back in a bit.”
Louis left the room and went down to one of the little balcony gardens located at each cardinal end of the building, where patients and their families could actually breathe a little bit of fresh air every now and again. That was something Louis figured he desperately needed.

Thankfully, there was no one else sat on either of the benches when he slipped through the balcony doors, so Louis parked himself on the righthand side and began scrolling through Liam’s phone to find Zayn’s number. Louis chewed frantically at his fingernails as it rang, and then dropped his hand with a loud sigh when it went to voicemail.

This time he decided to leave a message.

“It’s Louis,” he said gruffly, fighting the urge to scream into the receiver about what a wanker Zayn was being. “You need to call me. It’s important.” He hung up quickly after that, not trusting himself to resist the temptation to add a final ‘fuck you’ at the end of it.

Louis carefully lowered Liam’s phone and squashed down the urge to hurl it off the balcony altogether, instead storming back in an ill-concealed fit of frustration to Harry’s room. If he managed to see Zayn in person sometime in the next year, Louis would be hard-pressed to keep from punching him in the damn face after all of this shit.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Oof sorry about the delay with this one, folks. My health has been all over the place but hopefully I'm over the worst of it for now.

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostes upd8s
Tumblr: @vondrostes

February 7, 2021
Los Angeles, California

The answer was clear as day in the scowl on Louis’s face when he re-entered Harry’s hospital room, but Liam still asked anyway. “No luck?”

Louis gritted his teeth and shook his head minutely. “That fucker still won’t pick up.”

Liam sighed and took his phone back wordlessly. There was an unreadable expression on Niall’s face when Louis’s eyes drifted across him, and for some reason, the lack of reaction only made Louis angrier.

“I’m so sick of this shit,” Louis proclaimed as he threw himself down into one of the chairs with a loud huff. He knew he was acting like a whingey child, that Zayn had no reason to pick up the phone for any of them, and that Zayn didn’t even know how dire the situation really was. But Louis couldn’t help but blame him anyway. Louis needed someone to blame, and apart from Zayn or Harry, the only remaining candidate was himself.

“Lou….” Liam took a hesitant step toward him, and then stopped. “It’s not his fault,” he said with a touch of hesitation.

“I know that,” Louis snapped.

“It’s not your fault either,” Liam added unhelpfully.

Louis stared up at him with a blank look. If it wasn’t his fault, then whose? This wasn’t a crime of circumstance, it was a path Harry had been set on however many years ago. In Louis’s mind, he couldn’t have been more at fault even if he’d held Harry down and forced the sleeping tablets into his mouth.

“Stop being such a self-absorbed arsehole,” Liam said suddenly, his harsh tone at odds with the gentle reassurance from seconds prior. Clearly, he’d decided a delicate approach wasn’t going to work.

Out of the corner of his eye, Louis could see Niall’s eyes flitting between the two of them uncomfortably, but he said nothing.
“Tell me how you really feel,” Louis muttered under his breath.

Liam wasn’t having any bit of it. “Just shut the fuck up for once, Louis. Christ. You really think every decision Harry makes is because of you? You haven’t spoken in years. He’s barely left his own house in the last six months, and neither Niall nor I have heard from him outside of the reunion talks in at least that long. He’s obviously had his own shit to deal with.”

Now Louis was angry for an entirely different reason. “So why wouldn’t you tell me any of that?” he challenged, getting right up into Liam’s face as he spat out the words. “If you knew he was in trouble, why didn’t you fucking tell me?”

Liam’s reply was like an icy knife plunged straight into the centre of Louis’s chest. “What would you have done any differently?”

Louis forced himself to meet Liam’s judgmental gaze head-on even though he had no good answer. He turned away just as the door to Harry’s hospital room opened, revealing Gemma, who froze in the doorway, a white pastry bag clutched in her hand.

“Bad timing?” she said a bit apologetically, after noting the aggressive postures of Louis and Liam, in addition to Niall still cowering in the opposite corner. “I didn’t think you’d be in this early.”

“Yeah, well,” Louis replied lamely. He’d tried to keep her somewhat informed, at least.

“Right. Um…. Gemma’s eyes swept the room again before finally settling on Louis. “Since you’re here, do you mind if we chat a bit outside?”

Louis shrugged. “Yeah, all right.” He did mind, actually, but he wasn’t going to have a bloody strop over it. He followed her out into the corridor without bothering to check on either Niall or Liam’s reactions to it and closed the door behind them to give the illusion of privacy, despite the people walking up and down the hall just metres away.

“It’s about Mum,” Gemma said with a quick inhalation.

“Okay…” Louis replied, waiting for her to elaborate.

“She said some things about you,” Gemma continued with a bit more hesitation. Louis could hear her crinkling the bag in her left hands as she spoke. “I don’t even want to ask if they’re true or not, but regardless, I’ve asked her to put that aside and agree to a truce while we’re all still…dealing with this. I don’t want to spend the next whoever-knows-how-long trying to make sure the two of you are never in the same room, all right?”

Louis nodded. “All right,” he agreed.

Gemma let out a short sigh of relief and then hardened her eyes in a second, not giving Louis a chance to escape after their discussion. “No more yelling,” she warned him. “You know he’s meant to be able to hear us, right?”

Louis hadn’t known that. Or maybe he had, and he’d just forgotten, but in any case, he hadn’t once thought about the possibility that the shell of a human being in there wearing Harry’s face had any actual awareness of his surroundings.

“Sorry,” Louis said, blushing a little. He hadn’t meant to be that loud. “Won’t happen again.”

Gemma nodded curtly. “Good.” Her expression smoothed out again into something softer. “Are you and the boys planning on sticking around a little longer? I wouldn’t mind catching up with
them while they’re here.”

Louis shrugged. “Niall’s the only one with places to be,” he told her, “but I think he’s cleared his schedule for the day. Figured we’d clear out around lunch.”

Gemma’s face broke out into a small smile. “Great. After you, then.”

Louis led her back into Harry’s room, where Liam and Niall apparently hadn’t moved in their absence, though both seemed even tenser in posture if that was even possible. Louis arched an eyebrow at Liam and watched him almost visibly deflate in response.

Louis took the chair he’d been in before and gestured for Gemma to take the other. He zoned out as she began talking to the other two, focusing instead on the rhythm of Harry’s chest slowly rising and falling underneath the blanket, the only indication other than the heart-rate monitor that Louis wasn’t staring at a corpse.

The soft thrum of voices did little to penetrate the dazed reverie Louis easily sunk into as he stared at Harry. He was barely aware of the passage of time until suddenly someone was shaking his shoulder, softly calling his name. Louis looked up to find Liam standing over him, looking mildly concerned.

“Me and Niall were talking about grabbing some lunch. Do you want to come with or stay here until we get back?”

Louis stood a little too quickly. “I’ll come with, it’s fine.” He glanced down at Gemma next to him. “Probably best if we give you and Anne some space,” he told her.

“Louis…” she started, her voice taking on a scolding edge.

Louis was quick to correct her. “I’m just saying that he’s your family, not ours.” It was something that had been true for years, but it didn’t hurt any less to acknowledge it. Louis turned his face away as he finished. “I’ll let you know when we plan to drop by again.”

“Okay,” Gemma said quietly, apparently having decided it wasn’t a fight she was willing to have—at least, not in front of Harry.

“All right.” Louis looked to Liam. “Shall we go, then?”

Louis waited for Liam and Niall to say their goodbyes to Gemma, each with a hug that was warmly returned, before leading them back out of the hospital room and down to the lifts. He slouched against the railing after hitting the button for the ground floor and sighed.

“Do you wanna head back to the condo?” Louis asked them as they waited to descend. “Or…?” He was tired of making decisions.

“Let’s grab lunch somewhere,” Niall answered quickly. “Maybe somewhere with a patio. Hate being cooped up inside when I’m in the States.”

Louis could sympathise, so he went along with Niall’s suggestion easily despite Liam’s uneasy expression when they picked a tiny café up on Beverly Boulevard, only a few blocks west of the hospital.

“Don’t you think it’s a little…open?” Liam asked Louis as they pulled into a parking spot.

Louis hopped out without answering and fed the metre before taking a quick survey of the spot
from across the street. Liam had a point.

“I dunno,” Louis said at last, unwilling to concede to Liam that they should turn around and head straight for the condo without taking the risk. “It doesn’t look too busy?” he offered uncertainly.

Liam shook his head in obvious disapproval, reminding Louis suddenly of the way Liam had been in the early days of the band, always trying to call the shots and school the others into doing things his way. It only made Louis more determined to prove him wrong.

“Your loss,” Liam grumbled as they waited for an opportunity to cross the street.

It was Louis’s loss, as it turned out. They’d barely been seated and served before a gaggle of girls came up to them, shyly asking for signatures and pictures.

Louis felt his head turn of its own accord to face Liam while the girls were occupied with Niall only to be faced with a patented ‘I told you so’ glare. Louis clenched his fists under the tablecloth and forced a smile when the girls’ attention turned to him, determined to get through it without making a scene.

As soon as the girls had gone and disappeared from their sight completely, Louis’s need for escape won out.

“Loo,” he muttered abruptly, pulling out his chair clumsily and darting away from the table before either Liam or Niall had a chance to respond.

Louis fled to the bathroom, ignoring the two men at the urinal in favour of ducking into the nearest cubicle.

Despite the instantaneous fight-or-flight response—and what did it say about Louis that his instinct was always to run?—it didn’t fully hit him until his back was pressed up against the cubicle door that this was it. After today, there was no hiding the fact that Louis was holed up in Los Angeles instead of at home in England like he’d allowed everyone to believe.

Christ. Jaime was going to eviscerate him.

Louis knew that the responsible thing to do would be to pull out his phone and call Jaime right that second so she could make an attempt to get ahead of the news before it had a chance to spread all over social media. But Louis was done being responsible. What had responsibility ever gotten him other than misery and heartbreak?

He found himself scrolling to Zayn’s number instead, emotion driving him toward a last-ditch effort to get in contact with the bastard. Louis told himself as the phone started to ring that this was it. After this, he was done. He wasn’t trying again.

He didn’t expect Zayn to actually pick up.

“I was just about to call you,” Zayn lied.

Louis contemplated calling him out on it, decided it would be better not to, and then changed his mind again. Fuck it, right? “You’re an arsehole,” he said flatly. “And a liar. You weren’t going to call me. I don’t even know why the fuck you picked up.”

It was a few seconds before Zayn replied. “Curiosity, I guess. What do you want?”

“Harry almost died,” Louis told him, lowering his voice enough that he was confident he wouldn’t
be heard over the sound of the sink going. “He tried to kill himself a few days ago and now he’s in the hospital. Just thought you should know, even if you don’t care.”

Zayn’s answer, barely more than a whisper, came as a surprise. “I do care.”

Louis laughed harshly. “Sure doesn’t seem like it, mate.”

“Oh, that’s rich coming from you, Louis. I may not be best friends with Harry, but at least I’m not the reason he’s in a hospital bed right now.”

Louis sat on the toilet in stunned silence. There it was, the reason his subconscious had goaded him into making that call instead of allowing Liam to take the hit instead. Zayn always knew exactly how to make it hurt.

“I’m hanging up now,” Louis finally managed, whatever masochistic part of his brain temporarily eased by the abuse. “Don’t bother coming to see him. You’re not welcome.”

Louis ended the call immediately, not wanting to give Zayn even the slightest chance to edge in the last word. Their arguments had always been like that, drawn out until they were both exhausted by it but still refusing to give the other the satisfaction of giving up.

With Harry, it had always been the opposite. Harry didn’t fight back. He walked away. And Louis always let him.

Louis looked down at his phone again and thumbed the screen contemplatively. Maybe his urge for self-punishment hadn’t been sated after all.

January 31, 2012

Los Angeles, California

Nerves had been chewing up Louis’s insides all day. But they weren’t going to get better if he didn’t say something, and he knew that. Still.

“So,” he said finally, drawing in a deep breath immediately afterward. His throat felt like it was closing up as Harry looked up from his phone with an inquisitive expression. “We need to talk.” It was a horribly cliched thing to say, but Louis didn’t have the mental fortitude to think of anything better when his head felt like a swarm of hornets was buzzing round inside his skull.

Harry looked instantly panicked. Louis couldn’t blame him. This wasn’t going to be an easy conversation. One of them was probably going to shed some tears by the end of it. Maybe they both were.

But it was necessary.

Louis walked around the edge of the couch and slid down next to Harry, inwardly wincing when Harry almost flinched away from him as he settled into the cushion.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked, his voice laced with anxiety.

Louis hated himself for doing this to him. “You know how we talked about buying the flat together when we’re up to renew?” Louis glanced over just long enough to catch Harry’s uncertain nod
before staring back down at his hands again, tense claws curled up over his thighs. “I’ve changed my mind,” he said quickly, deciding not to draw it out too much longer.

Harry was silent for a few seconds. “What do you mean?” he finally asked. “Changed your mind about what?”

“All about moving in together.” Every syllable felt acidic on his tongue. Louis hated this. He fucking hated everything that was making him do this, everything that was driving him and Harry apart.

And Harry didn’t even realise it was happening; that was the worst part. Now Louis was going to have to shatter that illusion that things were fine between them. He’d have to bear the cost.

Harry slowly sucked his bottom lip up into his mouth, forcing Louis to jerk his head away again to avoid getting distracted. “You want to look at other places?”

“No,” Louis replied too quickly. “I mean, yes. But not—together.” He chanced another glance at Harry’s face, holding his breath as he waited for realisation to set in.

“Not…together,” Harry said slowly. “You’re moving out?”

“Not until the lease ends,” Louis reassured him, though he knew it wouldn’t exactly do much good. That wasn’t what Harry was worried about, obviously. “It just doesn’t feel like a good idea anymore.”

“Anymore,” Harry said flatly.

Louis could tell from just his eyes that Harry was pissed, but there was no going back now. They had to get through this.

“Think about it logically, Haz,” Louis argued. “How would it look to the fans if we bought a place together after everything they’ve been saying about us? They’re already catching on, and I’m the one constantly getting my arse reamed out by management for it. I always have.”

There were angry tears starting to sprout in Harry’s eyes, and Louis knew there was no way to stop them. “So what, you’re blaming me for that now?”

“I’m not blaming you! I’m just telling you that it is what it is. And we have to deal with it, one way or the other.” Louis exhaled loudly in frustration. Even though he’d known it was an impossibility, he’d still hoped that they could get through this without having an actual fight. But it clearly wasn’t in the cards now. “There’s a reason they’re doing all this, with Eleanor and everything—why they’re not doing the same with you. You’re the fantasy they’re trying to sell, Harry, and I’m getting in the way of that. Understand?”

Even when Harry had been ‘dating’ Caroline, no one had really been too concerned. Fans could still wrap their minds around the possibility that they’d one day part ways—sooner rather than later, in reality—and that one day they’d have the chance to ride off into the sunset with Harry themselves, as absurd as it was.

It was clear from the tone of this minority of fans (steadily growing, from what Griffiths had told him during their last meeting) that Louis was a threat to that fantasy.

Good, he’d thought at first, before he’d fully comprehended what Griffiths was telling him. If it had been up to Louis, everyone else in the world could fuck off where Harry was concerned.

It wasn’t up to Louis. And as much as Harry might hate to hear it, it wasn’t up to him either. They
didn’t even get to control the music that went on their record, why should they think that control wouldn’t extend to every aspect of their personal lives?

Louis had thought on more than one occasion that he might never have signed that contract after the X Factor if he’d known that this is what it would lead to. He would have taken Harry over the money and the fame in a heartbeat. He didn’t know if Harry would make the same decision for him. He was too afraid to ask.

Harry had gone utterly silent, but Louis could see him fighting back against the tears threatening to pour down his face. Louis wanted to tell him it was okay to cry, wanted to hold him while he did, but Louis knew it wouldn’t help.

“How long have you been planning this?” Harry finally choked out.

Louis looked away, hand over his face. “Christmas,” he admitted.

“A month?” Harry’s voice, usually slow and deep, edged suddenly toward shrill. “You waited a whole month to say something?”

“We still have plenty of time,” Louis countered. “This isn’t easy for me, either, you know.” It didn’t do anything to erase the look of betrayal plastered across Harry’s face as he stood up from the couch and stormed out of the room.

Louis didn’t follow. He flinched in his seat when a door slammed from the direction of Harry’s bedroom.

It took years for Louis to realise that was the first time he’d truly broken Harry’s heart.
Hello! I just want to quickly thank everyone for the kudos & comments and the lovely messages on Twitter. Also I just want to say again that I super appreciate seeing your comments, especially from people who read every time I update. :) This is a really experimental style for me in terms of pacing and it helps so much to know that people are enjoying it!

As of posting this I have officially written The Chapter Where Harry Wakes Up but I'm not going to spoil exactly when it happens. If you're diligent enough & really want to know though it's not hard to figure out. :P

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostesupd8s
Tumblr: @vondrostes

February 7, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis was proud of himself for not crying over the song until he realised the reason he hadn’t was simply that he felt too hollow inside to muster up even a single tear. And then he wished he felt like crying. Maybe it would have helped.

He gave himself another minute to make sure he was presentable and didn’t look too much like a reanimated corpse before heading back to the table to re-join Liam and Niall.

Neither commented on his extended absence as he sat down, but as soon as Louis lifted his sandwich to take another bite, Niall leaned over to murmur quietly in his ear. “Just a wild guess, but I think we might have a hard time leaving after this.”

Louis looked up and turned his head to follow Niall’s eyeline out to the street, where he could see a sizeable crowd brewing on the opposite pavement.

“Shit.”

Louis had thought the days of being mobbed by overeager teens were well behind them, especially in a place like LA where celebrity sightings were about as common as a sunny day. But he’d forgotten the effect of a well-timed absence and a scandal could have on the more dedicated fans, who had apparently started to congregate the second the other girls had left.

“D’you want to ask if we can go round the back?” Liam asked worriedly. At least he wasn’t breaking out the ‘I told you so’s. Those would probably come later.

Louis shook his head. “They’d see us going to the car,” he pointed out. “It’ll look worse if they catch us trying to sneak past them.” He glanced around at the café they were seated in, just this side of upscale. “This place is bound to have its own security, right?” he wondered aloud. “I
mean…it’s Beverly Hills.”

Niall looked hesitant about having local bouncers try to clear them a path, but it was starting to look like their only option without a team of bodyguards there to handle the chaos. Liam had always been the best at crowd control, but one glance at his panicked face told Louis he could no longer be relied on the way he once was. He couldn’t be faulted for that; they were all a bit out of practice with this sort of thing.

Louis’s motivations for not wanting to attract attention going through the back were two-fold, and he wondered if the others realised it. It would probably have been worth the risk in other circumstances, but Louis was already staring down the barrel in the form of social media outrage for his lie, no matter how vague and well-intentioned. He didn’t need the current circumstances to look any shadier than they already did.

“I’ll see what they can do,” Liam volunteered with a sigh. He stood up and walked toward the back of the café while Louis and Niall hurriedly finished their meals, not wanting to waste a single second in fear of what the scene might look like when they finally stepped outside the shaded patio.

As it turned out, the café itself didn’t have anything remotely resembling security, but they were willing enough to send out a busboy to retrieve some guards from a boutique a few doors down to help battle back the encroaching mass of eager fans hovering just outside the saloon style doors.

Louis was aware of how he must’ve looked coming out of the café, red-faced and guilty, with Liam and Niall flanking him as they pushed through the crowd now fully blocking the street to get across to their car.

It wasn’t nearly as bad as the first time they’d been properly mobbed at Heathrow a decade ago, but Louis had somewhat enjoyed the novelty of it then. The groping, screaming, all of it just felt exhausting now. Embarrassing.

Louis wanted to shut himself inside and sleep for a week. Every brush of grasping fingers seemed to sap the energy from him little by little until finally he managed to drag himself into the driver’s seat of the car with a tired sigh. But even after all that, they still had to wait for the crowd to be dispersed by the security guards who had agreed to assist them before slowly edging forward along the kerb. Louis certainly didn’t need a lawsuit to deal with on top of everything else.

“You all right, mate?” Liam said softly, leaning forward to place a tentative hand against Louis’s shoulder as he drove.

“Yeah,” Louis replied dully. “Just—you know.”

There was no need for either of them to acknowledge the fact that Liam had been right (again) when they both knew it well enough. Even Niall looked a bit regretful when Louis glanced back at him from the rear-view mirror, but he remained silent on the drive back as well.

Louis wasn’t surprised when Niall made his excuses for leaving the very second they returned to the condo, going on and on about needing to get back to the studio even though he’d previously told both Liam and Louis that he had cleared his schedule for the day and despite the fact that neither had so much as uttered a single word in protest.

Louis forced a smile onto his face as they said their goodbyes and pretended Niall’s touch didn’t feel wholly alien to him when they embraced at the front door.
Liam was the first one to breathe a sigh of relief as soon as Niall was gone, however. “I didn’t think it’d feel that awkward, being together again,” he said as he turned around to face Louis, disappointment colouring his tone.

“Yeah,” Louis agreed. “But at least it isn’t like that when it’s just us.”

“Right.”

But Louis knew that even though the familiarity lingered, things between him and Liam weren’t the same as they’d been before. Time had changed things for all of them and there was no point in fighting it anymore.

Maybe that’s why things had ended the way they did for him and Harry, Louis mused. They hadn’t been able to accept the fact that they’d become different people.

“Louis? You all right?” Liam was looking at him with concern, and Louis realised he must have spaced out for a second.

“Yeah, fine, sorry.” Louis did a kind of pirouette as he collapsed onto the sectional with a sigh. “I should probably call my assistant,” he said to the ceiling. “Let her know what happened with the café.”

“Don’t hold off on my account,” Liam said as he sat down on the other side of the sofa.

“Right.” Louis gave another shuddering sigh and pulled out his phone to do the deed. He could tell as soon as Sam answered that she was at Heathrow purely from the bustle of background noise at the terminal on her end. “Shit,” he uttered instinctively in lieu of an actual greeting.

“Sorry, I meant to text you,” Sam replied hurriedly, presumably misinterpreting his surprise for disapproval. “I just got out of security. It’s a mess.”

“How much time do you have before you board?” Louis asked. He gritted his teeth a little as he waited for an answer.

“Erm…fifteen minutes or so? Why?”

“Can you call Jaime for me? She’s gonna bite my head off when she sees the social media alerts.”

Sam coughed. “What did you do?” she asked cautiously.

“May have run into a small mob while out with Niall and Liam.”

Sam let out a soft cry of anguish. “Oh no,” she whimpered. “Louis, why? You were supposed to keep a low profile.”

“I know, I know,” Louis replied. “I shouldn’t even ask, but, please? If she tries to kill the messenger just tell her to call me instead and hang up. Use your flight as an excuse if you have to.” Louis didn’t actually think Jaime would dare to yell at Sam—his manager liked the girl too much to ever do anything to make her cry. And Sam would cry if anyone so much as raised their voice in her vicinity.

Sam sighed quietly. “I’ll let her know,” she agreed, still sounding put out but not nearly as worried as before.

“You’re a lifesaver,” Louis told her earnestly. “Let me know when you get in, yeah?”
“Of course,” Sam replied, and Louis was pleased that he could hear the smile in her voice again.

They exchanged quick farewells and then ended the call so Sam could fulfil her duty in informing Jaime of Louis’s catastrophic error in judgment. That part of the conversation clearly hadn’t escaped Liam’s notice, as when Louis put his phone back down in his lap, Liam was looking back at him with a sceptical expression.

“Making your assistant do your dirty work?” Liam asked with a small smirk.

Louis allowed his eyes to close for a long moment before he answered. “I don’t think I could handle the lecture right now if I’m honest.” He was still appreciative of the fact that Liam had spared him the same and hoped his admission would keep it that way. Louis already knew he’d made a mistake without having to be told by either Liam or Jaime.

When Louis opened his eyes again, Liam had moved a little closer to him on the sectional, his own phone in his hand.

“Twitter?” Louis asked.

Liam lifted his eyes briefly. “Nah, the missus sent me a couple photos of the little ones.” He tipped his phone toward Louis to show him the pictures, and Louis murmured appreciatively before drawing back again.

He suddenly wished he’d taken more photos of Freddie at the beach. Maybe he could work something out with Stace, have her send him more than Briana’s monthly allocation of images, the half dozen or so photos never enough to compensate for the massive portion of Freddie’s life that Louis had missed.

Louis thumbed hard at his screen, intending to bring up Briana’s number to send her a text, but instead he mis-swiped and ended up with Harry’s playlist staring him blank in the face. Louis stared back at it, his thumb hovering over the home button for far longer than it should’ve taken him to close the app.

“You?” Liam said unexpectedly.

Louis started, blinking up at Liam in confusion. “What?”

“Are you on Twitter?” Liam clarified, nudging a shoulder toward Louis’s phone in his hands.

Louis glanced back down at his screen and then up at Liam again, contemplating. “No,” he finally decided, before offering up the device for Liam to take.

Liam looked confused as he accepted Louis’s mobile, and then even more bewildered when he saw what was on the screen, a wrinkle forming between his eyebrows as he glanced back up at Louis. “You’re working on new music already?” he asked.

Louis hadn’t even anticipated Liam drawing that conclusion. He shook his head quickly. “Harry wrote them,” he said softly. “There was a note, with my name on it, back at his house. His assistant found it after he—”

Liam’s mouth opened in a silent ‘O’ of realisation. He looked back down again and carefully scrolled down the list using just the tip of his index finger, as if trying to stroke a nervous animal without spooking it. “Are they like…” Liam started to say before changing tacks. “Could you play me one?”
Louis nodded and reached over to take back his phone. “I’ve been trying to space them out,” he explained, feeling silly as soon as he’d admitted it to Liam’s face. “I don’t want to…I don’t know.”

Liam nodded and didn’t ask him to justify his reasoning. Louis scrolled to the next song down in the list and hit play.

February 1, 2012
Los Angeles, California

“Are you nervous?”

“Are you?”

Louis laughed. “I’m not the one about to get stabbed with a needle over and over again.”

“Technically it’s a bunch of needles,” Harry corrected him.

“Right. That sounds so much better.”

Louis hadn’t expected the chipper Harry who’d jumped in bed with him that morning before he’d had a chance to fully wake up, especially after the argument they’d had the night before—but as Harry had ever-so cheerfully reminded Louis, it was his birthday, and he was entitled to Louis getting him a present.

When Louis agreed, mostly to make up for the fact that he’d broken the news about wanting to move out of Princess Park literally the night before Harry’s eighteenth, he didn’t think Harry’s gift of choice was going to be a bloody tattoo.

But here they were, at Shamrock Social Club, waiting for Freddy to be freed up so Harry could get prepped for his first tattoo. So far, Louis’s attempts at talking him out of it had been monumentally unsuccessful.

Louis had spent barely any time at all tapping his foot nervously in time with the bass thrumming throughout the shop before Freddy was stepping out into the waiting room to receive them.

“Ready, boys?” he asked with a broad smile.

Harry jumped up eagerly, his massive grin dimpling his cheeks. Louis wanted to poke them, but it wouldn’t exactly be the most normal reaction, and they were still in a relatively public space.

Louis stood up a bit more reluctantly and followed the other two into the back, where Harry would be receiving his tattoo in private—just in case someone who recognised them happened to come in mid-session.

Harry had been right to tease him, probably, Louis thought to himself as Freddy led them into a secluded room and helped Harry get properly positioned in the chair, which reminded Louis unpleasantly of visits to the dentist. He just hoped he didn’t puke when the needles finally came out.

“Arm up,” Freddy urged, pulling Harry’s left arm over his head by the wrist and rolling his sleeve up into his armpit before turning around to start getting his tools of the trade ready.
“What are you getting?” Louis asked Harry again, for the hundredth time.

Harry gave him an exasperated look. “You’ll see in a minute.”

Louis wasn’t surprised when he couldn’t take his eyes off the smooth creamy flesh under Harry’s arm as Freddy went over the skin with a disposable razor a few times, nor did he make any attempt to hide his stare. Freddy was the only one in the room with them, and he was just as focused on Harry, albeit for different reasons.

Louis went red though when he noticed Harry had caught him looking. Harry sucked his lower lip into his mouth and averted his eyes immediately. Louis thought that was for the best. Them eye-fucking each other right before Harry got a tattoo probably wouldn’t be the smartest decision.

“Still time to back out,” Freddy informed Harry after he’d finished cleaning the area of any residue from the shaving foam.

Harry shook his head. “I’m good,” he assured him.

Louis was still shocked that he didn’t seem the least bit nervous about the procedure.

Freddy laughed. “Okay,” he said, pulling out what looked like a sheet of paper from the table and placing it against the underside of Harry’s arm. “Here, right?” he asked, waiting for Harry to nod before letting out a whistle. “That’s gonna hurt like a bitch, my man.”

Louis winced in advance. Harry still didn’t seem the least bit concerned.

Louis watched intently as Freddy transferred the stencil onto Harry’s arm and then peeled away the sheet to reveal a simple five-pointed star. Louis could see Harry’s nerves suddenly ratchet up in the seconds after the design was revealed, and it wasn’t hard for Louis to make the connection. He nodded in obvious approval, watching as all the tension bled out of Harry’s face once more.

“If you need to take a break or anything,” Freddy warned, “just let me know.” He turned his head a little to look at Louis. “You mind holding his arm still for a minute while I get started?” He waited until Louis nodded before getting up. Freddy circled round the back of the chair and explained to Harry, “It’s your first, so we don’t know how you’re gonna take it. I don’t want you to flinch and accidentally mess up the design if it’s too much for you.”

“Okay,” Harry replied almost dreamily as he gazed up at Louis from underneath his eyelashes.

Louis knew his skin was probably clammy against Harry’s wrist, but he wasn’t about to let go and risk Harry disfiguring himself for life.

Much to both Louis and Freddy’s surprise, Harry hardly reacted at all at the first glance of the tattoo gun against his skin. His eyes widened a little, breath hitching in his throat, maybe his pupils were a little dilated—but other than that, he seemed perfectly fine.

Freddy looked delighted. “Guess you’re just a natural, kid,” he told Harry. “Now you have no excuse not to come back.” He nodded at Louis. “You can let him go now,” he said, but Harry reached up to grab Louis’s arm with his free hand before he had a chance to pull away.

“It’s fine,” he said quickly. “You can stay like that.”

Louis nodded dumbly, and only gripped him tighter. Harry smiled and indicated for Freddy to continue.
By the time they were finished, Louis wasn’t sure if minutes or hours had passed. He felt disconnected from reality, like he’d just taken some really good painkillers, and he wasn’t sure why. He hadn’t even been the one to get the tattoo.

Harry wasn’t faring much better when they went stumbling out of the tattoo shop into the back alley to make the short journey back to their car. It didn’t take Louis long to realise why, when Harry spun around giddily under an overhead light, revealing the bulge in his jeans.

Louis opened his mouth, prepared to rib the boy over the revelation that Harry apparently got off on pain of all things, but his mouth went dry, tongue slack, and he couldn’t form the words.

He shook it off quickly and jogged a little to catch up with Harry. “Does it mean something?” Louis asked curiously, wishing the tattoo was healed already so he could touch it.

Harry nodded sagely. “Yes.”

Louis gave him a few seconds before realising he wasn’t intending on continuing past that. “Are you going to tell me what it means?”

Harry just smirked and walked past him toward the mouth of the alley. “Eventually,” he called back with a breathy laugh.

Louis shook his head with a sigh and followed him down.

February 7, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Liam remained ominously silent for nearly a full minute after the song ended, prompting Louis to finally speak up in a sudden fit of panic, worried about what the silence might mean.

“Well, don’t take all day,” Louis snapped. His whole body felt like a rubber band about to snap. He wasn’t sure why he was so much more concerned by Liam’s reaction than he’d been about Gemma’s. Maybe because Liam was closer to the truth of it all, knew what it must mean to Louis for Harry to leave something like that for him.

Liam lifted an eyebrow, but still said nothing even as he leaned over to get a closer look at Louis’s phone. He tugged at it gently until Louis finally gave up and just let him have the thing. Liam squinted down at the screen in concentration as he scrolled through the entirety of the playlist.

“Why’d he number them like that?” Liam finally asked, handing the phone back to Louis with a bemused expression.

Louis sucked in a deep breath, steeling himself for the explanation. If it had been anyone but Liam, he might have lied just to save face, but Liam already knew more than he should about the way things had been between Harry and Louis.

“They’re dates,” Louis replied carefully. “Things that happened between us that inspired him, I guess.” It was far more than a guess, seeing as how Harry’s message had confirmed it, but Louis couldn’t bring himself to fully commit to that particular statement.
“All of them are about you?” Liam asked.

Louis nodded. “So far as I can tell, yeah.”

Liam frowned, teething at the corner of his lip as he formulated a reply. “Is it rude to ask what that one was for?” he finally settled on with an uncertain glance up to Louis’s eyes.

Louis shook his head tiredly. “His first tattoo,” Louis told him. Upon seeing the lack of recognition in Liam’s eyes, he helpfully added, “The star on his arm.”

“Right.”

Louis couldn’t tell if Liam actually remembered the tattoo in question or not, but he was happy to leave it at that. Liam apparently wasn’t, however.

“So…he wrote you eighty songs and then—”

Louis flinched a little, willing Liam not to say it.

Liam shook his head, frowning a little. “Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know, Liam!” Louis retorted, his voice breaking a little out of frustration. “I can’t read his fucking mind. I wish I could.” Louis couldn’t stand the way Liam was staring at him pityingly and turned away, feeling the angry sting of unshed tears behind his eyes.

Liam pushed on despite Louis’s emotional display. “Are they all like that?” he asked quietly. “Just…instrumentals?”

Louis nodded. He didn’t like the way Liam was looking at him, like he was expecting Louis to read his mind. “What?” Louis asked bluntly.

“Well…” Liam seemed reluctantly to voice the thought. “Don’t you think maybe he wants you to finish them?”

It was something Louis couldn’t say he hadn’t considered, way at the back of his mind, mostly when he was half-conscious or fully drunk, but he had never allowed the idea to linger more than a split second. He didn’t even want to consider the possibility that this was Harry’s last gift to him, not a memory, but a fucking project. Like he was still trying to prop Louis up. Give him a sense of purpose.

“I’m having a kip,” Louis said abruptly, no longer willing to put up with Liam’s questioning any longer. To his credit, Liam let him walk away without saying another word.
Louis’s attempt at an afternoon nap wasn’t anything to write home about.

He knew he shouldn’t complain. After years of work-related sleep deprivation, too much sleep shouldn’t have been a bad thing. But it was difficult not to resent his body for having too much energy when sleep had become his only respite from reality.

Louis tossed and turned for as long as he could bear to in a state of drowsy half-consciousness before finally emerging from a tangle of sheets feeling no less the worse for wear. If he’d been in different company, he probably would have put in the effort to shower again just to make himself somewhat presentable, but the only people currently inhabiting the condo were Liam and Mark, both of whom had seen Louis in worse states.

Both of the men in question were out and about in the flat when Louis emerged from the master bedroom: Mark in the kitchen, making some kind of horrible looking protein sludge on the counter, and Liam still in the sitting room, perched on the sectional with his phone held up to his ear. He didn’t look up when Louis wandered over and took a seat on the other end, intending to wait out the conversation so he could apologise for snapping at Liam earlier.

It was clear in the next several seconds however that this wasn’t just a quick phone call. Louis could hear the high-pitched chitter of his wife’s voice coming through the speaker on Liam’s mobile, slightly too indistinct to make out exactly what was being said, but the quiet smile as Liam hummed along in acknowledgment was clue enough that they were talking about their kids, or the like.

Louis felt like he was in agony just watching the whole scene. His heart hurt. That was the only way to voice the tearing sensation taking place inside his ribcage as he took in every inch of Liam’s expression of contentment.

All Louis could think about suddenly was all the fleeting fantasies he’d had at nineteen, after realising Harry was going to be a part of his life, where they were thirty and married with a pet dog, still living in their Princess Park flat together. Happily ever after.

And now Louis really was pushing thirty, and all of those dreams seemed further away than they’d ever been.
Louis tipped his head up toward the ceiling, not wanting to look at Liam’s face anymore but not wanting to surrender to his own emotions either. He’d never learned to give in to vulnerability like Harry was wont to, but things like that had always been easier for Harry. Louis sometimes resented him for it, honestly.

“I’ll be back soon,” Liam was saying, and that hurt even more to hear. “No, I haven’t booked it yet, but I’ll be back in time for the party, of course. I wouldn’t miss that.”

Louis had forgotten that Liam’s daughter had a birthday coming up. It wasn’t fair to ask his friend to miss his children’s milestones to watch Harry waste away in a hospital bed, but Louis still felt bitter about it anyway.

Louis suddenly wanted to stand up and shake the phone out of Liam’s hand, demand to know if he recognised how lucky he was in all this. He had everything Louis had ever wanted. It wasn’t fair.

“Give them my love, yeah?” Liam continued, wholly oblivious to Louis’s existential battle taking place on the other side of the couch. “Yeah, I miss you too. I love you.”

It was obvious the phone call was reaching its conclusion, but Louis no longer felt fit to face Liam anymore. He threw himself off the sectional without fanfare, ignoring Mark’s inquisitive look as he marched back into the master bedroom and carefully closed the door behind himself.

The sting of unshed tears returned to haunt him as soon as Louis climbed back into bed, huddling into himself and drawing the blankets up over his knees in a vain attempt at substituting human comfort. He almost felt determined to cry now, as if doing so would spite Harry in some way, prove that Louis wasn’t an unfeeling robot with no human emotions.

Louis had always had too many emotions. That was the problem. He just wasn’t the best at showing them.

He toyed briefly with the idea of calling Lottie, or Fizzy maybe, but it was late and his sisters wouldn’t understand what he was looking for from them anyway. He wished his mum were still around. He’d never needed her more until after she’d passed, and wasn’t that just the way life worked out?

Louis’s thoughts began to drift into darker places without his permission. If Harry didn’t wake up—if *Harry died*—what was he supposed to do then?

If Harry didn’t make it, Liam would still have his wife and kids, Niall still had Hailee (and Shawn, maybe), and Zayn—well, Zayn had never really seemed to need anyone the same way the rest of them did. But Louis had always had Harry, even when he couldn’t actually have him. Even when they’d been on opposite sides of the world, never once speaking a word to each other with no hope of doing so again in the future, Louis had clung on to the knowledge that Harry was out there somewhere, still breathing, existing, and some part of him had taken solace in that.

Louis didn’t know how to handle the alternative.

He scrunched his eyes closed and sucked in a deep breath. Liam would kill himself if he knew what was going on in Louis’s head. He needed a distraction, and he knew the only thing that would take his mind off Harry was Harry himself.
“Did you see Zayn’s face?” Harry asked, laughing as he spun around in a circle in the green room before tumbling down onto one of the couches.

Louis forced a smile to match. He had seen Zayn’s face. A lot of people had seen Zayn’s face. A lot of people had seen them, and even though it hadn’t even crossed Louis’s mind at the time to get a handle on things, all he could think about now was what would happen when shit finally hit the fan.

Because it was going to.

Louis had been a little overwhelmed by Paris, he had to admit. They hadn’t even gotten to do any of the touristy shit like visiting the Eiffel Tower, too busy with interviews and the event later in the day. They weren’t even staying overnight, just hanging out until The Powers That Be (aka management) told them it was time to go home.

But even so, there was something about the city that had Louis feeling lighter than air throughout the whole day. The mood had been infectious, taking hold of Harry almost immediately.

They’d botched the interview. Not in the traditional sense, but in the way that Louis knew he’d be receiving another lecture from either Magee or Griffiths in the coming days. The event hadn’t been much better.

Louis wondered if Harry even realised how bad it really was. They’d been unbearable during the interview, unable to keep the flirting under wraps for even a second. Louis knew he’d seemed out of sorts for most of the signing, and toward the end he and Harry had started to get a little handsy—under the guise of playful banter, of course.

After seeing Zayn’s face, Louis wasn’t sure their bandmates were going to buy into the lie that their relationship was strictly platonic for much longer. Management themselves would certainly have no doubts about Louis and Harry’s behaviour.

Louis felt ill just thinking about it. But Harry was still riding high from the events of the day, and Louis didn’t want to be the one to bring him back down to earth. Louis knew he wouldn’t be able to conceal his anxiety for much longer though, never one to successfully hide his emotions, so he did the only thing he could think to do to distract Harry: he kissed him.

Full on the mouth, the way he’d been dying to all day, with Harry’s head back against the sofa and Louis leaning down to meet him, to press him down into the cushions, till they were as horizontal as the furniture would allow.

When Louis finally moved from Harry’s lips to a spot just under his jaw, Harry started to make these breathy high-pitched vocalisations from the back of his throat that had Louis hard up faster than he had even thought possible. But Louis still wasn’t ready to deal with the consequences of being forced to acknowledge that Harry was in a similar state.

He shifted his own hips back a few centimetres, distractedly kissing Harry even while maintaining a strict distance between their bodies, to the point where Louis started to feel the strain in his back from holding the awkward position. Harry didn’t seem to notice though, too caught up in running his hands up and down Louis’s back, and that was all that mattered really.

They stayed like that for longer than they should have considering the fact that they were in a
They flew apart at the sound of the doorknob turning, but there was no hiding what they’d just been up to. Louis’s mouth dried up as the door fully opened, expecting to see Zayn and Niall—or god forbid, Liam—back from their visit to one of the shops far earlier than expected, but instead he came face to face with their handler from Modest, a rather nasty woman named Jan, whose pinched expression seemed permanently carved into her plastic features.

“Harry, I need you to come with me,” she said stiffly.

Harry swiped at his mouth and looked frantically between her and Louis, as if searching for an answer Louis couldn’t give him. “Why?” he said finally, in a tiny voice.

Jan’s normally unpleasant face somehow managed to sour even further in response to Harry’s question. “Richard and Harry requested a meeting. We need to go now, before it’s time to leave.”

Harry still didn’t move, prompting Louis to step in. “Management’s not even here,” Louis pointed out, unable to hold his tongue any longer. He didn’t actually think Jan was lying, but it was his only chance to stall. Maybe if the others came back before she managed to get Harry out of there, they could delay things till they were back in London, at least.

Jan gave Louis a look that implied she would love nothing more than to tell Louis to go fuck himself. “They’re on a video call,” she countered. “Harry, come along, please.”

Harry gazed pleadingly at Louis as he marched toward her, looking like a man about to meet a firing squad, which Louis suspected wasn’t too far off the mark. Louis stared helplessly back and wished it was him going instead, but there was nothing he could do that wouldn’t make the whole situation worse.

Harry didn’t come back until after the other lads had returned from their outing, laden with souvenirs from one of the nearby gift shops, and when Harry finally walked in the room with the rest of their entourage in tow to take the lot of them back to the airport, his good mood had completely vanished, replaced by a wall of sullen silence instead.

Louis wasn’t sure how to address the issue without bringing more attention to it from the others. Even Niall, who was remarkably unobservant event at the best of times, seemed to realise something was wrong with Harry right off the bat. And of course, being Niall, he had the gall to ask Harry point-blank what was wrong as they were driving away in the back of a spacious SUV, no privacy divider between them and Jan in the front seat next to their driver.

“Nothing,” Harry replied flatly. “I’m just tired.”

It was clear to everyone that he was lying through his teeth, but nobody pushed him for more after that. The atmosphere in the car successfully soured by the dark storm-cloud hovering over Harry’s head, the other lads had no choice but to wait out the trip in a like manner, their silence interspersed by the occasional bit of subdued conversation, mostly between Zayn and Liam.

Louis didn’t dare say a word. He didn’t even look at Harry, not wanting to implicate himself as the cause of Harry’s distress, no matter how indirect.

He wasn’t surprised when Jan informed them of the change in seating arrangement at the airport itself, with Harry now sitting between Liam and Niall on the opposite side of the cabin from Louis and Zayn. He was surprised however when Zayn addressed the elephant in the room once they’d reached cruising altitude, instead of ignoring it like he did most other things that didn’t directly
involve him.

“What was with you and Harry earlier?” Zayn asked, having at least the decency to keep his voice down. “You trying to play that stuff up for the fans now?”

Louis shrugged. “Just messing about,” he replied, doing his best to keep his voice steady. He couldn’t tell if Zayn believed him, but he left things alone after that, which was all Louis could really ask for.

They split up into two separate cars after they landed at Heathrow, with Louis and Harry sat alone together in the back of a sedan following the others at a safe and unassuming distance back to Princess Park. Still, Louis didn’t dare broach the subject of Harry’s meeting in front of the driver, even though the chances of the man working directly under Modest were slim to none.

When Louis noticed Eleanor’s car parked outside their flat once they arrived, his heart sunk. He’d forgotten about the dinner date they’d agreed to have once he got back from Paris, past-Louis only too eager to go along with any plan that ended in someone else cooking him dinner. He wished now he’d asked Harry to do it instead, but it was too late for that now.

Harry exited the car and jogged up the drive far too fast for Louis to stop him. He barrelled through the front door and right past Eleanor, who was waiting inside on the sofa in the sitting room. She stood up immediately once Louis entered just behind Harry, but he held up a finger to stop her before she could do something like hug him—or worse, kiss him. Louis needed to go after Harry first, and he couldn’t deal with Eleanor distracting him right now.

“Haz, wait.”

Harry finally stopped at the top of the stairs, angling his body slightly to face Louis with a deadpan expression. It wasn’t the privacy they needed to have a real conversation about what had happened with management; Eleanor was just downstairs, still within earshot.

“Come have dinner with us,” Louis blurted out instead.

There was a flash of something on Harry’s face, but it was gone too fast for Louis to successfully comprehend. “I think I’m just gonna head to bed, actually,” Harry replied, his voice cold as he turned away again and started to walk down the corridor to his bedroom at the very end of the hall.

“Harry,” Louis called out again, taking the next few steps up the stairs after him. He couldn’t let the night end on such a sour note. He had to mediate things somehow. “Happy Valentine’s Day, yeah?” It was a peace offering, a way of letting Harry know that Louis didn’t blame him for the way he was acting after everything that had happened.

Harry stopped dead in the middle of the corridor. He stood perfectly still for just a moment before finally turning his head just the tiniest bit to look over his shoulder at Louis. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Louis,” he replied quietly. And then he opened the door to his bedroom and slipped inside without another word.

Louis flinched at the sound of the lock clicking shut, loud as a gunshot against the heavy silence.

February 7, 2021

Los Angeles, California
Louis didn’t have time to wipe away the tears rolling down his face when Liam opened the bedroom door without warning and walked in just as the last notes of the song faded out into nothing.

Liam paused just inside the door, looking a bit uncertain about how to proceed. “I’d ask if you’re okay but….”

Louis sniffed loudly, unable to muster up the energy to even feel embarrassed about it anymore. “That obvious, eh?”

“Do you want me to leave?” Liam asked earnestly.

Louis considered it for a moment. He shook his head. He patted the space next to him on the bed and hunched further into his own knees, craving something he couldn’t quite put a name to.

Liam seemed to understand intuitively what Louis was seeking and crawled into bed without a second’s hesitation, wrapping his broad arms around Louis like a security blanket.

Louis could understand why Harry loved being the little spoon with Liam encircling him like this, like Louis was just a little kid who’d woken up from a nightmare and needed a simple comfort. But this nightmare was his waking life, and Liam’s gentle hold was only a temporary solution, one whose effects would disappear as soon as they separated again. But for now, Louis would take what he could get. Anything to get him through the day, he thought bitterly.

“Tell me when you want me to let go,” Liam murmured softly.

Louis laughed, hiccupping a little. “Is it too pathetic for me to say never?” He could feel Liam smiling with his face pressed into Louis’s hair.

“Wish I could, mate,” Liam told him. “Wish I could fix this for you.”

It was tragic really that between them they probably had enough money to buy a small island when no amount of money in the world could make Louis’s problems disappear.

“Do you want to go back to bed?” Liam asked after a few minutes had gone by. Louis shook his head. “Food, then?”

Louis tried to assess whether he felt up to eating right then. “Yeah, all right,” he decided. “Can you ask Mark to grab us some take-out?”

Liam nodded and finally pulled away from Louis, leaving him feeling oddly bereft. It wasn’t like him to need this much physical comfort, at least not since he’d gotten used to going without it. “I’ll be right back,” Liam told him as he climbed off the bed.

Louis watched Liam leave with a frown despite the fact that he’d just asked him to do so, trying and failing to avoid falling into another sulk. New Louis was co-dependent apparently, and that just wouldn’t do.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Hopefully one chapter a week isn't too long of a wait! Ideally I would like to update more frequently, but I also like to work on multiple things simultaneously so I don't get super burnt out and bored.

Also I know this is a bit of a long-shot since multishipping isn't super common in this fandom, but if you are so inclined, I would love it if you read my Xarry AU "Ivory River" now that it's complete! :)

Hope you enjoy this chapter!!

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February 7, 2021
Los Angeles, California

When Liam came back into the bedroom again, there was a peculiar expression on his face, one that kind of made him look constipated. Louis didn’t say as much, not wanting to upset Liam after his dedication to keeping Louis sane throughout the majority of that day, to say nothing of the past two years. Louis owed Liam a little lenience.

Louis was tempted to take every good thought he’d just had about him back, however, the second Liam opened his mouth.

“I think you and I should have a talk.”

Louis grimaced, making his distaste for that prospect abundantly clear. “What kind of talk?” he hedged.

“The kind where we discuss some things I’m sure neither of us want to talk about,” Liam answered with a sigh as he sat back down on the bed next to Louis, this time maintaining a bit of distance between them. “I’m not your therapist—and thank god for that—but I am your friend, and I just want to help you, Louis. I don’t want you to feel like you’re going through this alone.”

“Liam…” Louis warned.

Liam gave him a withering look. “I’m not done.”

Louis fumed silently, wishing that he could make his escape without proving Liam right about his mental state in the process. He waited and assumed that Liam would continue unprompted, but it was nearly a full minute before Liam spoke again.

“Before I—” Liam stopped, chewing at the inside of his cheek with a pained look on his face. He
wouldn’t meet Louis’s eyes. “I just need to know that you aren’t planning on…that you haven’t been thinking about doing something daft,” Liam said meaningfully. “If Harry doesn’t wake up.”

Louis blanched. “I haven’t,” he said reflexively, finally drawing Liam’s eyes back to him. He could tell Liam didn’t quite believe it. “I haven’t!”

“Oh, I’m done,” Liam replied, nodding slowly. “Okay. Cause you know Harry wouldn’t want that, right?”

Louis didn’t know a damn thing anymore about what Harry wanted, but he wasn’t about to set Liam off again by saying so. “Yes, Liam, I’m aware. And I do have a son, you know. Harry’s not the centre of the universe.” Not anymore at least.

Louis turned away from the sceptical look Liam gave him in response to that, not wanting to be forced into addressing it.

“Are we done?” Louis asked, not bothering to hide his irritation.

“No,” Liam replied with a surprising amount of force.

He reached suddenly for Louis’s hand, holding it against the inside of his folded knee as if they were two schoolgirls sharing gossip in confidence instead of adult men with the weight of the world on their shoulders.

“I already said my piece about you not being responsible for what Harry did, and I stand by that. But—” Liam sucked in a deep breath. “I do think there are things you need to work out if—when Harry wakes up.”

Louis had the perverse urge to laugh in Liam’s face. “Don’t you think it’s a little late for that now?”

Liam’s stony expression didn’t change. “I’m not saying you should forget everything that happened and go skipping off into the sunset, Louis. But you need to make your peace with each other. It’s obvious that both of you need to get help.” He gently released Louis’s hand.

“I already have a therapist, thank you, Liam.” Louis snatched his hand back quickly, feeling his cheeks heat up unexpectedly once he realised how much he’d been relying on that small bit of comfort.

“And when’s the last time you actually saw them?” Liam asked, arching one eyebrow as he stared pointedly until Louis had to look away. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“I’ve been busy,” Louis insisted. He picked at a stray thread in the duvet, refusing to look back up at Liam again. He hoped Mark would be back soon with their food, just so he wouldn’t have to endure this lecture much longer.

But evidently Liam was already winding down if his capitulating sigh was anything to go by. “Well, I can see that you’re just going to argue with anything I try to say,” he said with a note of exasperation, “so I want you to know that I’ve seen the way both of you have been carrying on after what happened, and it’s not sustainable. You need to find a way to get over it somehow, because you’re poisoning each other without even trying, and I can’t sit around and just let it happen anymore. I’m just gonna leave it at that.”

Louis didn’t respond, happy to—as Liam had put it—*leave it at that*. He wasn’t convinced Liam’s advice was really the right approach, given Harry and Louis’s individual stubbornness, amongst other things. There was every possibility Louis wouldn’t ever get the chance to find out whether
Liam was right or not if Harry didn’t wake up, and he didn’t much want to think about that.

True to his word, Liam got up and exited the bedroom again without any more nagging, but there was no relief to be found in his absence. Louis hated it. Loneliness was bearable once you got used to it, but Liam being around again was re-opening those old wounds. It was agonising.

Which was all the excuse Louis needed to pull out his phone and bring up Harry’s playlist. He didn’t care anymore if Liam walked in and caught him listening to it.

He could argue he was reconnecting with Harry in the only way he could; he could play to Liam’s farfetched fantasies of Louis and Harry kissing and making up in a romance-novel moment at Harry’s bedside when this was all over.

Louis had no such hopes, but that didn’t matter.

February 25, 2012
Detroit, Michigan

“We look ridiculous,” Louis said in a flat voice. He stared at himself in the bathroom mirror, frowning at the oversized hoodies and pom-pom topped beanies Harry had bought at some kitschy corner shop down the road.

“Well I want real food,” Harry replied firmly as he adjusted his own matching beanie—which had a fucking tiger on it, of all things. “So we’re going.”

“Not like this we’re not.” Usually Louis would let Harry have his way, especially over something so trivial, but this time he was putting his foot down. “You’re not getting me out in public wearing this get-up, Haz. Not even over my dead body.”

The venomous look Harry sent him said otherwise, but Louis sighed in relief when Harry silently began to peel his blue hoodie up over his head. “Give me your beanie,” he said to Louis, making it very clear that he would broker no argument on the subject.

Louis watched curiously as he stuffed both hats into the little backpack they had planned to bring with them to the shop, in case they needed somewhere to stash their groceries at the end of the trip, but didn’t ask why. As long as Louis didn’t have to wear the damn thing on his head like a beacon of potential embarrassment, he didn’t really care what Harry did.

They were in Detroit for the first time in both of their lives. In Michigan, which Louis hadn’t ever really known was a state, if he was honest. Even in his awareness of Detroit itself, he’d always imagined the city existing wholly separate from everything else. Detroit, America.

It wasn’t really the type of place he’d been expecting either. Louis had seen 8 Mile years and years ago, but the strangely romantic portrayal of the projects hadn’t prepared Louis for the swanky bit of downtown they had been confined to for the duration of their stay—which wasn’t long enough for them to explore the city much at all.

Louis couldn’t deny that cabin fever was a big part of his easy acquiescence when Harry had suddenly declared his need to buy fresh fruit from a nearby shop. They’d been so busy with promoting ‘What Makes You Beautiful’, flying from LA to London and then to Chicago for the
Better With U tour that none of them had even had a single moment to breathe.

Louis just wanted to have a second to feel normal, really, the way they couldn’t anymore in London, or even LA, apparently. But Detroit—Detroit was safe. They were nobodies here.

Which was why Harry’s whole plan to go to the shop in some ill-contrived disguise was ludicrous. They were only going to draw more attention to themselves in tourist get-up than their everyday clothes. Harry was being paranoid. Everything would be fine.

They were standing in the middle of the produce section in some upscale organic foods shop, loosely holding hands while Harry dithered over the slim selection of fruit that was in season: papayas, bananas, and pears being the main objects of his attention.

Louis’s reflexes were the only thing that saved them when the teenage girl and her mother suddenly circled around the fruit display and stopped dead in front of the two boys, Louis dropping Harry’s hand immediately, before the girl and her mother had a chance to see.

Louis could feel the full brunt of Harry’s offended gaze heating the side of his neck, but it didn’t matter, because the girl in front of them was pointing, stuttering and stumbling over her words in her haste to get them out.

“Oh my god, you’re Harry Styles!” she exclaimed loudly, pulling insistently at her mother’s sleeve. “Mom, do you have—can I get a signature?” she asked frantically, eyes roving between Harry and her mother and then back again.

“Oh course, yeah,” Harry replied, stepping away from Louis to move around to the front of the fruit display.

The mother still looked lost but was digging in her purse at her daughter’s request anyway, finally coming up with a pen and notepad to pass to Harry.

He signed it quickly, and then hesitated before giving it back. He looked up at Louis, who wasn’t sure yet if the girl had even recognised him in the first place and had been banking on her being so distracted by Harry that she wouldn’t even notice Louis was there at all.

“Do you want Louis to sign it as well?” Harry asked the girl politely, dashing Louis’s hopes of remaining incognito.

The girl glanced at Louis and nodded fervently. Louis plastered a smile onto his face as he accepted the notepad from Harry and scrawled his signature underneath the other boy’s, passing it back to the girl’s mother as soon as he was done.

Luckily for them, the mother pulled her daughter away quickly after that, waving politely as she pushed her trolley up the aisle and out of sight. Harry stared after them, looking a little gobsmacked. Louis slapped him on the bum to get his attention again.

“What was that for?” Harry asked with a frown, jolting a little at the blow but not looking truly annoyed by it.

“Give me the beanies,” Louis commanded.

“What?”

“The beanies, in your bag.” Louis waited impatiently for Harry to comply, and then as soon as he had both hats in hand, jammed them onto his own and Harry’s heads respectively, ignoring Harry’s
cries of protest as Louis dragged the bottom of the beanie down nearly over his eyes. “Get your fruit, Harry, we’re leaving.”

Herding Harry to the self-checkout and out of the store was much like dealing with a small child who didn’t want to leave the candy shop—even though it was just fruit, and Harry had ended up with more than enough to last him the day. Louis couldn’t be arsed to explain himself until they were safely shut up inside their hotel again.

“You were right,” Louis told Harry as they stood alone together inside the lift. “I really didn’t think anyone here would notice us, but—”

Harry shrugged. “Might as well get used to it, yeah?” He was taking the whole thing remarkably well considering he’d been the one to propose going in disguise in the first place. “We’ll just be more careful from now on,” he continued, sliding his hand into Louis’s again and then stepping in front of him to hide it just as the lift doors opened to let more people in on the floor below theirs.

He squeezed Louis’s hand tightly, and Louis squeezed back. Maybe they couldn’t be normal, but at least they were in it together.

February 7, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis’s stomach growled loudly just as Liam reopened the bedroom door. Liam blinked, seemingly stunned by the loudness of the sound, and behind him Louis could see the front door to the condo opening as Mark came through laden with plastic takeaway bags.

Louis was off the bed in a flash, not willing to wait a second longer to eat. He pushed past Liam without saying a word and looked hopefully up at Mark as he threw himself at one of the barstools in the kitchen.

Mark gestured toward the takeaway bags with a raised eyebrow and a small smile playing at the corner of his lips. “I got a little of everything,” he said by way of explanation.

Louis’s eyes widened as he dug into the first bag while Liam and Mark took their seats on either side of him. Mark had bought out an entire Chinese buffet by the looks of it, and Louis was ready to feast.

“You’re a godsend,” Louis told Mark, sighing happily as the smell of fried rice wafted into his nostrils.

He picked through the seemingly endless cartons of food and ended up with nine different courses laid out in front of him, fully intending on eating all of them in one sitting. He would have done so, too, if it weren’t for Liam suddenly speaking up halfway through the meal, ruining Louis’s appetite in one fell swoop.

“I think we should go back to the hospital and see Harry again. Just you and me.”

Louis froze. “Is this part of your whole ‘I’m not a therapist but I’m going to act like one anyway’ agenda?” he asked carefully. He tilted his head enough to see Liam scowling at him in response.
“Forgive me if I want to actually spend time with Harry while I’m here,” Liam retorted.

Louis could hear Mark’s stool shifting against the tile, and when he turned to look, the other man was standing, arms laden with food. “I’ll be in the guest room if you need anything,” he told Louis, quickly extricating himself from the conversation before it could escalate.

Louis said nothing as Mark quietly tip-toed into the guest bedroom and shut the door behind him. He didn’t want to admit to Liam that the reason he was reluctant to visit Harry again was because Anne would most likely be there. Truce or not, Louis wasn’t keen on hanging around Harry’s mum for extended periods of time if he could avoid it.

He knew if it really came down to it, he could always text Gemma and ask for space. She’d give in, at least the first time he asked, but Louis didn’t want to be the kind of coward who needed to pursue permission to see Harry. Avoiding Anne felt like admitting defeat.

“Fine,” Louis agreed after another moment of deliberation. He wasn’t happy about it, and he wasn’t going to pretend otherwise, but he’d go to the hospital if that’s what Liam really wanted. “I assume I can at least finish my dinner first?”

“Oh, sure,” Liam replied through a mouthful of his own.

Louis shook his head in disgust but started in on his orange chicken like a man starving, as if he hadn’t already made it through half a dozen other courses first. By the time he finished, Louis felt bloated but satisfied, and the food in his belly was almost enough to quell the slight tremble in his hands as he reached for his sunnies on the counter. Almost.

Liam noticed, giving Louis a concentrated look of concern that caused Louis acute physical pain. He hated being constantly confronted by everyone’s pity all the time. Even if he deserved it.

“We don’t have to go if you’re really not feeling up to it, mate.”

Louis bristled at the comment as he donned the glasses and glared from behind the tinted lenses at Liam, who probably couldn’t even tell. “I’m fine,” he insisted. “You’re the one that wanted to go so badly.” It would have been easier to take the out, but Louis was determined now not to let Liam have the upper hand. Maybe Liam was banking on that, using reverse psychology.

Liam cocked his head to the side and watched as Louis finished getting ready to leave. “You know it’s dark out, right?” he pointed out.

“Oh, yeah, and we’ve already been recognised once. You wanna risk it again?”

Liam shrugged. “Fair enough.” His feigned nonchalance was grating, but Louis wasn’t about to take the bait.

Liam was all about getting in touch with your inner-feelings and constructive conflict and all that shite. Louis was perfectly happy relying on repression as a tried and true method. Well, maybe not happy, but he was still chugging along, wasn’t he?

Louis walked away to let Mark know they were leaving again. He was lying in bed on top of the covers, book in hand, and uttered only a grunt in acknowledgment. Good enough.

“You ready?” Louis asked Liam when he re-emerged, taking note of Liam’s change in attire with a critical expression. He was bundled up like someone anticipating a blizzard rather than the mild California winter air they would be stepping into.
“I get cold easily,” Liam said a bit defensively.

“Right,” Louis replied with a derisive snort. “Is that a second child thing, too?”

Liam didn’t deign to answer him, instead marching up to the door without waiting for Louis to go ahead. He opened the door an inch and then shut it immediately. He spun around to face Louis with wide eyes like he’d just seen a ghost on the front step.

“There’s paps,” he hissed. Worse than a ghost, then.

Louis barrelled forward and pushed him out of the way to peer through the peephole. Sure enough, there was a smattering of very obvious photographers out on the street just in front of the condo, positioned in various places along their stretch of road, some with giant telescopic lenses on their thousand-dollar cameras, others armed with just mobile phones—but no less of a threat because of it.

“Shit,” Louis muttered, pressing his forehead against the door.

Louis would have been happy for the excuse not to run into Anne at the hospital if it weren’t such a major inconvenience to have a bunch of photographers camped out on his porch. Maybe you couldn’t get snowed-in in sunny Los Angeles, but you could still find yourself just as trapped.
February 7, 2021
Los Angeles, California

It took Louis a few minutes to collect himself enough to form a coherent plan of action. It wasn’t the first time he’d had to deal with a mob-scene outside a hotel or flat. He knew the drill.

“Mark,” Louis called out. He elected to ignore Liam for the time being. Louis edged open the door to Mark’s room, meeting his inquisitive eyes from over the top of Mark’s book. “We have a bit of a problem outside.”

Mark jumped into action without hesitation, listening intently to Louis’s description of the issue before carefully peering through the blinds to make his own assessment. They had a number for property management, in case of emergencies. Louis was fairly confident that this qualified.

Louis perched nervously on the arm of the sectional as Mark paced back and forth between the kitchen and entryway, arguing insistently with whoever he’d managed to get a hold of on the phone, who seemed to be trying to blame Mark rather than their own subpar security.

Well, Louis supposed that was probably an unfair assessment. He didn’t actually know how the paps had managed to get through the gate in the first place.

It wasn’t until Mark was being switched over to speak to the complex’s security team themselves that Louis began to relax a bit. A solution was within reach, even if the damage had already been done.

“I feel like you should be having more of a reaction to all this,” Louis said to Liam, who had sat down with his phone in the kitchen after being the first to ascertain that there was a problem. He’d been calmly typing ever since.

“I’m texting Gemma,” Liam replied without looking up. “She’s staying in the same complex, right?”


Liam didn’t bother to address Louis’s negligence. “I figured it wouldn’t look great if someone snapped a photo of Harry’s family right after we were spotted. Someone might start to connect the
“Yeah. Smart thinking.” It should have been the first thing Louis’s mind had gone to after realising there was a paparazzi stake-out on the other side of his front door, to protect Harry’s best interests, but truthfully, he hadn’t been thinking about Harry at all.

It was a first. A disaster overshadowed by a more immediate and pressing crisis. An unwelcome distraction.

Suddenly, Louis found himself overcome by terror again. God, what was waiting for him on Twitter?

“Don’t,” Liam warned him as soon as he spotted Louis’s hand reaching into his pocket. Louis gave him a wounded-puppy look, but Liam just shook his head, brokering no sympathy. “Call your manager,” he instructed. “Don’t even think about opening Twitter till you’ve spoken to her.”

Louis didn’t want to admit it, but Liam was right. And Jaime was going to have Louis’s head for waking her up in the middle of the night because of this.

Jaime answered on the third ring, voice hoarse from sleep. “Please tell me you’ve forgotten about time zones and this phone call has just been an innocent mistake.”

“Sorry,” Louis choked out. “You talked to Sam earlier, right?”

“Yes. I’m handling it. You could’ve called me yourself, you know.”

“I didn’t want you to yell at me,” Louis admitted.

Jaime sighed. “And yet here you are. What do I have to fix now, Louis?”

Louis winced pre-emptively. “The paps might have found out where I’m staying.”

There was a loud clatter on Jaime’s end, like she’d dropped something. Or kicked it maybe. She offered no explanation for the noise. “Christ alive, Louis, are you trying to put me in an early grave? Don’t answer that. Fuck’s sake.”

“What should I do?” Louis asked in a small voice, curling in on himself a little. He avoided Liam’s eyes as he waited for Jaime to decide on the best course of action.

“Well, there’s no putting the genie back in the bottle. If you’ve made that much of a spectacle of yourself already, you’re going to have to address the fact that you’re in LA.”

Louis paused a moment. “What should I say?”

“You have family in LA, don’t you? Just be vague and ask people to respect your privacy. You’ve done this a million times before, Louis.”

But never like this, he thought to himself, though he didn’t dare voice it out loud. Jamie was a decent manager, but she’d not been involved in his career before Harry had cut Louis out of his life. She didn’t fully understand the weight of Louis’s circumstances, though he knew she had a vague idea that things between them hadn’t always been strictly professional. Still.

“I just don’t want to lie,” he confessed.

“And you won’t be as long as you don’t offer any details. Make the tweet, Louis. The longer you wait, the worse the speculation is going to get.”
She wasn’t saying anything Louis didn’t already know for himself, but it helped to have it come from an external source rather than his own mind, just so he couldn’t justify continuing to second guess himself over nothing.

“Oh, okay,” Louis finally said. He lowered his phone with Jaime still on the line, pulling up Twitter and putting down the first words that came to mind, only making a couple minor changes once he’d finished to clean it up a bit. Then he hit send before he could agonise over the damn thing. “How’s that?” Louis asked, already hitting refresh to see the initial reaction.

“Well, it won’t fix anything really, but it should make my job a hell of a lot easier,” Jaime replied. It was as close to approval as Louis was going to get. “How’s the situation with the paparazzi? Are the police involved?”

“No, not yet,” Louis replied as he looked up to meet Mark’s eyes. They exchanged a loaded glance; Mark made a gesture indicating that he was taking care of it. “I think the property manager is sending security down to clear them out.”

“All right,” Jaime said with a sigh. “I won’t tell you to hole up because I know you won’t listen, but just try to keep out of the spotlight from now on, if you can? It doesn’t look like anyone’s come close to guessing the real reason you’re in the States but if news about Styles gets out—”

“Yeah, I know,” Louis replied roughly. He had far too much experience trying to keep his baggage separate from Harry’s in the public eye. Louis knew that Jaime didn’t mean it the same way his previous managers had, but the sting remained nonetheless. “You should go back to bed,” Louis told her. “Mark’s handling everything else.”

“Stay out of trouble,” Jaime warned him instead of replying with a more civilised ‘goodnight’. Louis didn’t have a chance to respond before she hung up.

“Everything all right?” Liam asked as Louis lowered the phone.

Louis nodded, scrolling through his Twitter notifications quickly to gauge the response to his message.

*I’m sorry to anyone who feels that they were misled, but I am currently in LA dealing with a family emergency. I ask that you please respect my privacy at this time. Thank you for all the support.*

It was almost too clinical for comfort in Louis’s opinion, but there wasn’t much else he could say without making Harry’s situation public. He was still a little shocked they’d managed to keep things under wraps this long, but he supposed it helped matters that Harry had been a total recluse in recent months.

Most of the replies to his tweet were benign well-wishes, accompanied more often than not by tearful emojis. Most people seemed to know that Niall had already been in LA recording, so his presence at least wasn’t exactly a mystery, but there were more than a few fans demanding explanations for Liam being there with them. Louis considered answering them, but decided it was better to just leave it alone and let them draw their own conclusions.

Whatever insane stories the fans and gossip sites came up with would undoubtedly pale in comparison to the truth of the matter, and Louis was fine with that.

“You’re sure you’re okay?” Liam pressed.

Louis glanced up with a stony expression. “Of course I’m not ‘okay’, Liam, there’s an army of paparazzi outside. But what the hell am I supposed to do?”
Instead of answering, Liam turned to face Mark and called out to him despite the fact that he was still on the phone. Well, they could both hear elevator music clearly emanating from the speakers while Mark sat on hold, so Louis supposed it wasn’t that rude. “Do you need us for anything else?” Liam asked. He waited just long enough for Mark to shake his head no before launching himself off of the barstool toward Louis.

He grabbed Louis by the arm, hauling him off toward the master bedroom as if Louis were a naughty child and Liam was his father. Not exactly the kind of roleplay Louis was into.

“What’s your problem?” Louis demanded once they were inside.

Liam pushed him toward the bed. “Get comfortable,” he commanded.

Louis gaped at him. “Are you trying to sleep with me?” he asked, hardly believing that he was asking the question even as it was coming from his own lips.

Liam just rolled his eyes and gave him another nudge toward the bed. “Come on, up,” he urged. “I don’t need you working yourself up into a panic attack on my watch.”

“I have meds for that,” Louis pointed out.

“And I’d rather you only take them if you absolutely have to,” Liam countered. “Now get on the bed.”

Louis was tempted to protest purely out of spite, but he was exhausted now that the surge of adrenaline had waned. He climbed up primly onto the bed, kicking off his shoes and socks and—after a second’s deliberation—throwing his trousers into the corner as well. Then he burrowed into the duvet, getting comfortable, as Liam had directed.

Despite every sign leading to Liam instigating a puppy pile, like they’d done back in the band when all of them were overcome by the stress of non-stop touring and just needed a minute to relax, Louis was still a bit surprised when Liam climbed into bed behind him and folded his body around Louis’s, breathing gently against the back of his neck.

It was the kind of thing two men (even if they were best mates) didn’t do together, something that had taken Louis some time to come around to when Harry and Liam had first started roping the lads into cuddling with them in a big hotel bed. It always felt too intimate, even though Louis knew that Liam didn’t see that way. He was just naturally touchy, like Harry was, but the touches didn’t mean the same thing.

Liam may have been the baby of his own family, and Louis’s junior by a couple years, but wrapped together like this, Louis could almost imagine what it might have been like to have an older brother, to not have every bit of responsibility constantly weighing him down.

Louis let his eyes drift closed as Liam gently traced patterns along his tattoos, lulling Louis carefully into the space between consciousness and sleep. “Do you want to listen to another song?” Liam asked softly.

Louis grunted affirmatively, without opening his eyes. “What’s the date on the twenty-third track?”

“Where’s your phone?” Liam asked him.

“Nightstand.” Louis shifted onto his stomach to allow Liam to lean over him, and then stayed there, letting Liam rub his back instead.
“Erm…thirteenth of March, I think?” Liam said haltingly as he settled back into bed with Louis’s phone in his hand. “2012. Isn’t that—?”

Louis hummed in agreement before Liam could even finish the thought. “You can play it,” he said sleepily. There was almost something delightfully ironic about Liam asking to play this particular track, but at least the memory itself was more sweet than bitter.

March 13, 2012
New York City, New York

The four of them were jammed into the back of a cab: Harry half in Louis’s lap in the middle, with Liam and Niall pressed up against the doors. There was nothing comfortable about it. The inside of the cab was hot, stuffy, and Harry’s arse was all bones digging into the meat of Louis’s thigh.

He didn’t want the cab ride to ever end.

They were on their way to some pizza place Niall had gotten overly excited about and demanded they visit. Louis didn’t really give a damn one way or the other, so he’d agreed easily after taking note of Harry’s eagerness to go along with Niall’s plans. They’d outvoted Liam, who was playing the typical spoilsport role and had adamantly refused to stray too far from the hotel on their day off.

Liam was pouting in the back of the cab now, his elbow pressed up into Louis’s armpit with his arms folded over his chest as if to remind all of them just how cross he really was. Louis suspected he’d mellow out once they got a bit of food in him, especially if the pizza was as good as Niall’s friend had promised.

Louis was making it a point to ignore him. Attention would only make the sulking worse, and besides, Louis was occupied with Harry anyway. More specifically, he was occupied with doodling tiny Ls onto Harry’s hand and arm, and then smudging them out again with his thumb as soon as he finished. Niall and Liam had yet to catch on and thought it was just Louis trying to be annoying—which was more or less how it had started, but Harry had long since stopped being annoyed by the action.

“This is worse than traffic in London,” Niall mused with a look of utter devastation as he stared out at the road ahead of them, completely packed with cars.

Louis felt bad for him. He knew Niall didn’t like small spaces, and New York City was practically nothing but. “We could get out and walk,” he suggested, even though it was ridiculous. They were already miles from the hotel.

Liam made a disgruntled noise, pulling Louis’s eyes over to him despite his earlier convictions. “I told you this was a bad idea,” he grumbled, souring Louis’s good mood in an instant.

“What do you always have to do that?” Louis demanded. It was easy to let his anger get the best of him, even with Harry’s soft hands curling tighter around his wrist.

“What?” Liam shot back.

“Guys…” Harry interjected softly, trying to stall the argument before it could escalate, but not even
Louis was paying attention to him anymore.

“Act like such a prick!” Louis shouted, causing Harry’s grip around his wrist to squeeze until Louis couldn’t feel his fingers. “Ow! What the hell, Haz?”

“Stop fighting,” Harry scolded with a pointed glance toward Niall, whose entire face had gone beet-red and was perspiring heavily as he leaned against the car window.

“Shit, Nialler, you all right, mate?” Louis asked, snaking his head around Harry to get a better look at the younger boy.

“What’s wrong with Niall?” Liam asked from the other side of the cab, unable to see what was going on with Harry and Louis both blocking his view.

Louis ignored him. “Niall? You still with us?”

Niall managed the tiniest of nods, and then Harry was shoving Louis out of the way without ceremony and taking Niall’s hands in his instead. “Niall, just try to breathe with me, okay?” he said earnestly. “We can’t get out of the car yet.”

“Can we roll down the windows?” Niall gasped.

Louis and Liam shared an uneasy look. They didn’t want to risk rolling the windows down and having someone recognise them, especially after their very public Today Show appearance the day before, but Louis didn’t want Niall to suffocate or have a heart attack either.

“Can you crack the windows?” he said, leaning forward to address the cabbie directly. “Just a tad,” he clarified.

The cabbie had the audacity to look annoyed with him for asking but obliged by rolling down the windows just a few centimetres to let in a bit of the chill pre-spring air. Niall pressed his face into the gap and started to inhale greedily, but from the looks of his flushed cheeks and the panicked expression on Harry’s face, it didn’t seem to be helping much.

“Niall,” Harry said softly. “Niall, look at me.” It was amazing to watch how easy it was for him to pull Niall out of whatever funk he’d found himself in enough for Harry to connect their eyes and press their foreheads together in the back of the cab. “Just breathe with me, okay?”

Together they sounded like two pregnant women about to give birth, but Louis wasn’t about to complain if it calmed Niall down enough that they could make it somewhere safe enough for him to get out and walk around.

“Can you take us back to the hotel?” Louis asked suddenly. They could always get pizza delivered, even if it didn’t live up to the standards Niall had set for them with his promises of the best pizza in all of New York City.

The cabbie glared at him from the rear-view mirror. “Seriously?”

“My friend’s clearly not feeling well,” Louis snapped. “So yes, seriously.”

The cabbie mumbled something under his breath but plugged in new directions into his GPS, alleviating just a little bit of Louis’s mounting stress. He glanced back and Harry and Niall, feeling utterly helpless to do anything to fix the situation, but Harry seemed to be managing at least. He staunchly avoided looking at Liam, still.
But then Liam’s phone started to ring a few seconds into Harry’s overexaggerated breathing exercises, drawing Louis’s reluctant attention.

“Who is it?” Louis whispered, unable to tamp down his curiosity, but Liam didn’t answer him.

“Hello? Yeah. Yeah, we’re together. Well, Zayn’s back at the hotel, but—oh my god. Really? You’re joking. Oh my god.” Liam looked genuinely stunned, but Louis couldn’t tell if the news he’d gotten was good or bad. He just seemed…shocked.

Louis tapped Harry’s thigh in an effort to get his attention as the phone call seemed to wind down. Harry looked away from Niall questioningly, and then seemed to notice Liam’s occupation for the first time, his mouth forming into a little ‘O’ of realisation.

“Lads…” Liam said as he slowly lowered the phone from his ear. His face gave away nothing even as he said the words out loud. “We hit number one. We’re number one in the US.”

It took a few seconds for Louis’s brain to catch up with what Liam said, and then he was cheering without even realising why, fist thrust up in the air and colliding with the roof of the cab in his excitement.

He grabbed Harry’s face in the next second, practically bashing their foreheads together. It was only at the very last second that he remembered why kissing Harry in the back of a New York cab, squished between their bandmates, was a monumentally bad idea. But when he glanced all around in the seconds after letting Harry go and caught Liam’s suspicious frown, Louis realised that the damage may have already been done.

Louis turned away quickly, busying himself with checking on Niall and trying unsuccessfully to hide the pink flush blossoming across his face. He could feel Liam’s piercing stare cutting right through the haze of excitement filling the cab in the aftermath of their good news.

First Zayn, now Liam. How much longer could he and Harry keep it a secret?
Louis came entrenched in a dizzy fog, aware at the edges of his mind of vague dreams he couldn’t quite latch onto that only drifted further away the closer he swam toward consciousness. Liam was flat on his back on the mattress right next to him, snoring loudly with his mouth wide open. Louis watched him a moment, and then shoved at him roughly.

Liam woke up with a start, sputtering as he shot straight up in bed. “What?” he demanded, blinking frantically at Louis, who couldn’t help but laugh at his bewildered expression. “Oh, fuck off,” Liam grumbled after realising there was no fire after all and Louis was just being an arsehole. “What time’s it?”

Louis dug through the mess of blankets surrounding them to find his phone. “Nearly seven,” he reported back.

Liam groaned and slumped back into the pile of pillows. “You couldn’t have waited another hour?” he whined.

“I thought you wanted to see Harry.”

Liam turned his head, glaring at Louis through one eye. “I do.”

“Then we have things we have to get sorted first,” Louis told him. He bounced out of bed with an unexpected spring in his step.

It was easier to focus, Louis found, when he had a concrete goal in mind. Getting to Cedars-Sinai was his goal for the day, and now it required careful work to make sure they weren’t tailed.

Louis dressed quickly and then left Liam behind in the master bedroom while he went to rouse Mark, who happened to already be awake when Louis checked in on him. After, Louis set about getting a few bowls of cereal together—cereal was about the only thing Louis preferred in America to home—and was just pulling the milk out of the fridge when Liam emerged from the bedroom to join them.

“So the paps are hanging about just outside the complex,” Louis informed Liam as he sat down
and yawned over his food. “There’s no real way to avoid them when we leave, unfortunately, so it’s just a matter of making sure they don’t follow us to the hospital.”

Liam yawned again. “How did they even know to follow Mark in?”

Louis exchanged an uncertain look with Mark, who shrugged. “Plates?” Louis offered. “Someone must’ve gotten pics of the rental at the café and posted them.”

“I guess we’d best switch cars then.”

Mark had his phone out and ready to go before Liam had even finished his sentence. But even with Mark’s diligence, the process of trading in the rental was no easy matter. They had to negotiate heavily for a vastly different model, something with heavy enough tint that Louis and Liam couldn’t be photographed through the back windows. And then there was the wait. It was nearly two hours before the courier arrived to make the switch, and by the time he finally got there, Louis had found himself on edge again.

“You sure you’re still up for going?” Liam asked on their way out to the new car.

“I’ll be fine once we’re out of here,” Louis reassured him, though he wasn’t quite sure how much truth there was to it.

Liam put a hand on his shoulder while they waited for the gate to open, but it did nothing to curb the tension radiating through Louis’s muscles as they slowly rolled past a mob of paparazzi waiting out on the street with cameras in hand. He didn’t relax again until they were out of sight, without having taken a single photo of the bright red SUV. Their ruse had worked for now.

The relief was palpable enough that Louis didn’t even feel the familiar uptick in blood pressure that usually accompanied his entrance into the Cedars-Sinai car park. Liam didn’t seem wholly convinced that Louis was all right though, judging by the way he trailed Louis closely as they walked through the front doors together while Mark looked for a suitable parking space in which to leave the car, his hand hovering over the small of Louis’s back all the while.

“I’m fine,” Louis insisted, starting to get a little irritated with Liam’s fretting. He appreciated the concern, truly, but it was only making him more anxious to have Liam staring at him like he was a bomb about to go off. “Look, why don’t you head up without me and I’ll grab us some coffee?”

“Are you sure?” Liam asked, brows drawn tightly together in a deep—unwarranted—frown.

“Yes, Liam,” Louis replied, infusing his voice with an audible note of exasperation. “I’m sure.” He pushed Liam toward the lifts and made a beeline for the hospital Starbucks before Liam had a chance to argue with him.

The counter wasn’t even open by the time Louis made it over to the steadily growing queue, but the employees were already bustling around behind the scenes, leading Louis to believe it wouldn’t be too much longer. Louis took his place in the queue behind a young woman with a baby slung over her shoulder. She looked exhausted, but the baby was bright-eyed and curious, staring back at Louis without blinking as he smiled instinctively back and tried to make faces to get the child to laugh.

It was a futile effort, one he gave up on as soon as the woman turned to give him an odd look. Louis tried not to be offended. She couldn’t know that he’d grown up with six younger siblings and had a child of his own. To her, he was just some guy with overgrown stubble acting like a lunatic in the queue for coffee. Louis backed off with an apologetic smile, hoping they could leave it at
But as he took a step back, Louis suddenly felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle, like someone had just walked over his grave. It was a few minutes before Louis identified the source of his unease: a heavily bearded man sitting in the far corner of the lounge at one of the café tables staring directly at him before quickly glancing away as soon as Louis’s eyes swivelled around to get a good look.

Louis chanced a few more seconds of quick examination before turning his head back toward the counter, where he could see one of the baristas telling the woman at the very front that it would still be a few more minutes before they were ready to take her order.

The man didn’t strike him as a fan. Louis knew full-well there were plenty of different types of people who listened to his music besides the overwhelming demographic of women in their early twenties, but after a decade, he had a sense for just that kind of thing. There had been something like recognition in the man’s face, but not the right kind.

Louis felt goose bumps spreading up his arms. He was just paranoid, he tried to tell himself, because of the situation with the paps at the condo. They hadn’t been followed to the hospital. He was sure of that much.

But he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong.

Louis craned his head to check the progress of the queue again. It hadn’t moved a centimetre since he’d hopped in, and it didn’t seem like it would make much progress in the next few minutes. Louis pulled out his phone, wondering if he had time to listen to another song from Harry’s playlist while he waited, but nearly dropped it once he caught sight of the date.

That one…that one would definitely have to wait.

Louis was quick to notice that the man sitting in the corner of the lounge was still there when he finally made it through the queue and ordered coffee for himself and Liam. He caught the man watching him again as he stood off to the side, waiting for his name to be called (his middle name) so he could collect his order. This time the man didn’t look away, instead standing as if Louis was an old friend he’d just spotted from across the way.

Louis didn’t like that one bit.

He snatched his drink tray as soon as it hit the counter, before the barista could even open his mouth, and darted away from the lounge as fast as he could manage without it looking overly suspicious.

There was a crowd of people already gathered around the lifts. Louis glanced over his shoulder, spotted the bearded man headed in his direction, and decided not to risk being cornered while waiting for the next lift to arrive—or worse, being trapped inside an enclosed space with him. Louis hadn’t decided if he was a deranged lunatic or a pap, but it really didn’t matter; they basically amounted to the same thing.

Louis took the stairs instead, jogging up all three flights at a brisk pace. His lungs were on fire when he emerged on the third floor only to find that somehow the bearded man from downstairs had beaten him up there and was currently standing in the middle of the corridor, blocking Louis’s path to Harry’s room.

Louis couldn’t even fathom how the man had figured out his intended destination. If it was a guess,
it must have been a damn good one. Louis’s only saving grace was that when he stepped out of the stairwell, the man was looking the other direction, and Louis took the opportunity to sprint for the toilets just a few yards away.

Louis ducked inside and rudely pushed past the man trying to leave before locking himself inside of a cubicle with shaking hands. He decided to try and wait his stalker out, hoping that if the man couldn’t find Louis on the third floor, he would just give up and try somewhere else. It was the only thing Louis could think to do short of alerting hospital security, which would only draw more attention to his presence at Cedars-Sinai in the first place.

Louis listened carefully for the door to make sure he hadn’t been followed into the loo as well, and then when he was certain it was safe enough to do so, he sat down on the toilet and pulled out his phone to listen to the song he’d decided to rain-check earlier. A hospital toilet wasn’t exactly the most ideal setting, but Louis rationalised that it was private enough that he wouldn’t risk embarrassment thinking about Harry in a less than platonic manner.

Louis was a bit surprised and delighted when he pressed play to find a bit more production had gone into this one. For the most part, Harry had stuck to piano or acoustic guitar for the previous tracks, but this one started right off with a bassline that made Louis close his eyes and tap his foot in time.

March 24, 2012
Dallas, Texas

“This is the worst idea you’ve ever had.”

“Yeah,” Louis breathed out against the skin below Harry’s collarbone, which was usually just out of sight with his shirt on.

But Harry’s shirt wasn’t on. It was lying crumpled in the sink behind them, and Louis had no intention of letting Harry pick it back up again until they were forced out of the loo by one of their handlers.

Louis wasn’t worried about being caught by their handlers anymore, which was part of the reason he was being so reckless. They’d struck up an unspoken agreement of sorts after being spotted sneaking out of one of the hotel conference rooms together, during one of the stops where they hadn’t been roomed together. The handlers knew now to look the other way so long as Louis and Harry’s behaviour didn’t jeopardise their public image.

The other reason Louis had thrown caution and all sense to the wind was purely because he hadn’t had a spare second to get off in the last two weeks—at least not the way he preferred to: unhurried and drawn out. That was a far cry from the quick wanks he’d managed a few times in the shower, when he wasn’t listening to one of the lads pounding on the door demanding that he hurry up so they could have their turn.

Louis was only vaguely aware of how easy it would be to come in his pants now, with his hips pressed up against Harry’s, one thigh keeping Harry’s knees spread apart. But he was still conscious enough of the consequences to know that he shouldn’t let himself come, that if he did it would be one step closer to the event horizon they were steadily hurtling towards.
Louis wasn’t ready. But Harry hadn’t gotten the same memo.

He gasped loudly in Louis’s ear without any warning, his hips jerking upward twice before all the life went out of him entirely. He hung loosely from Louis with his arms looped around the older boy’s neck, seemingly the only thing keeping him upright.

“Haz, you all right?” Louis asked, a bit concerned by the way Harry had suddenly spaced out on him. He cupped Harry’s cheeks gently, pressing his thumb into the divot where he knew Harry’s skin would dimple if he smiled.

Harry blinked up at him lazily and then suddenly lurched out of Louis’s hold as if a switch had been flipped. He blanched, clutching his hands to his crotch—and that’s when it finally hit Louis what had happened.

“Oh,” Louis said dully, his brain working overtime to process the fact that Harry had come from just kissing and a bit of rubbing off, far before Louis had expected to ever get there himself.

“What do I do?” Harry whispered, looking absolutely mortified.

Louis supposed he would have felt the same in Harry’s situation, but on the other side of it, he just felt inordinately pleased that he’d managed to make Harry come, even though the remainder of his brain was fighting against the cognitive dissonance telling him he was wrong for ever putting his hands on Harry in the first place.

“Trousers off,” he urged, turning round to gather up one of the small handtowels and running it under cool water in the sink while Harry shimmied out of his jeans.

Louis didn’t look away when Harry stripped out of his boxers, but he couldn’t help but choke a little on his own saliva as he handed Harry the damp towel—seeing Harry naked when he was soft and clean was one thing; staring at his still chubbed-up cock, slick with his own come was wholly another. Louis’s own trousers suddenly felt marginally tighter, and he forced himself to focus on a crack in the tile under his feet as Harry cleaned himself up.

“Bin your boxers,” Louis suggested. Hopefully the staff wouldn’t find them, but if they did, they’d have no way of knowing they belonged to Harry at least. It was better than trying to carry them around all throughout the signing. Louis already knew they didn’t have time to duck back up to Harry’s hotel room to drop them off before leaving.

Harry nodded, crumpling up his shorts and tossing them into the bin with a slightly forlorn look.

“Comfortable?” Louis asked as Harry pulled his trousers back on and carefully zipped up the fly over his softening cock. It certainly didn’t look it.

Harry shrugged. “It’s a bit weird,” he admitted, giving his hips an experimental shimmy.

Louis leaned forward to kiss him before he could say anything else, but only got as far as a simple press of lips on lips before Harry was pulling away with a sharp gasp.

“Shit,” Harry hissed as he ran the tip of his tongue over his raw bottom lip.

Louis’s eyes followed the movement hungrily. Harry may have gotten off, but Louis was still sporting a semi in his trousers. With every passing second that Harry remained in the loo with him, Louis was losing the opportunity to take care of it on his own before they had to leave for the signing. Louis knew he needed to tell him to go, even though every instinct was telling him otherwise.
But he didn’t have the chance. There was a knock against the door, sending a sharp spike of anxiety down his spine at the sound. Louis had to take a second to reassure himself that it was fine, that it was just their handlers come to collect them, before he could bring himself to open the door.

It wasn’t one of their handlers standing on the other side. It was Liam.

He had the gall to not even look surprised by the sight that lay before him, an irritated scowl plastered across his face. “Well. Guess I can add this to the list of things I’ve been right about.”

Louis had the good sense to drag him inside and close the door before anyone else could see what was happening inside the loo. There was no denying what had happened but hopefully he could talk some sense into Liam, make sure he didn’t say anything to the others, or god forbid—management.

Louis barely had a chance to open his mouth, however, before Liam started laying into him.

“What the hell were you thinking, Louis? He looks—”

Wrecked, Louis thought to himself as he glanced at Harry again and took in all of him: the cherry-red lips, glassy eyes, cheeks flushed petal-pink. Harry looked thoroughly debauched, and Liam was right. There was little that could be done to mask the state of him now.

Harry didn’t seem to know how to react, his wide doe-eyes flicking between Liam and Louis rapidly, as if unsure of who he should be focusing on. Louis knew he couldn’t table a discussion with Liam forever, but Liam seemed determined to have a row, and Louis didn’t want to have it with Harry stood between them. Besides, they didn’t have time for a shouting match.

“Let’s just get to the signing,” Louis suggested, already grabbing hold of Harry’s elbow and guiding him toward the door. “I assume that’s why you were looking for us, yeah?”

Liam didn’t reply, nor did his disapproving scowl soften. Louis knew that he’d be in for it the next time Liam got him alone, or when Modest found out what they’d done, or if the fans were savvy enough to put two and two together and solve the mystery of Harry’s frazzled appearance.

Louis knew he couldn’t keep skirting around the issue of sex with Harry either, and that every time they did this together, a confrontation loomed every closer. Eventually they’d reach their boiling point. Maybe Harry already had, and the next time he’d demand more from Louis, even though Louis wasn’t yet sure if he could give him anything else.

And still, Louis couldn’t bring himself to regret it all that much.

February 8, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis wasn’t sure at which point his brain had started to think that having a wank in a hospital toilet was a good idea, but by the time the song was over, Louis had his trousers shoved down around his thighs and a hand already on his dick.

He was quick about it. Remembering Harry the way he’d looked that day wasn’t something he could forget easily, even if he hadn’t been able to dig up video evidence of the aftermath years
later. Louis may have been pushing thirty, but he was still liable to get worked up over a thoroughly pornographic image—and the memory of Harry coming in his pants with Louis’s mouth on his neck definitely fit the bill.

By the time he finished, Louis had nearly managed to convince himself that he was better off for having taken care of it with a wank rather than risk waltzing back into Harry’s room with a semi bulging in his trousers. Liam would never let him live it down.

But Louis couldn’t fully rid himself of the uneasy prick of guilt lingering under his skin as he cleaned himself up and left the toilets, only growing stronger as he walked back to the lifts with their (now cold) coffees in hand.
Chapter 25

February 8, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis was relieved to find that the man who was apparently stalking him had gone by the time he emerged from the toilets, but he wasn’t yet sure if he wanted to include that detail in his explanation for why it had taken him so long to get a couple cups of coffee. Louis was a bit worried that if he said anything, Liam was liable to place them both on house arrest just to be safe.

He felt like the protagonist of a horror flick as he cautiously made his way through the corridor to Harry’s room, his head on a swivel as he searched for his would-be stalker. He didn’t see Anne until it was too late.

“Fuck, sorry,” Louis exclaimed after almost literally bumping into her just outside the door. He knew his eyes were still wide and a little panicked, and he wasn’t sure anymore if the cause was his stalker or the woman staring impassively back at him without saying a word.

The last thing in the world he expected from Anne was to be unexpectedly pulled into her arms for a tight embrace. Louis returned it hesitantly, savouring the moment for the few brief seconds it lasted before she let him go. He stepped away quickly, not wanting to overstay his welcome, and stared back at her in confusion.

“I don’t want to sound ungrateful,” Louis ventured, “but…why?”

It took her a while to come up with the words. “I’ve known you for years, Louis,” Anne said, voice strong and unwavering. “I know you don’t ask for the things you need because you don’t want to be a burden. But it isn’t fair—” She stopped, blinking furiously at Louis without averting her eyes. “It isn’t fair that you expected things from my son that he couldn’t give you. And I don’t forgive you for that.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” Louis replied hoarsely.

Anne nodded. “But even if I can’t put that aside…’ she continued, this time speaking only just louder than a whisper. “you’re the only thing I have left of Harry to hold onto.” She moved into his space again, this time slowly winding her arms around his waist, as if to give Louis time to escape if he wanted to.

Louis didn’t want to. He’d missed Anne, missed feeling like he had a second mum waiting there for
him if he needed her, missed her worse now that his own mother was gone. Louis squeezed his
eyes shut tight as he held her and told himself not to cry, because he knew once he started he
wouldn’t be able to stop. Liam was still waiting for him inside.

Louis gave a polite little cough after a minute of being held, all too aware of the coffee tray still
clutched in his right hand, though it had been so long now that there was no hope of saving their
drinks even if Anne did let go.

Anne finally unwound herself and pulled away far enough for Louis to see that she was crying.
“Come on, then,” Louis urged, using his free hand to guide her toward the door.

Liam only had a second in which to stare at Louis in annoyance as he came through the door before
his eyes dropped to Anne and his face morphed into one of surprise, tinged with just a little bit of
fear. Louis knew it had been a while since Liam had spoken to Anne as well, even though there
were no hard feelings between them like there’d been with Louis.

“Liam,” Anne said, sniffing. “Good to see you again.”

Liam nodded uncertainly. “Shame it’s not under better circumstances,” he replied in a soft tone.

Louis handed Liam his coffee. He winced sympathetically as the Liam took a sip and immediately
blanched.

“Sorry,” Louis offered. “Got held up.” He didn’t elaborate, willing to allow Liam to believe that
Anne was the reason for his delay rather than the much more insidious truth of the matter,
something he definitely wasn’t about to bring up with Anne still in the room.

“Right, right,” Liam murmured. “Well, it’ll have to do, then.”

Louis was surprised when Anne suddenly tugged at his hand, her fingers clinging tightly to his
lifeline as she strayed toward Harry’s bed. This wasn’t her first time seeing Harry, but she was
shaking like a leaf as she stepped up to his bedside and put a gentle hand down against his gaunt
cheek.

“I want to be here for him,” Anne confessed suddenly, causing Louis’s hand to tighten
involuntarily around hers in response. “It just hurts so much seeing him like this, knowing there’s
nothing I can do about it.”

Louis shut his eyes tightly. He knew whatever pain he felt over Harry must pale in comparison to
what his mother was feeling. Louis couldn’t even comprehend how she was still standing. But
Anne had always been one of the strongest people Louis knew. Harry had gotten that from her.

And maybe Louis had always taken Harry’s strength for granted.

Anne finally let go of Louis’s hand once she moved to sit down next to Harry, leaving Louis to
assume that his comfort was no longer needed. But then Anne patted the cushion of the chair next
to her pointedly, waiting until Louis had sat down before turning to Liam to make conversation.

Louis cautiously placed his hand on the armrest between them while Anne and Liam chatted and
was surprised yet again when Anne casually placed her hand over his without even looking at
Louis in the process.

It felt strange that Anne could so easily go back to the way things had been before even while
acknowledging that some part of her still blamed Louis for what had happened. Or maybe it wasn’t
easy; it only seemed that way to Louis because Anne always made everything look easy, another
trait she’d passed down to Harry.

Whatever the reason, Louis couldn’t deny that it helped warm some small part of him that had been frozen over years before. Anne had been right about Louis’s stubbornness. No matter how bad things got, he couldn’t bring himself to ask for the things he needed, and what he needed right now was a mother, a brother. Anne and Liam could be that for him, could see what Louis needed without having to be told. That’s the way a family was meant to be.

Louis had missed that part of it. He’d only grown further from his siblings since his mother passed, not wanting to muck up their lives any more than he’d already had, and by that point he’d already lost the band, Liam had nearly stopped speaking to him altogether, and Harry’s family—ever a surrogate to Louis in the past—had been thrust out of reach by Harry himself after Briana had gotten pregnant.

So if this was the one small piece of the past Louis was allowed to have, then he would take it without question.

By the time Liam’s phone rang in the middle of their conversation and pulled him out of the room unexpectedly, Louis’s head had somehow drifted onto Anne’s shoulder, her hand in his hair, a quiet silence permeating the air around them. Louis slowed his breathing till it was barely noticeable at all, some nonsensical part of him worried that if he alerted Anne to his presence she’d realise he’d been there all along and force him to leave.

But Louis wasn’t the one to leave in the end. “Off to the loo,” Anne said after a few minutes had passed, gently nudging Louis out of the way so she could stand up. Louis couldn’t help but wonder if she was lying just to get away from him. He stared at her forlornly as she slipped out of the room after stopping just long enough to give Harry a quick kiss on the forehead first.

It was only mere seconds into her absence that Louis felt the tendrils of want creeping under his skin, prompting him to pull his phone and earbuds out to listen to another song. He stared down at the date with a wry smile, but hit play quickly, not wanting to waste his opportunity to listen undisturbed before either Liam or Anne came back.

April 23, 2012

Wellington, New Zealand

In Louis’s defence, they had both been well on their way to drunk before it happened. If anything, the blame could be traced back to Liam for dragging them to that bar in the first place. Whatever the cause, it certainly hadn’t been *Louis’s* fault.

Louis was quite a bit drunker than Harry, but that was to be expected. He’d been attempting to keep up with Niall, finally giving up after nearly half a dozen shots when he’d decided he wanted to be conscious when they got back to the hotel. Louis had a high tolerance, but he knew to quit when he was ahead.

Despite his relative sobriety, a couple mixed drinks had been enough for Harry to throw his reservations to the wind and drape himself all over Louis like it was 2010 again and Modest was just a looming grey shadow on the horizon.

Louis wasn’t about to complain, but he knew Liam would, so as much as he hated to minimize any
contact between himself and Harry, he turned his back toward him at the bar and gazed out at the street instead, hoping Harry would take the hint. If anything, the lack of attention only made Harry more determined to get a reaction out of Louis.

Louis jolted in surprise at the first sneaky swipe of Harry’s tongue just under his ear, turning back around again just in time for Harry to peck him on the lips. Louis jerked his head away quickly, looking back over at Liam and Niall, but it didn’t seem as if either had noticed. No one else in the bar was paying much attention to them either, too enraptured in whatever sporting event was playing on the overhead television displays.

A cheer went up just as Louis ducked back in for another kiss, but it was Harry who pulled away this time, wrenching himself away from Louis altogether and darting over to Niall instead. Louis turned sluggishly and took a step forward, as if to follow him, but then Liam was standing in front of Louis like a impassable brick wall.

“Someone’s filming us,” Liam hissed, moving to the side in a poor attempt at shielding Louis from the view of the windows. Or blocking him, rather, from getting to Harry, who seemed halfway across the world now that he was no longer within touching distance of Louis.

Still, Louis wasn’t so pissed that Liam’s words didn’t register in his brain as a legitimate warning. He slowly turned his head toward the wall of glass to see a gaggle of teenage girls gathered on the opposite side of the road, phones out and pointed toward them.

“Shit,” Louis muttered dully once his brain finally caught up to his eyes.

“Give me your phone,” Liam commanded, already reaching over to fish it out of Louis’s pocket.

“Why?” Louis asked, though he didn’t make any attempt to stop Liam.

“I’m gonna email Modest, and you’re too drunk to even spell your own name.” Liam glanced up sharply at Louis with his finger already hovering over the screen of Louis’s phone. “I assume you want them to take care of this, right?”

Louis nodded, wondering why it felt suddenly like giant cavernous hole had opened up inside him.

“There,” Liam said as he handed Louis’s phone back. “I don’t know if they can really fix it now, but it’s better than doing nothing.”

Louis nodded, still feeling hollow and raw around the edges. He flinched when Liam clapped a hand on his shoulder and shoved another drink into his hand.

“Try to enjoy yourself without making any more headlines, yeah?” Liam suggested, turning away finally to laugh at something Niall had just said and leaving Louis alone with his thoughts for the rest of the night.

Harry hopped in the shower as soon as they returned to their hotel around two in the morning, leaving Louis sat on the edge of one of their beds with his phone in his hand, wondering how long it would be before Modest saw the email Liam had sent. Louis was already dreading the phone call he knew was coming. He almost wished he’d told Liam to leave it altogether.

But if it had gotten out before management could nip it in the bud…. Well, that wasn’t a scenario Louis much liked either.

When Harry stepped out, still all damp and pink despite being swaddled in one of the hotel’s oversized bath towels, nothing had changed. But Louis’s dark mood didn’t seem to perturb Harry
one bit as he skipped over to Louis and threw himself in his lap. Harry blinked up at him with a sleepy smile, his wet hair rapidly soaking into Louis’s trousers.

Louis leaned over to procure some boxer-shorts from his own travel bag with a sigh and placed them in Harry’s hands. “Put ‘em on,” he insisted, tugging away the towel as Harry leaned down to pull the shorts up over his Bambi-legs and doing his best to scrub the moisture out of Harry’s hair in the process. Once Louis was satisfied that it was dry enough, he carefully combed his fingers through the curls, gently picking apart the natural tangles in Harry’s hair while the younger boy emitted soft murmurs of pleasure.

“I know you’re worried,” Harry said finally, causing Louis’s fingers to pause in their ministrations. He cocked his head a bit to give Louis an encouraging smile. “It’ll all work out, I promise.”

Louis slowly pulled his hands out of Harry’s hair. He felt a sickening lurch of realisation in his gut as he stared at Harry’s blissfully innocent face. Harry didn’t know that Liam and Louis had conspired already to have management stop the rumours before they could spiral out of control. Harry thought that their kiss was bound to make the front page of the Sun by morning, and some part of Louis was still afraid that he might be right.

“You don’t seem worried,” Louis ventured. “Modest could still come after us over the morality clause,” he pointed out. That was really the sticking point. Or at least the one Louis could still safely cling to.

Harry shrugged. “Let ‘em,” he said, with all the bravado of a teenager who’d never been on the receiving end of a multi-million-pound lawsuit.

Louis wished he had the same confidence.

“Once it’s over, we won’t have to hide anymore,” Harry continued, each word sending a searing bolt of white-hot guilt into Louis’s heart. “That’s worth more than the money to me.”

“And the fans?” Louis said softly. It wasn’t that he doubted Harry had put enough thought into this so much as he didn’t think Harry had the capacity to really see the big picture yet.

“The ones who matter’ll stand by us anyhow,” Harry replied simply, with a quick shrug.

Louis forced a smile. “Okay,” he replied.

Louis knew that he should tell Harry right then about the email, before the truth inevitably came out some other way and soured things between them, but he couldn’t bring himself to open his mouth and shatter Harry’s happy illusion that things were going to work out just fine in the end.

Maybe Harry was right anyhow, Louis told himself, and he leaned forward to kiss Harry again, long and lazy now that they were away from prying eyes. Maybe Modest wouldn’t be able to keep a lid on the truth any longer and for better or worse, they’d have to learn to live their lives out in the open.

February 8, 2021

Los Angeles, California
Louis stared contemplatively at Harry’s vacant features as the song ended, chewing at the skin just above his thumbnail.

Including Wellington was an odd choice on Harry’s part. Louis couldn’t help but feel like there was something more to it than there had been with most of the other songs, that in this case, the memory was less important than the meaning behind it. But Louis couldn’t for the life of him figure out what that was.

Louis had never really decided which outcome he was hoping for when he’d received the phone call letting him know that PR was taking care of buying the rights to any footage they could get their hands on, as well as issuing NDAs and orchestrating a full tabloid blackout of anything to do with the incident. Louis’s ‘reputation’, as they’d put it, would remain intact. He hadn’t felt any better after the matter had been settled. He hadn’t felt much of anything, really.

Louis never learned when exactly Harry had found out about Louis’s involvement in suppressing the Wellington videos, but at some point, he had found out. It was a topic of choice during their more vicious arguments.

Louis had always stuck to his guns when that happened, arguing that he’d done what he thought was best at the time to protect them both. It was true that they couldn’t have afforded the lawsuit, that the scandal would have jeopardised both their careers, that there was every possibility that the year would have ended with both of them back in their parents’ houses without a penny to their name.

But Louis knew—and Harry most likely guessed—that that hadn’t been the reason he’d done it. That Louis’s reasons had been purely selfish. That he’d been afraid. Louis had always been afraid. He was still terrified now.

It was the reason he’d clung to Eleanor even when he couldn’t stand the sight of her anymore because of what she represented. It was the reason he’d gone back to her like a frightened child in need of his security blanket, the reason he’d refused time and time again to let Harry drag them out of the shadows, the reason Harry had ultimately walked away.

It was the reason why, even now, Louis was staring longingly at Harry from centimetres away as if they were miles instead, unable to so much as reach out and touch Harry’s hand.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

One of the first few fics I read was Once Upon a Dream by objectlesson, and I actually wrote a little bit of this flashback in homage to that fic before I ever even met her because the fic was that good. Also Harry definitely has a favorite Disney Princess & I need to know for science who it is.

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostenupd8s
Tumblr: @vondrostes

February 8, 2021
Los Angeles, California

It took Louis seven minutes and fifty-six seconds to cross the gap between his chair and the bed. In all that time, Anne had yet to come back, leading Louis to believe that she’d gone back to the condo she was sharing with Gemma, or maybe that she’d merely gotten caught up talking to Liam out in the hallway and they’d both forgotten Louis was still inside. Or maybe they knew and were both trying to avoid being trapped in the same room as him again.

Louis shelved his paranoia, focusing instead on the body laid out in front of him, helpless in a way that physically pained him to acknowledge. But Louis knew it wasn’t fair to Harry to keep running away.

The first brush of Louis’s skin against Harry’s was like being burned. It was a simple touch, merely the rasp of knuckles against Harry’s stubbled jaw, but it hurt more than Louis had anticipated. Was this really how he was supposed to live his life? Knowing that Harry had dismantled him over ten years ago and never bothered to put him back together the right way?

Louis closed his eyes. No, he thought. No, no, no. None of this was Harry’s fault. It wasn’t.

When he opened his eyes again, Louis allowed himself to scour every inch of Harry’s exposed skin, which wasn’t much. The blankets were tucked up under his armpits, his arms and neck swathed in unforgiving white gauze, covering the grisly wounds that lay beneath. Louis hadn’t seen what he’d looked like before they’d fixed him up. He didn’t want to. His imagination was cruel enough.

Louis palmed Harry’s cheek again, frowning at the overgrowth of blonde stubble. He wondered why Anne or Gemma hadn’t done anything about it. Maybe it didn’t bother them the same way it bothered Louis, who knew that Harry hated the itch of days-old stubble on his baby soft skin. Not that it mattered much when he was unconscious, but, still.

Louis let his eyes and hands rove downwards, to Harry’s own hands lying slack against the knit blanket covering most of Harry’s body. Louis threaded his fingers through Harry’s with trembling hands, suddenly overcome by an indescribable burst of emotion as he stared down at the chipped
Louis’s heart jumped a little at the thought of Harry doing this for himself right before….

Harry only ever wore black nail varnish in public, or maybe a subtle shade of gold or ivory. He’d never been able to convince himself that he was allowed to do much else after the abuse he’d endured at the hands of certain people on their team while they were still in the band. Louis knew Harry had nearly had a panic attack every time he thought about trying to wear lipstick in public, but he’d still tried sometimes, even if he’d had to be subtle about it.

Pink meant no one else had been meant to see it, that Harry had done it to feel something he’d never been able to quite explain. Harry had only ever worn pink varnish around Louis.

Louis suddenly dropped Harry’s hand back down onto the blankets, feeling overwhelmed by it all. Maybe he couldn’t fix any of this, but there was still something he could do for Harry.

Louis had only just stood up when Liam suddenly came through the door, his hair standing on end from running his hands through it a few too many times.

“Bad news?” Louis guessed.

“Bear’s poorly,” Liam replied with a sigh. He slid past Louis to get to the chairs next to Harry’s bed and sank into the one Anne had vacated, giving a little grunt of relief once his bum hit the seat.

“It’s not serious, is it?” Louis asked, unable to take a step further toward the door now that Liam had waltzed back in again. It would be rude to walk out on him in the middle of a conversation about his sick child.

Liam shook his head, eyes closed. “The missus’s overreacting, as usual. Had to talk her out of taking the lad to the hospital and all.” He opened his eyes again and glanced up at Louis, squinting. “Think it’s just strep,” he continued. “Where are you off to? Where’s Anne?”

It took Louis a minute to come up with a plausible-sounding excuse for leaving. “Thought I’d take the car, go grab us something to eat,” he replied faux-casually. He glanced around at the room, as if noticing for the first time that Anne was gone. “Anne said she was off to the loo, but she never came back,” he admitted. “I thought maybe she was talking to you outside or—”

“No, I never even saw her,” Liam said. He frowned, the corners of his lips twitching in concern. “Was she…okay when you left? Did you—did she say anything weird?”

Louis shook his head and took a minute step to the side, angling his body toward the door. “She didn’t say much of anything,” Louis said. “I can ask Gemma, though, just in case she headed back to Sherbourne—”

“You’re not really going to get food, are you?” Liam interrupted, crooking an eyebrow in open scepticism.

“Of course I am,” Louis replied too quickly.

Liam’s eyebrow didn’t come down. “Right. And you couldn’t have Mark bring something to us? Or Gemma even? Why do you have to go? Did you forget about the paparazzi stake-out this morning?”

Louis floundered, his flimsy excuses crumbling under Liam’s questions. “Well…I kind of wanted to pick up some things. For Harry.” Liam stared at him blankly, prompting Louis to elaborate.
“Like hygiene stuff.” Louis could feel his face heating up. It sounded so silly out loud like that.

“Oh.” Liam glanced over at Harry and then back to Louis again. “Oh. Did you want me to come with?” he asked hesitantly.

Louis gave a quick shake of his head. “No, no, I’d rather—you should stay here. Maybe give Gemma a ring, see if she’s heard from Anne at all.”

Liam stared at Louis for a while before responding. He sighed and stood up to adjust Louis’s hat on his head, pulling it down a little farther over his eyes. “Just be careful, all right? You should head outside the Hills, just in case. Less chance of being recognised in another part of town.”

“Yeah, of course,” Louis replied easily. He didn’t move, thought about it for a second, and then pulled Liam in for a quick hug. Less quick than he’d anticipated once Liam got hold of him. “You know, I really should go,” he said, gently pushing Liam away. “Traffic’s bound to be bad enough already.”

“Right, yeah.” Liam took a step back, looking strangely morose, like Louis was planning on jetting halfway across the world instead of popping off to visit a shop a few miles away. “Text me when you’re on your way back, okay?”

“Of course.” And that was it.

June 18, 2012

Anaheim, California

“This is weird, right? I mean…” Harry glanced around at the bustling park around them, marvelling at how not a single person seemed to notice the two celebrities standing in their midst.

“No one expects to see famous people at Disneyland,” Louis reminded him. That was certainly part of it, but it helped that Louis had taken Harry’s advice to heart this time, both of them opting for big sunglasses and baseball caps in addition to dressing down enough that they looked like regular tourists.

Harry had gone a bit overboard, in Louis’s opinion, adopting a surprisingly convincing SoCal accent when they’d gone through the turnstiles at the park entrance, but Louis wasn’t going to needlessly discourage him even if it was a bit embarrassing to watch.

“What ride do you want to go on first?” Louis started to ask, only to have Harry cut him off before he could finish.

“I want to meet a princess,” Harry said deadpan.

“A princess.”

“Yeah.”

Louis stared at him, ignoring the hordes of people trying to get around them as they stood right in the centre of Main Street, USA. “Any princess in particular?” he asked, unable to keep the exasperation out of his voice.
Harry shook his head. “Whichever one we can find.”

After a few minutes of careful consultation with their already wrinkled map of the park, they decided to stop inside one of the shops first to buy Harry a bright pink autograph book to collect signatures with. Louis didn’t think he’d ever seen Harry look so happy.

Louis couldn’t bring himself to say a word about the fact that it would probably look weird for a teenage boy to be carrying around something so obviously…feminine. The thought didn’t even seem to occur to Harry, who was all smiles when they shilled out their American dollars at the cash register for the overpriced tourist item.

And after that they were on the hunt, carefully scouring the park for any sign of a princess.

By the time they made it to Fantasyland, after Louis had unsuccessfully tried to convince Harry to make detours for nearly a dozen different rides over the course of their search, Louis was just about ready to make an argument for why Kuzco was actually a Disney princess because they’d somehow managed to run into him about a billion times without even trying.

Louis could see Harry’s enthusiasm waning as they wandered the park with less and less luck. Louis felt bad about it, even though it wasn’t like it was his fault they couldn’t find a single princess to autograph Harry’s book anywhere in the entire park.

But then, just as Louis was about to give up hope altogether, he caught sight of a tell-tale flash of red, almost entirely hidden by a growing crowd of children and their parents, eagerly swarming for the same reason Harry had a pink autograph book clutched in his too-large hands. Louis grabbed Harry by the wrist and yanked him forward, ignoring his feeble cries of protest as they sprinted away from It’s a Small World over to the other side of the bridge, where their prize awaited.

Harry continued to look confused until they were in the thick of it, surrounded by waist-high tots and finally able to look over their heads to see none other than Ariel, propped up in a shell-shaped throne, posing for pictures and signing autographs from her tiny fans.

Louis could’ve sworn that Harry had stopped breathing.

“‘I didn’t…’” Harry stuttered, clutching desperately to the front of Louis’s shirt like it was the only thing still keeping him upright. “I looked it up online and they closed Ariel’s Grotto back in 2008 so I didn’t think I’d even be able to see her.”

“Are you all right?” Louis asked, starting to become genuinely concerned as Harry began to hyperventilate.

Harry whirled around to face him, bug-eyed and manic. “She’s my favourite princess, Lou,” he hissed, as if that explained everything.

Louis patted him on the shoulder consolingly. “Well, come on, then, let’s get you a signature.”

Harry fogged up his sunglasses with tears when they finally made it to the front of the throng of children so he could get an autograph and a quick photo—taken by a helpful parent, as Harry patently refused to take the damn thing without Louis.

Louis knew his awkward smile would be no match for the genuine grin splitting Harry’s face from ear to ear.

Finally, they’d gotten what they were after, and while Louis was pleased as punch on Harry’s behalf, he really wanted to pursue the Disneyland experience he’d been expecting.
“Can we please go on a roller coaster now?” Louis practically begged.

Harry made a disgruntled face. “Do we have to?”

Louis pursed his lips. “Yes, Harry, we have to. Don’t be a spoilsport.” It wasn’t Harry’s fault he didn’t like roller coasters, but surely some sacrifices could be made. “I want to ride Big Thunder Mountain.”

Harry sighed long-sufferingly, as if he were being asked to give up a limb, not spend five minutes on a ride that was supposed to be fun. “Fine,” he agreed. “But I want to ride Pirates after.”

“Deal.”

Harry looked a little worse-for-wear by the time they made it off ‘The Wildest Ride in the Wilderness’, but he’d managed to be a good sport about the whole thing, so Louis bought them both ice cream at the nearest stand before they headed off to New Orleans Square.

“You’re not going to be too scared to do the Haunted Mansion, are you?” Louis asked as they walked.

Harry shot him a pointed glare. “Don’t be an arse.”

“Sorry, sorry. Are you sure you can’t be convinced to go on Indiana Jones? Or Space Mountain?”

Harry sighed again, shoving nearly half his ice cream into his mouth before biting down with a loud crunch that made Louis wince in sympathy. Louis was attacking his with kitten-licks, far too wary of a brain freeze to go at it with Harry’s same gusto.

“Maybe if you’re good,” Harry finally settled on, giving Louis a cheeky smile that knocked the wind out of him a little.

They made their way onto Pirates without incident, Harry smugly noting to Louis that the queue was half as long as the one for Big Thunder had been—in response to which Louis had merely rolled his eyes. It wasn’t until they’d boarded the actual ride that Harry dropped the bomb.

“It’s not just me, right?” Harry said just after they’d gotten into the boat, whispering so as not to be heard by the other occupants on the benches in front of them.

“What?” Louis replied, leaning in to breathe the word into Harry’s ear.

Harry shivered at the sensation. Louis tried futilely not to feel overly smug about it.

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“Just…it feels like this is the first time we’ve gone on a proper date before, yeah?” The words sounded hopeful, like he was desperately seeking confirmation from Louis that their outing was indeed romantic in nature and not just some fluke of circumstance, despite the fact that Louis had kissed Harry no less than twelve times that morning before they’d even made it out the door.

Louis opened his mouth to protest that they’d been on loads of dates before, but stopped, suddenly unable to think of a single instance that qualified as a Real Date. The closest they’d come was Paris, and that had been truncated by work. They hadn’t even gotten to do any of the fun touristy things they’d wanted to do in the end, and the night had ended on a sour note to say the least.

So maybe Harry was right. This was their first date.

Instead of answering, Louis snaked his hand down to tangle with Harry’s, giving it a reassuring
squeeze. He couldn’t see Harry’s answering smile in the darkness, but he imagined he could feel the warmth of it on his skin.

It wasn’t dark enough that Louis was confident no one could tell what they were doing, but he leaned in to kiss Harry anyway once they reached the bayou, half-wishing that they were alone somewhere in the real Louisiana, far away from any prying eyes and the consequences of them.

Louis started crafting in his head a vague plan for a vacation, just the two of them, once they finally had a break. They could go somewhere secluded, somewhere where nobody would know their faces, somewhere they could stand outside in the sunlight kissing until their lips stung and they couldn’t even remember their own names.

They deserved that. Harry deserved that. And they both needed it.

February 8, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis listened to the song in the car on the way out of Beverly Hills, feeling inside of himself some deep-seated longing to return to those days once Harry woke up, no matter how far-fetched the thought was. He lost himself in a fantasy of taking Freddie to Disneyland with Harry along for the ride, smiling to himself at the thought of Harry using Freddie as an excuse to avoid going on a single roller coaster, and nearly missed his exit as a result.

Louis headed to Brentwood, knowing from experience that it would be a hell of a lot quieter than WeHo, with far less chance of being recognised amongst the aging heiresses and has-been actors who still inhabited the neighbourhood.

The shop he eventually popped into was small, upscale, and well off the beaten path. The woman at the counter didn’t so much as look at Louis when he walked inside and headed straight for the haircare section to choose a dry shampoo he thought Harry would like the scent of. If he could still hear things happening around him, then surely he could smell things, too?

After settling on something that smelled like the ocean in a bottle, Louis moved on to deodorant, which was markedly easier since he knew exactly what brand Harry liked. Or used to like, at least. He didn’t allow himself to fret over that and quickly snatched the item off the shelf, adding it to his basket.

He bought lotion just for the hell of it, only allowing himself to worry for a second that it was overkill before he rounded the corner to find the nailcare aisle awaiting his perusal. Louis collected the essentials first—clippers and a nail file—before allowing himself to be precious about picking out a couple different varnishes.

Louis hadn’t even decided if he was actually going to use them, yet. It almost felt like it would mean too much. And yet he couldn’t bring himself to leave with the rest of his intended purchases until he’d selected something, his feet glued to the floor in front of the array of available colours and textures. He settled on three different kinds in the end and grabbed them out of the display hurriedly, feeling suddenly paranoid that someone might see him.

Louis assumed that the reason Gemma and Anne hadn’t done what he was about to do was that they were too overwhelmed right now to even think about the smaller details, or maybe it just
seemed too invasive to them. Louis had the same qualms, but they were outweighed by his need to feel useful in some way, and he knew full well that Harry wouldn’t want to wake up looking like he’d just spent a month on a deserted island.

Arsenal of hygiene items in hand, Louis marched up to the counter to pay, not even batting an eye when the total came out to nearly five-hundred dollars. He would have paid it a hundred times over for Harry. He would have paid anything.
Chapter Notes

Trying to keep chapter updates on Wednesdays but I was feeling a bit under the weather yesterday so this one's a little late. Hopefully the chapter itself makes up for the slight delay!

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February 8, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis made good on his initial excuse of getting food, stopping by In-N-Out on the way back to Cedars-Sinai for some good old-fashioned American burgers. He knew Liam would be over the moon about it, which was his main reasoning for going there at all. Louis had long-since lost his appetite for greasy fast-food, but a cheeseburger once or twice a year wasn’t going to kill him.

Louis experienced a moment of uncertainty on his drive back; he wasn’t sure—he didn’t know if he could be with Harry and take care of him the way he wanted to with Liam looking over his shoulder, to say nothing of Anne or Gemma, both of whom might be there by the time he got back. Louis detoured to the condo at the last minute to drop off everything he’d bought on Harry’s behalf and resolved to return to the hospital with it later. Maybe after he’d had a chat with Gemma about his plan first. Louis didn’t think she’d object; at worst, she’d insist on doing it herself. Because Harry wasn’t Louis’s responsibility anymore.

Mark was sat in front of the television when Louis popped in, a large grainy video-stream of all his nieces and nephews plastered onto the screen. Louis waved awkwardly when the children let out high-pitched shrieks at seeing him walk by. He gave them all a quick hello before Mark butted in again to tell his relatives to leave Louis alone.

“You sure you don’t need me to come with?” Mark asked dutifully, turning around to watch as Louis dropped his purchases just inside the doorway to the master bedroom.

Louis shook his head, catching the note of hopefulness in Mark’s voice. He appreciated him asking, but contrary to popular belief, Louis really could handle things on his own. “Have fun,” he said, giving the kids another wave on his way out the door.

Louis felt a little guilty over the look he’d seen on Mark’s face as he’d spoken with his family. Mark was meant to be on his way home by now; Louis should’ve been home already. He pulled out his phone in a fit of pique and sent Lottie a quick text: Miss you. X

He wasn’t expecting a quick response, or a response at all even. But he knew it would make her feel better to see the text even if she didn’t have anything to say back.
Louis was tempted to spin up another song on the short drive back to the hospital but ultimately decided against it, not wanting to waste any more time. Liam would be lucky if his burger wasn’t cold as it was.

Once back inside the hospital, Louis sprinted for the lifts with his takeout bag tucked under his armpit, looking for all the world like a would-be father struggling to make it to the delivery room in time. He had no doubts that Liam, when presented with a cold burger and fries, could be every bit as wrathful as a woman in labour.

Anne was there again when he walked inside Harry’s room. She had one of Liam’s arms around her shoulders, her eyes red from crying. Louis handed off the fast food to Liam and quickly took up residence at her side instead.

“Sorry I just bolted like that,” Anne said, wiping delicately at her eyes. “It just got to be too much for me, I suppose.”

Louis squeezed her tighter, reassuringly, hoping it was enough. There wasn’t much he could say, except that he understood, but he didn’t really. Whatever he was going through, for Anne, it must’ve been a thousand times worse.

“Louis,” Anne said slowly, in a way that made Louis freeze up a bit in anticipation of what was coming next. “Liam told me about the songs Harry left you.”

Louis shot a glare over her shoulder at Liam, who shrugged apologetically as he munched on his cheeseburger. He didn’t seem too bothered by his own betrayal, which did nothing to ease Louis’s irritation.

“Did he?” Louis replied sharply. He took a step away from Anne and sank back down into one of the bedside chairs.

Anne blinked rapidly at Louis, seemingly so overwhelmed that she failed to notice the sharpness in his tone. “I was wondering if… if I could hear one of them, maybe.” She looked so hopeful that even if he had been adamantly opposed to sharing them with her, Louis didn’t think he could’ve refused.

“Yeah,” Louis replied quickly, making a mental note to berate Liam later for sharing that info without consulting him first. “Yeah, of course.”

Louis glanced up at her a few times as he got his phone out and pulled up the playlist. She looked nervous, deservedly so. God, he wished Liam had let him explain the playlist in his own time. Or never, preferably.

Louis’s eyes bugged out a little when he saw the date on the song and connected the dots. Fitting then, that it was the next up on the docket when Anne had asked to listen. If that was confirmation of a higher power, Louis hoped it would take pity on him—on all of them.

“Fair warning,” Louis told Anne, “he doesn’t sing over any of them. So—” He stopped, seeing the look of melancholy understanding in her wide eyes. If she was hoping to hear Harry’s voice, she’d have to wait a little longer.

June 20, 2012

Los Angeles, California
To an outsider, it might’ve seemed that Louis and Liam had the most drastically clashing personalities, Liam too serious and Louis too frivolous, but behind the scenes, it was really Harry and Zayn who had the most trouble getting along.

It wasn’t like they fought a lot. They just didn’t…understand each other, not the way they did with the other boys. There was something about each of their mindsets that was just too different for them to fully bridge the gap.

Which was why the last thing Louis ever expected to see was Zayn and Harry giggling to each other in the back room at Shamrock Social Club while Freddy patiently explained to them how to use the tattoo gun.

“You’re not really gonna let Zayn give you a tattoo, are you?” Louis asked for the twelfth time. He still couldn’t hardly believe Harry had agreed when Zayn had suggested it—mostly as a joke, Louis thought, at least until Harry’s easy enthusiasm had convinced him it was a good idea to do it for real.

Freddy was being all-too accommodating in Louis’s opinion. This was such a phenomenally bad idea, for reasons Louis could only begin to articulate. And neither Harry nor Zayn seemed remotely interested in hearing them.

“It’s just an initial,” Harry replied with an annoyed scowl pulling at his lips. “It’s not like I’m letting him do a sleeve.”

Harry had a point, but management had been pissed enough about the professionally-done tattoos Harry had gotten thus far. Apparently, it cut into the squeaky-clean image they’d been trying to project onto all of them, Harry included, even in sharp contrast to the womanizer persona they’d been pushing from Day One. Though a little bird had recently informed Louis that they were warming to the concept now after seeing the fans’ reactions to Harry’s ink, which had been unprecedented to say the least.

Louis had laughed a little at some of the more outlandish portrayals of Harry as a ‘bad boy’. If only they knew the truth. That Harry loved kittens and puppies and rainbows, and cried while watching sappy romances on Netflix, and secretly harboured a fondness for the colour pink. Louis still couldn’t believe he’d lied to that interviewer and told her he liked orange. Orange, really? No one liked orange.

Louis chewed on his thumbnail (partly out of habit, but mostly from nerves) as Freddy prepped Harry before walking Zayn through each step of the process. At least they weren’t drunk, Louis thought to himself, but then again, Freddy probably would have never agreed to let them do this if that had been the case.

Louis nearly bit all the way through his finger at the first press of the tattoo gun against Harry’s skin.

“You all right?” Harry asked with just a hint of mockery.

“Are you?” Louis retorted, even though there was absolutely no reason to think otherwise. Louis could tell from the state of Harry’s flushed cheeks and lopsided grin that he was doing just fine under Zayn’s careful efforts.

And then suddenly, Louis felt a hot stab of jealousy coursing through him. Over Zayn. Where had
“Would you let me tattoo something?” Louis blurted out before his mind had a chance to catch up with the impulse and curbed it for his own good.

Harry’s eyes widened a fraction. “You’d want to?”

“If you’ll let me,” Louis replied fussily. There were prickles of heat creeping up from his collar into his cheeks. He had the feeling that if Zayn weren’t otherwise occupied, Harry would’ve given Louis a look neither of them could come back from.

Louis wouldn’t have blamed him for it. The request was hopelessly transparent, another nail in the coffin holding in Louis’s love for Harry Edward Styles.

And God, that was it, wasn’t it? He was in love with Harry. Like properly in love with him. This wasn’t some fleeting entanglement Louis had stumbled into by accident that he could crawl out of in a few months when he’d gotten over the rush of hormones that accompanied adolescent infatuation. Harry was it for him.

Louis felt like he might throw up.

Harry noticed the change immediately; he just didn’t know what had caused it. “You don’t have to do it if you’re not comfortable,” he assured Louis as Zayn went over the last bit of the tattoo before pulling away to let Freddy examine his handiwork.

“That’s not—” Louis started to say before getting distracted by the big and bold ‘A’ on Harry’s arm. “Oh.”

“Not good enough for you, mate?” Zayn said good-naturedly.

“No,” Louis replied, seeing the look of near-panic crossing Harry’s face at the words. “No, it looks good.”

“You still want to do one, kiddo?” Freddy asked him.

Louis gulped. “Yeah,” he replied heavily. “Yeah, I do. That okay with you?” he added. He looked to Harry for confirmation and was met with only a tiny nod. That didn’t exactly do wonders for Louis’s confidence, but he’d be damned if he was going to miss out on an opportunity to leave an irremovable mark on Harry’s skin.

“Anything in particular you’ve been wanting?” Freddy asked Harry. “I can draw up a simple sketch for Louis to trace if you want.”

“No, I want him to pick.”

Louis blinked a few times, stunned. “You what?”

Harry’s eyes hardened. “I want you to pick,” he said as he lifted up his left arm to point at a patch of bare skin underneath. “Put it here, next to the star.”

“I—okay,” Louis agreed, still having trouble coming to terms with the reality of the situation he’d found himself in. “Give me a minute to think about it.” He was pretty sure he needed far longer than a minute, but they didn’t have all the time in the world.

Louis scoured his brain for something that was simple but meaningful. The ‘L’s were the first
thing to come to mind, the doodles he’d drawn on Harry’s hands. It was tempting to leave that mark on Harry again knowing it wouldn’t ever wash away, but that would be too obvious. Management would literally have his head over that one. All right, so something more subtle, but still unique to them.

Then with an unexpected flash of inspiration, it hit him. “How about—”

“Don’t tell me,” Harry interrupted.

Louis did a double-take. “Wait, what?” Even Freddy looked a little apprehensive.

“I don’t want to see it until it’s finished,” Harry explained.

And that was—Louis felt breathless. The trust Harry had in him was earth-shattering. “If you’re sure,” he said.

Harry nodded, and that seemed to be good enough for Freddy, who took Louis aside to do a quick stencil.

True to his word, Harry kept his eyes closed throughout the entire process. That admittedly made things a little easier for Louis, who was by necessity leaning in close to Harry’s face as he worked.

When Louis finished, Freddy quickly swooped in to determine that it didn’t need touching up before getting up to retrieve a mirror so Harry could have a better look.

Harry softly fluttered his eyes open and smiled up at Louis.

“Hi,” Harry said quietly, pulling a laugh from somewhere deep in Louis’s chest. “What’d I say?” Harry asked, looking confused but still smiling.

Louis shook his head. “You’ll see in a minute.”

He was aware of Zayn hovering in the background behind him as he craned his head over Louis’s shoulder to get a good look at Harry’s tattoo, but he made no comment on it. Louis wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

Instead of holding up the mirror himself when he came back over to them, Freddy simply handed the item to Louis instead and took a step back. Louis tried to ignore the way his fingers were shaking as he positioned the mirror to give Harry a better look at the text written on his arm.

There was a series of minute changes in Harry’s expression as he stared at the backwards lettering. He drew in a short inhalation through his mouth before he replied. “Oh.”

Louis’s face fell. “Please don’t say whatever you’re about to say,” he begged.

“No!” Harry said emphatically. “It’s perfect, it just doesn’t make sense.”

Louis stared at him blankly. “What do you mean, it doesn’t make sense?” Did Harry really not get it?

“Well, it’s the first thing you ever said to me, right?” Harry replied quickly. “When we met in the loo at X Factor? But it’s missing what I said back.”

Louis nodded along, still confused. “So you want another tattoo?” he asked.

Harry poked at Louis’s arm with a smirk. “No, I want you to get one, too.”
Louis was on edge throughout the whole song, hardly able to concentrate on the music itself as he painstakingly analysed every detail of Anne’s expression while it played. It probably wasn’t right to put her under that much scrutiny, but he couldn’t help it.

Louis felt just as exposed as Anne did herself perhaps, now that she knew Harry had left him something this personal after everything that had happened between them. After everything that Anne thought had happened. Louis had no way of knowing just how much Harry had told her.

Louis caught himself contemplating asking just that, but it wasn’t a conversation he was sure he was ready for yet, and certainly not one he was willing to have with Liam in the room.

As the silence extended in the wake of the song’s conclusion, Louis felt his muscles coiling with tension just under the skin.

“I need a wee,” Louis announced, standing up just as quickly. Seeing the look on Liam’s face, he quickly clarified: “I actually do need a wee. I’ll be back in a minute.”

It wasn’t a lie, though Louis relished the chance to have a second to himself to just breathe on his own once outside Harry’s room again.

Louis suspected he might have felt differently if this had happened back home, where he would’ve had plenty of support from friends and family, but here he just felt trapped. Trapped and utterly, utterly useless. And it was definitely getting to him, as if Louis wasn’t off-kilter enough already.

Louis sucked in a few deep breaths as he washed his hands at the sink, trying to remember the breathing exercises his therapist had recommended. They didn’t seem to help much.

Louis was still working on centring himself as he meandered back down the corridor when he caught sight of an unpleasantly familiar figure parked right outside of Harry’s room, peering inside the tiny rectangular pane of glass in the door. Louis saw red.

Any hope of abiding by logic or reason went out the window as soon as Louis spotted the phone in the man’s hands, pointed shutter-first at the glass separating him from Harry—not protection enough. Louis slammed into him with all the force of a speeding lorry, ignoring the fact that the other man had a good four inches in height on him and that the last thing Louis needed was another assault charge filed against him by a pap.

But none of that mattered when all Louis could think about was the headline accompanying the photos of Harry lying lifeless in a hospital bed.

“Give me your phone,” Louis growled, scrabbling to snatch the device out of the man’s hand. It clattered onto the floor with a stray swipe of his arm, and both men dove for it, Louis ultimately emerging the victor.

Louis scrolled through the dozen or so blurry photos the man had managed to take, using to his full advantage the fact that if Louis were to come away with any sort of physical injury due to an altercation, it would be the pap at a disadvantage in the resulting lawsuit. Louis was still half-
planning to sue him into the ground anyway for a breach of privacy.

Delete, delete, delete. He combed through the camera roll, ensuring any evidence of Harry’s residency at Cedars-Sinai was erased from existence. It wouldn’t do anything to keep the pap’s mouth shut, of course, but they had a better chance of quelling rumours in the press if those rumours weren’t accompanied by cold hard proof.

Louis tossed the phone back onto the floor when he was through, watching with a sick sense of satisfaction when the pap scuttled down to retrieve it. “Get the fuck out before I call the cops,” Louis warned him, holding back his sigh of relief just long enough for the other man to jog down the corridor and out of sight.

Louis breathed out slowly and pulled out his own mobile. He closed his eyes tightly as he waited for it to ring.

The voice on the other end was amicably apprehensive. “Louis? What’s going on?”

“Gemma, you need to get here now.”
Louis was still mid-argument with Gemma over the phone when Liam and Anne emerged from Harry’s hospital room, looking confused and a little alarmed.

“Mate, what’s going on?” Liam asked, scanning the length of the corridor shiftily.

It had been empty during Louis’s confrontation with the pap—which was most likely what had given the twat the confidence to try and take the photos of Harry in the first place—but a few people were starting to file in now from the lifts, some of them giving the trio standing outside Harry’s room odd looks as they passed.

Louis gestured for Liam to wait a bloody minute as he tried to focus instead on Gemma’s shrill questioning in his ear. “How did he get in?” she demanded. “How did he even know Harry was here?”

“It’s a hospital, Gemma,” Louis said tiredly, choosing the only one of her questions he had the capacity to answer. He suddenly felt as if he hadn’t slept in weeks. “If you look like you know where you’re going, it’s not like someone’s going to stop you.”

But some part of Louis couldn’t help but feel that he should’ve done something sooner, that he should have found hospital security before when the pap had followed him up from the hospital Starbucks.

“Look,” Louis continued, voice trending toward a genuine whine, “can you just…get here? Please?”

“There’s a maintenance guy here, fixing the aircon,” Gemma replied with a sigh. Louis supposed that explained why she hadn’t been with Anne in the first place. “Look, just tell my mum that I’ll be by as soon as I can, okay?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Some childish urge inside Louis had wanted Gemma to be there in his time of crisis, another substitute for his own missing family. And Louis was terrified now of what the consequences would be if Harry’s story hit the internet. Gemma, at least, was slightly more equipped than Anne to make the kind of difficult decisions needed in a situation like this. She’d helped Lottie through her fair share of tabloid scandals, when even Louis hadn’t been able to give his sister the advice she’d needed.
“Louis? You still there?” Gemma’s voice slowly filtered into his brain again, and Louis wondered how long she’d been trying to get his attention.

“Yeah,” he replied, barely able to squeeze the word out through the feeling of his throat slowly closing under the pressure of his mounting anxiety. Louis could see Liam waiting in the periphery of his vision, arms crossed over his chest and hands balled into fists, while Anne twitched nervously at his side. Louis turned away again so he wouldn’t have to look at them anymore.

“Don’t hang up, all right? I’m checking to see if anyone’s said anything online yet.”

Louis exhaled forcefully, knowing there wasn’t much point in checking except to figure out how much damage control was already needed. If there wasn’t any word just yet about Harry, it would only be a matter of time before something cropped up.

“Oh.” He turned slightly to face Liam and Anne, mouthing a quick ‘hang on’ before spinning around again.

It was a few seconds—that felt like hours—before Gemma spoke up again. “I don’t see anyone talking about it yet…” she said, sending a flash of something resembling relief through Louis’s body even though he knew better than that. “No—wait.”

“What?” Louis asked, bringing his hand up to his mouth to start chewing at his nails again.

“Someone posted a photo on Twitter.”

“I deleted all the photos,” Louis replied mechanically. But maybe the pap had managed to send one, before Louis had even gotten there?

“Well, it’s not a very good photo,” Gemma said, as if that made any difference. “There’s no way to actually prove one way or the other that it’s Harry.”

“But people are saying that it is,” Louis assumed.

“Yeah.” Gemma paused, and when she continued, her voice was audibly strained. “Drug overdose is the general consensus online but like, not—you know.”

Louis nodded and pressed his forehead into the wall. He didn’t know if it made him feel better or worse that people apparently thought Harry was a drug addict—really, the least likely thing in the world given Harry’s personality—rather than suicidal.

“Okay,” he said quietly. “Fuck. I’ll tell Anne.” He hung up on Gemma quickly and swallowed back the burgeoning wave of panic he could feel at the back of his mind, threatening to overwhelm him before he could even get a word out in explanation.

Liam and Anne’s expectantly concerned expressions only made it worse.

“I caught a guy taking photos through the door,” Louis told them. “I think he recognised me this morning, down in the lounge when I was getting coffee, and somehow pieced together that Harry was here. I don’t know.”

“So they know?” Anne asked in a small voice. “The media?”

“No everything,” Louis clarified. “And there’s nothing official yet. But, yeah, they know.”

His head was spinning with all the things he knew they still had to take care of. An announcement
would need to be made. They probably should try to track down the pap who had taken the photo and threaten legal action for good measure, just so no one could claim they had set up the scandal for publicity’s sake.

And then there was Louis himself. He hadn’t been implicated yet from what Gemma had said, in either Harry’s hospitalisation or the incident with the paparazzo, but both of those things were sure to come, and Louis felt ill-equipped to deal with them.

He felt ill—full-stop.

“Louis? You okay, mate?”

Louis forced himself to meet Liam’s eyes as he blinked would-be tears out of his own. “Yeah. Fine.” But Louis could only endure looking at Liam for so long before his flight response finally took over. “I have to go.”

Louis only made it halfway to the lifts before Liam caught up to him.

“Louis,” Liam called out, grabbing for the smaller man’s arm. “Hey!” He yanked Louis around to face him, and Louis already knew that he must’ve looked like a complete mess. “You can’t run away from this.”

“I know that,” Louis replied through gritted teeth, ripping his wrist out of Liam’s hold. “I need to think, Liam. I need space.”

The hurt didn’t vanish from Liam’s face, nor did the concentrated worry, but it was tinged with understanding as he took a step back. “Promise you’ll come back.”

Louis nodded tightly. “I promise.” He wasn’t going to abandon them—Harry—now. Not again.

He pressed play as soon as he hit the open road.

August 12, 2012

London, England

This was what being a popstar was all about.

Even Liam, who normally went all shrill and nagging whenever Louis or Zayn suggested they imbibe so much as a single drop of alcohol, had completely let himself go once they’d gotten through the front doors to the incredibly exclusive after-party. Now he was riding just as high as the rest of them after their performance at the closing ceremonies for the Olympics. The fucking Olympics.

Louis had experienced it all for himself and he could still hardly believe it.

The party hadn’t exactly been part of their original plans—after the ceremonies ended they’d all met up with those in their families who had been able to attend, and that was supposed to be the end of it. But then Zayn had gotten word about the festivities taking place at a club nearby, and only Niall had opted to sit things out, much to everyone else’s surprise.

Louis hadn’t planned on letting Harry leave his side for a second, but somehow, they’d managed to
get separated almost as soon as they’d arrived, after being swarmed en masse by a bunch of London socialites who smelled overwhelmingly of cheap liquor. Louis had tried to look for Harry for a bit, but it wasn’t long before he was swayed into joining Zayn in a private booth at the back of the club instead, where a bounty had been laid out before him on the table.

“This what I think it is?” Louis asked, delicately picking the bright blue tablet up between two of his fingers.

Zayn had already swallowed his. “Don’t chicken out on me, bro,” he said by way of answering.

Louis popped the tablet into his mouth with a laugh. “Of course not.”

He didn’t start to regret the decision until hours later when his dry mouth had driven him to search the club top to bottom for something to drink that wasn’t mostly alcohol, which is when he finally stumbled upon Harry again for the first time since they’d gotten to the party.

The other boy was swaying woefully in the middle of the floor, moving in some approximation of dancing despite being completely alone. Harry giggled as Louis pulled him away, clearly drunk off his arse.

Louis hadn’t been intending on more than corralling Harry just so he wouldn’t lose track of him again, because he knew Harry was liable to get himself into trouble after a few drinks, but the hands suddenly grabbing at his crotch as Harry flopped into him quickly changed his mind.

“Where are you taking me, Lou?” Harry slurred, stumbling all the way.

Louis wished Harry hadn’t sprouted up like a beanstalk in the last year; it would have made carrying his drunk arse through the club all the easier. It wasn’t like his own drug-addled coordination was much better.

“Somewhere you won’t get us in trouble,” Louis replied honestly. It hadn’t occurred to him before now that getting absolutely pissed probably wasn’t the best idea when they were both trying to keep the biggest secret in the world. Louis had forgotten already the way Wellington had turned out.

Hoping that any passers-by would mistake Harry’s very pointed gropes for the innocent drunken fumbling it resembled, Louis dragged him out of the main area of the club and up the stairs, where Zayn had told him earlier that he could find a private room if he needed one. Louis supposed Zayn hadn’t said it with this in mind, however.

It took Louis a little while to find one that wasn’t already occupied by several of the party-goers who had apparently decided to end their nights early. He was also treated to more than his fair-share of exposed body parts in the process, something that made Harry giggle while Louis’s face turned bright red in embarrassment.

By the time they found somewhere secluded, Harry had been mouthing at Louis’s throat for a good minute or so, and Louis was starting to feel the effects. He spared just enough time to lock the door behind him before turning his head to connect their mouths, kissing Harry just as deeply as he wished he could every second of every day.

Harry panted wetly against Louis’s mouth as he pulled away to catch his breath, the taste of him ambiguously fruity, like he’d downed whatever cocktails had been put in front of him without regard for their contents.

Louis stared at him for a long moment and drank in the sight of Harry’s face bathed in silvery
moonlight from the balcony doors overlooking the city. He pulled Harry into himself as he leaned back against the wall, getting a hand on the back of Harry’s neck so Louis could reconnect their lips.

The kiss didn’t last much longer the second time around, Louis just barely getting a knee between Harry’s thighs before the younger boy pulled away again, breathing heavily in the darkness.

“Take your clothes off,” Harry said. The alcohol was making him braver than he would’ve been otherwise.

“Why?” Louis asked stupidly.

“Why d’you think?” Harry didn’t wait even a second before reaching out and clumsily tugging at Louis’s shirt.

Louis pushed his hands away and tried to make some space between them without actually letting Harry go. “Whoa, hey, wait a second, Hazza.”

“Why?” Harry said with a pouting expression clearly intended to manipulate Louis into giving him what he wanted.

Louis wasn’t having it. “I’m high as a kite, Haz,” he pointed out, reason just barely cutting through the haze of euphoria currently clouding his mind. “You’re drunk and who knows what else; I don’t want it to be something neither of us remember in the morning.”

Harry just stared blankly back at him for a long moment, and then blinked slowly as Louis’s words finally seemed to connect in his mind. “Oh,” he said. “Okay.”

Louis was relieved, and then alarmed, all at once. “What are you doing?” he hissed, wondering if he should act to stop Harry, who was already in the process of unzipping his trousers.

Harry didn’t answer, slumping down instead to rest his forehead against Louis’s shoulder while he pulled down the waistband of his briefs to get a hand around his cock. Louis watched in shocked fascination as Harry leisurely stroked himself in time with the ragged breaths warming Louis’s neck. If there had been any way for Louis to get any harder with the constriction of his trousers, the sight of Harry slowly fucking up into his own fist would’ve done it.

“You’re hard,” Harry murmured around a groan.

“Of course I’m hard,” Louis replied dumbly. Didn’t they just talk about this?

“So do something about it,” Harry told him, speeding up the movement of his hand until his hips were jerking unsteadily in a poor mimicry of actual sex.

That sight was what had Louis scrambling to pull down his trousers just far enough that he could wrap his free hand around his dick, the other still clinging to Harry’s shoulder.

Both were too worked-up already to make it anything more than a search for release, but Louis thought it was probably best that way. There wouldn’t have been anything romantic about wanking off together in the back of a club even if they’d been sober.

Harry finished first, coming with a muffled cry into the crook of Louis’s shoulder before biting down hard. Louis followed soon after him, the feeling of Harry’s come flecking his own hand spurring him on even faster than before, until he was practically sobbing with the force of his own release.
The two of them stayed like that for a while afterward, tangled up in each other and breathing in
time, until the mess started to become uncomfortable and Louis finally pulled away.

“Come on,” Louis urged, carefully jostling Harry along with his clean hand. “We should get
cleaned up.”

Harry stopped dead before Louis could get him to the toilet, looking abruptly panicked even
though Louis was sure he hadn’t said anything to cause it.

“This wasn’t like…it for us, right?” Harry said, only just loud enough to be heard over the
thumping electronic music coming up through the floor.

Louis let his hand run down the length of Harry’s arm and twined their fingers together, giving him
a reassuring squeeze. “Of course not,” Louis replied easily, trying not to let any of his inner turmoil
show on his face. Harry didn’t need to be bogged down with Louis’s persistent hang-ups about sex.
He’d figure it out, one way or another. “I just want our first time together to be special, yeah?”

Harry smiled a little in response, finally perking up again as they made their way to the loo, but
Louis couldn’t help but wonder how much longer he could keep stringing Harry along before it all
came to a head.

February 8, 2021

Los Angeles, California

There was silence in the car for barely a full minute before Louis’s phone started to ring. He
glanced at the name flashing across the centre console. Gemma.

“Hello?” he said cautiously after accepting the call.

“Turn around.” Her tone was firm and absolute, echoing throughout the car from the stereo like the
voice of God. “Turn the fucking car around.”

“No.” Louis increased the pressure of his foot on the accelerator just to spite her, even though there
was no way for her to know. Petulance was one of the few things Louis could still cling to.

Gemma’s voice ratcheted up a few octaves. “Louis, if you don’t turn around right now, I swear to
god—”

“You’re not my older sister, Gemma,” Louis cut in cruelly. “You can’t just order me around like
I’m a child. I want to be alone.”

Gemma’s answering tone straddled the thin line between patience and annoyance. “What you need
to be is here, with the rest of us. You need to do the right thing for Harry, not for yourself.”

“Don’t you think I fucking know that?”

Louis swerved suddenly to avoid colliding with the car in front of him that was going a good ten
miles or so below his own speed. He swore loudly as he passed. Gemma didn’t react. Louis pulled
over into the next corner gas station and stared down at his steering wheel with a begrudging sigh.
The least he could do was not get himself pulled over or killed while Gemma was still on the line.
It wasn’t her fault he’d reacted so badly. Not really, anyway. Gemma didn’t know what it meant to Louis, to be told that he was only doing right by himself and not Harry. That was something Louis had learned for himself through trial and error, after error, after error. A string of failures, with nothing to show for it but guilt and regret.

“Louis,” Gemma said softly after the silence had lengthened past the point of tolerance.

“Yeah?” Louis hated the way his voice sounded, ragged and on the edge of breaking with just that single syllable.

She sighed a little, perhaps wondering if it was even worth it to keep arguing with him. “Please just come back to the condo so we can have a chat face to face about this, all right? If you still want to do your silly masculine brooding thing afterwards, well, then I won’t stop you. Okay?”

Louis considered her proposal for a long moment, fingers growing slick with sweat as they tightened on the steering wheel. Maybe she was right. What could it hurt? “Okay,” he said finally. “Okay, I’ll come back.”
Louis was surprised when Gemma told him the unit number of the condo she was staying in and he realized it was only one away from his own. They’d been practically next door to each other this whole time and Louis had no clue.

When he pulled up in front of the condo, Louis could see Gemma stood out on the front steps dressed in a hoodie and yoga pants, her long hair knotted up in a bun. The resemblance wasn’t truly there, not like it was with Anne, but she reminded Louis of Harry regardless, and he felt a throbbing pang in his chest as he stepped out of the car and walked up to the door.

“Well, don’t you look a right mess,” Gemma proclaimed with her arms crossed over her chest in mock-exasperation as Louis trudged up the steps.

“Did you expect anything else?” Louis asked.

Gemma’s fond smile faded into something a little sad. “Come on in, then. We don’t want the neighbours to talk.”

“I am the neighbours,” Louis reminded her as he walked in and she shut the front door behind him.

There was a man visible only from the waist down in the hallway, the rest of him tucked into the crawl space up above, presumably fixing the central air. It was quite chilly inside, now that Louis thought about it, but not unbearably so. Gemma said nothing to the handyman as they passed by him and walked into the master bedroom, a mirror image of Louis’s own, apart from the colour scheme.

Gemma’s laptop and phone were sitting out on the bed. She plopped onto it and settled herself in without saying a word, patting the empty space beside her when Louis hovered uncertainly near the edge of the bed.

Louis hoped she wasn’t offended by his hesitation. If she was, she didn’t show it. He folded himself uncomfortably next to her on the bed, careful to keep their knees from touching. Once upon a time, Louis would have been half in her lap; Harry would’ve been there, too, likewise draped all over Louis, desperately trying to get his attention while Louis played hard-to-get for no other reason than because he knew, secretly, that Harry liked it.

Louis curled his fingers against his chest and hoped Gemma didn’t notice how much it hurt him to be around her.
“Here’s the photo,” Gemma said, her fingers racing across the keyboard for a second before she tipped the screen of the laptop toward Louis so he could see.

He squinted at the blurry picture that accompanied the expectedly sensational tweet. She was right, it was a terrible picture, and you couldn’t confidently identify Harry as the figure lying in a hospital bed. But it still wouldn’t matter. Louis had seen social media go ape over far, far less than that. He could only imagine the shitstorm that had undoubtedly erupted already.

Louis pushed the computer back toward Gemma, forcibly depriving himself of the temptation to glance at any trending hashtags. The #PrayForHarry his imagination had come up with on the spot was cruel enough without concrete proof of its existence.

“I appreciate you trying to reassure me,” Louis said to her, rubbing frustrated circles against his eyelids, “but proof’s not exactly what I’m worried about.” A photo, even a bad one, was just enough to give credence to any rumours that had already started to circulate.

Gemma was staring straight at Louis when he opened his eyes again. “Then what are you worried about?” she asked bluntly.

Louis gave it some thought. He shrugged. “I don’t know, to be perfectly honest with you.” There were the obvious repercussions, of course, the increased scrutiny, the bad press, the damage control they’d all inevitably have to be a part of. But Louis wasn’t sure that’s what had him so terrified. And he wasn’t sure he wanted to examine just what was really scaring him.

Gemma frowned ever so slightly. “Louis, I’ve been….” She stopped, oblivious to the way Louis’s pulse had ratcheted up the second she opened her mouth. “I don’t mean to pry, but was there ever something going on between you and Harry?”

Louis just stared at her, blank-faced. Was it really that much of a mystery?

Gemma must have seen the question in his eyes because she continued without waiting for an answer. “I always knew my brother felt something for you,” she said, stumbling a bit over the words. She glanced down suddenly. “I thought maybe you might have been…more than friends at one point, but then it seemed like you just drifted apart after a while.”

Louis wasn’t surprised that she had assumed as much. It wasn’t entirely untrue, either. “Harry and I were together off and on for seven years,” he said bluntly. They were past the time of vague roundabout answers. Louis had no more patience for guessing games.

Gemma’s eyes flicked back up to meet his, wide and startled. “What?” she asked. “How?”

“I didn’t want him to tell anyone,” Louis admitted, knowing Gemma would likely blame him for it now that she knew the truth. “Your mum figured it out, eventually, and the other boys, but we got better at hiding it the second time around.”

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“After you broke up, you mean,” she prompted.

Louis nodded stiffly. “And got back together.”

After that first time…had there really been a first time? Things had slowly deteriorated between them all throughout 2013 under the stress of a film and a simultaneous tour. But there had been attempts to make it work after that, attempts that had lasted anywhere from a few weeks to a few months before they crumbled again, until finally, years later, they just couldn’t do it anymore.

But Louis didn’t have the time or the energy to explain that to Gemma. And he didn’t want to see
the look on her face when she found out how guilty Louis really was of destroying Harry’s life. Literally, as it turned out.

“I thought—” She stopped again. “I just thought he was embarrassed,” she confessed, looking stricken. “I didn’t want to push him because I thought it would just make things worse.”

Louis shook his head. “He wouldn’t have told you even if you’d confronted him about it,” he told her. “I practically begged him not to.”

“What?”

Because he was too scared. Louis had always been a scared little boy, afraid of being too different, terrified of not being wanted. It was the reason he’d lived under Simon’s thumb for nearly a decade instead of throwing caution to the wind and going after the things he actually wanted. Too late now to have the thing he wanted most.

Gemma was still staring at him, waiting for an answer, but Louis couldn’t give her one.

“You’re an idiot,” she said in a flat voice. Then she reached out and pulled Louis in for a hug before he could react to her words, squeezing him tightly for a few long seconds before letting him go again. “You’re an idiot, and obviously you went about it the wrong way, but I know you were just trying to protect Harry,” Gemma told him once they were at an arms-length once more.

She wasn’t wrong about his intentions, but that didn’t mean Louis had succeeded. “It doesn’t matter,” he said, looking away at last. “I appreciate you doing this,” he continued, “but I still think I should go.”

Gemma furrowed her brow, carefully examining Louis’s face for any sign of weakness she could exploit to keep him there. Seeing none, she finally let out a heavy sigh and nodded. “If you’re sure.”

“I just need space,” Louis told her. “I’m not going to do anything stupid.” He wasn’t sure if Gemma believed him, but even if she wasn’t quite convinced, she made no attempt to stop him from leaving.

Louis’s hands were trembling by the time he made it back out to the car. Gemma’s efforts had made him feel better, for the moment, and then worse again all at once.

He was on the road for barely a minute before he caved and called Jaime, something he should’ve done far sooner. Her voicemail picked it up. “Jaime, it’s bad. Don’t look at the news, just call me once you get this.” She’d be furious, but Louis was too wrung-out, mentally and emotionally, to muster up the terror he knew he would’ve felt otherwise. He’d be lucky if she didn’t quit on him after this fiasco.

Satisfied that he’d done all he could for the moment, Louis headed west toward the highway. He wasn’t in love with California the way Harry had always been, but there was something inherently calming about driving down the PCH with the ocean at one shoulder, especially at this time of day, with the sun reflecting off the water as it slowly descended toward the horizon.

Louis drove leisurely, allowing nearly every other car to pass him by as he meandered north along the coast with no particular destination in mind. He was looking for a place, nowhere specific, going by feeling alone. And eventually he found it.

He pulled into a small overlook perched precariously on the cliffs and parked. Louis stumbled out of his car just as the sun began to scrape the horizon, fire meeting water in a clash of colour too
bright for the naked eye to witness. Louis sat on the bonnet and stared out at the reflection on the waves instead, glancing down after just a few minutes to send a text to Liam reassuring him that he hadn’t jumped off a bridge.

Louis knew he needed to turn back soon, even though he would have loved nothing more than to sit out there above the ocean until the sky went dark or to drive and drive and leave all his responsibilities hundreds of miles behind.

Neither of those options were practical, but there was one small indulgence Louis could afford himself before he was forced to return to the harshness of reality.

September 6, 2012
Los Angeles, California

Louis was deathly nervous.

There were a lot of reasons to be nervous, first off. Or there had been a few hours ago when they were just about to perform at the VMAs and hadn’t yet found out that they’d won three different awards, which was three more than any of them had banked on.

Now there was only one thing that had Louis’s nerves alight, and that was Harry, curled up into his side in the back of a private car on the way to the house they’d rented for the weekend.

Harry had been the one to suggest they skip the afterparty. Louis had agreed readily. He was exhausted and had no desire to schmooze with industry people and vapid popstars who thought boybands were the scum of the earth. Louis hadn’t realised until after he’d said yes, when Harry’s eyes had gone dark and glossy, just what the other boy was expecting when they returned to the house.

They didn’t talk at all during the car ride. Louis couldn’t tell if Harry felt the same, but his own heart felt like it was going to explode, the pressure inside him only building as they careened down the winding California freeways, his breaking point growing ever closer as the distance on the GPS shortened.

Louis was positively shitting it when they were finally dropped off at the house, a hilltop mansion in Hollywood with a view of the whole city, something Louis didn’t have the capacity to truly appreciate at the moment.

In sharp contrast, Harry floated down the drive and actually skipped through the front door, perfectly playing the part of a fairy tale princess while Louis trudged behind him and tried to keep from tearing his own hair out.

Louis followed Harry without saying a word into the house, all the way up the stairs, and into the master bedroom before Harry finally turned around and registered the look on Louis’s face. His own expression turned abruptly crestfallen.

“Oh, I thought….”

“I think we should talk about some things first,” Louis interrupted He was doing his best to keep his voice steady. He stood in the centre of the room as he stared down at Harry, who had
immediately bounced down onto the edge of the bed as soon as they’d come in.

“Oh,” Harry said quietly, his too-large mouth perfectly round and horribly tempting. Louis had to force himself to look away. “Like what?”

“Have you even had sex before?” Louis asked, not sure exactly what answer he was expecting or hoping for. It would make things easier, maybe, if Harry said yes, but some inherently jealous part of Louis wanted him to say no even though he knew it was unfair and hypocritical.

“Once,” Harry answered easily, sounding loads more at ease than Louis. He leaned back a little, bracing his palms against the duvet. “When I was sixteen, with my girlfriend back home, but I’ve never—” He stopped and scrunched up his nose a little before continuing. “It wasn’t very good, but I think that was just because I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Louis just nodded, his mouth gone dry.

“What about you?” Harry said hopefully, taking Louis completely by surprise.

“Oh, er, yeah,” he replied hastily.

“With another boy?” There was an odd note to Harry’s voice that Louis couldn’t quite figure out.

Louis shook his head. “No, with Hannah.” It hadn’t been very good for him either, and Hannah hadn’t seemed to enjoy it much, but it was one of the biggest reasons he’d been able to convince himself for so long that he did like girls. Because he wouldn’t have been able to have sex with her if he was gay, would he?

Comparing the experiences now, the way Louis’s hands were trembling for an entirely different reason than when he’d lost his virginity to Hannah, he realised he might have been a bit naïve back then.

“Right,” Harry said, nodding sagely. “So I guess we’re in the same boat, then?” He looked up at Louis hopefully, and Louis realised suddenly that he was expected to initiate things.

It made sense. Louis was older, and he’d always been the one to put on the brakes when they’d gotten a little too close to this before—Harry waiting for Louis to lead him through this experience was perfectly logical. But Louis didn’t have a damn clue what was expected from him.

“I don’t actually know what I’m supposed to do,” he admitted.

“Maybe we should just—” Harry was already scrambling back to lay down against the pillows. “Kiss? And then go from there?”

Louis nodded and wished it didn’t feel incredibly juvenile and embarrassing to ask for a minute to go brush his teeth and make sure his lips weren’t as dry as they felt.

Harry was licking his own as Louis tentatively crawled up the bed over him. He inhaled sharply when Louis’s mouth pressed against his.

“Okay?” Louis asked, pulling back just a fraction.

Harry nodded, his eyes wide and dark. “Just nervous.”

“Me too.” He leaned down to kiss Harry again, this time trying to clear his mind completely so that instinct could take over. It hadn’t been this hard before there had been an actual destination in
mind. Louis tried to forget where this was leading entirely, letting his body do the work instead.

Louis let himself sink into the softness of Harry’s torso, his weight pressing down until they were practically one entity, their mouths still glued together. He rucked up Harry’s shirt, disconnecting their lips just long enough to get it off, and then changed his mind, attaching his mouth to one of Harry’s nipples instead.

The reaction was more than he could have hoped for. Harry keened, high and frantic from the back of his throat, his whole body bucking up against Louis and nearly dislodging the older boy in the process.

Louis pressed Harry back down into the mattress and moved away from his nipple—he’d already filed away Harry’s reaction for later—to get his trousers off as well.

“You too,” Harry said through a gasp, nudging at Louis’s hip with one of his knees.

Louis acquiesced even though he was slightly worried this was a bit too fast. He tried to kiss Harry again once his own clothing was on the floor next to the bed, but Harry shook his head and pushed him away.

“Pants, too,” he said, already in the process of wriggling out of his own.

Louis carefully tugged down his boxer-briefs over his half-hard dick and tried not to blush. When he turned his attention back to Harry again, it was clear the other boy was utterly gone, his skin flushed from his cheeks all the way down to his groin, where his own cock jutted up proudly between his thighs, looking like the prettiest thing Louis had ever set his eyes on.

So, yeah. Maybe he was gay.

It was easier after that for Louis to wrap his hand around Harry, to pull slowly, the way he would on himself if he were warming up for a relaxed wank, to drink up the moans that flooded out of Harry’s pink lips in response to his touch.

“I wanna—” Harry kept whimpering as Louis upped the pace, canting his hips up into Louis’s hand desperately, like the fingers around his cock weren’t enough. Louis knew what he wanted but it was bad timing, and Louis was so terrified of the prospect of being inside Harry—or the other way around—that he suddenly felt like he was suffocating.

“Just this for now, all right?” he managed. “The others’ll be back soon,” he reminded Harry, who tossed an arm over his eyes with a pathetic little whine.

Harry came only a few minutes later. Louis watched him float back down to earth with something akin to reverence.

When Harry’s eyes finally fluttered open, they alighted immediately on Louis’s cock, still hanging heavily in the space between them. Harry’s tongue darted out to wet his lips, and Louis realised immediately where his train of thought had gone.

“Not this time,” Louis warned him. He knew he didn’t have a chance of lasting more than a few seconds with Harry’s mouth on him.

“But I—” Harry stopped suddenly, his eyes focused on something beyond Louis’s shoulder. “Let me up,” he told Louis, their eyes meeting again.

Louis felt cold as he rolled over onto his back and watched Harry climb out of bed. This was the
thing he had been most afraid of.

But Harry didn’t leave. He only walked up to the door, still bare-arsed and gleaming from head to toe in sweat, and turned off the light before wandering back into bed. Only this time, it was Harry perched on top of Louis, his bum against Louis’s thighs as he squatted over him, illuminated only by the tiny bit of light coming in through the window.

Louis was startled by the sudden shift in position, and a little worried Harry was still planning on taking things further than either of them were ready for. “Haz—” he started to say, but Harry’s finger against his lips stopped him.

“Like this,” he said simply before curling his fingers around Louis’s cock with a jolt of electricity that raced up his spine, sparking every nerve ending in its path until his whole body felt like it was on fire.

Like this, in the dark, with Harry’s body silhouetted against the city lights outside, Louis could almost pretend that the warm wetness of Harry’s hand was like being inside him, and he came with a silent scream, his body jack-knifing underneath Harry as he spilled all over them both in hot throbbing pulses.

After it was over and Harry was tucked back into Louis’s side, the both of them still lying there in the darkness and unwilling to leave the bed for anything—Harry finally spoke. “It’s beautiful,” he said, and it wasn’t hard for Louis to guess that he meant the sprawling city nestled amongst the hills just outside their window, the twinkling lights like mirrored stars scattered across the ground.

“Yeah,” Louis replied, thinking privately to himself that it didn’t remotely compare to the way Harry had looked earlier when he’d came in Louis’s hand. It felt like too much right now to say out loud.

“We should live here someday,” Harry said resolutely.

Louis didn’t respond, but he knew that if LA was what Harry wanted, he would follow him there. He’d follow him anywhere.

February 8, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis stared out at the ocean as the song faded out, wishing Harry were there beside him to take it all in. It had been more than a week now since Harry had seen a California sunset, and Louis couldn’t help but wonder if he’d sat on his balcony staring out at the horizon that last night, thinking to himself that it would be the last one he ever saw.

A single tear sprang unbidden to Louis’s eyes. He wiped it away hastily.

He turned his mind instead to the way Harry had looked the very first time he’d seen the ocean, so different from the beaches back home. He’d been enraptured from the very first glimpse, so utterly in love with this place, and Louis had grown to resent it, jealous of the place itself even though it made no sense.

But maybe that had just been the first time Louis had sensed that their paths were meant to diverge,
that they were two different people who needed different things from the world, and that Louis wouldn’t be able to hold onto Harry forever.
Chapter 30

February 8, 2021

Los Angeles, California

As Louis stared out into the ocean while the sky darkened around him, he couldn’t help but think about what might have been if things had been different.

Maybe if he and Harry hadn’t parted ways that last time, Louis would have kept on the same path, kept digging his career into a grave with Simon looking on, smiling smarmily the whole time. Maybe Louis wouldn’t have thrown that X Factor position back in the man’s smug little face after the first season and broken contract to do his own thing regardless of the consequences.

It was strange looking back on it all now, how fate seemed to only allow enough happiness for one of them at a time. Louis had been miserable during Harry’s best years, and apparently Harry had been slowly wasting away during his. Maybe they just weren’t meant to be together. Maybe they weren’t meant to be happy.

Louis climbed back into the car slowly, not really wanting to leave even though he knew he needed to get back before Liam threw an even bigger fit over everything. He carefully pulled out into traffic, flicking his headlamps on now that it was dark enough to justify doing so.

California at night wasn’t quite so bad. It was closer to home without the bright blue sky constantly bearing down on him, the unrelenting sun and heat unbearable even for Louis, who actually liked the cold. Night-time was a happy medium, a compromise.

Louis felt marginally better as he sped back down the highway, all the way up until his phone started to ring from where he’d tossed it carelessly into the cupholder. He picked it up without looking at the screen, realising belatedly that he’d forgotten to re-enable the Bluetooth inside the car. Louis crammed the phone against his shoulder and steeled himself for a lecture from Jaime.

“How’s it going?”

It wasn’t Jaime on the other end. “Hi, Louis? I’m just landed, but I haven’t deplaned yet. Should I rent a car or take a cab to your place?”

Louis nearly allowed the phone to slip free from his shoulder. “Fuck! Erm, sorry, Sam, hang on a second.” He quickly readjusted. Louis was nearly within the city limits again and the airport was
just a quick jaunt down the highway. “I can pick you up myself if you don’t mind waiting a bit,” he suggested, knowing already that Sam would agree to do whatever he thought was best.

Well, unless it was absolutely insane or Jaime recommended otherwise, at least. But this was neither of those things.

“If you’re sure,” Sam replied uneasily. “I don’t mind taking a cab if it’s easier.”

“I’ll be there in a few,” Louis replied firmly.

Knowing that Sam was in town and ready to take over—after she’d had a good solid sleep—had already eased some of the semi-permanent tension wracking Louis’s body. He could send Mark home finally, he could have Sam mitigate Jaime’s rage…. Things were looking up.

They arranged to meet at a pre-determined spot on the pickup kerb; it wasn’t like Louis could waltz into the airport holding a sign with Sam’s name on it and expect no consequences to arise as a result.

Sam smelled faintly of talcum powder and vomit when she crawled into the front seat a few minutes after Louis pulled up. Her hands were shaking in her lap and she looked a bit peaky.

“You all right?” Louis asked her, already knowing the answer. Sam nodded anyway, and Louis sighed. She was most definitely not all right. “You mind if we grab a bite on the way back?” The grateful expression on her face said everything. “Fast food okay?” Jet lag was a little bit like a hangover; Louis thought a greasy cheeseburger would probably do her some good.

Sam’s nervousness failed to dissipate during the drive, something that concerned Louis enough that he decided he would have to hold off for a while on telling her what had happened with Harry until she got some actual food and a hot shower.

Sam was a bit of an enigma. Soft-spoken, high-strung, and emotionally fragile, she certainly wasn’t an archetype suited to a high-stress job like being a celebrity’s personal assistant. But she’d never given Louis any reason to doubt her, and at this point he trusted her with his life, which was ironic considering she’d come at the recommendation of Nick Grimshaw of all people, who Louis still harboured a fair amount of resentment for even after Harry had cut ties with the both of them.

Sam even lived with him back home in London, which had been a strange arrangement at first, but one Louis had grown accustomed to over time. Now he couldn’t imagine life without her. They were platonic soulmates, practically. She’d hit it off with Lottie in recent months as well, and Louis couldn’t help but hope that there was something more going on behind the scenes. Sam as a sister-in-law wouldn’t be such a bad deal.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Louis asked, glancing over sceptically while Sam clasped and unclasped her hands in her lap.

“I’ll be fine,” she replied unconvincingly. Louis wondered if there was something else going on that had her so off-kilter. “It’s just a bit nerve-wracking, you know.”

“What is?” Louis replied too quickly.

Sam looked over at him just as he focused his eyes back on the road, her brows creased in concern. “Flying,” she said, as if it should have been obvious what she’d meant.

Louis nodded and hoped he wasn’t being so transparent that she’d feel compelled to pursue the source of his own anxiety. She didn’t say anything more, luckily, instead folding up her jacket into
Louis drove to a McDonald’s in Inglewood, hoping it was far enough from LAX that it wouldn’t be swarmed with hungry travellers. By the time they pulled into the drive-thru, Louis’s stomach was grumbling, the realisation that he hadn’t eaten any of the food he’d picked up for Liam and Anne finally catching up to him in that moment.

He over-ordered, getting enough food to feed a family of five, and softened his accent so that he could be comfortably understood by the poor kid listening through their shitty headset. Things were going smoothly all the way up until Louis pulled up to the first window to pay, at which point he was told that they would have to wait in the carpark for their food to be brought out due to it not being ready.

Louis was a little miffed but handed over his credit card and accepted the drinks they had prepared already, handing the larger of the two to Sam, who began sipping it gratefully as soon as it touched her hands. After they gave his card back, Louis pulled forward to park in one of the designated spots for drive-thru customers and tapped his fingers impatiently against the wheel, hoping they wouldn’t be tied up for too much longer. Sam looked like she was ready to pass out.

Of course, because Louis’s luck was just the worst, when the food finally came out, it was carried by a wisp of a girl, who trembled and shook as she passed the bags through the car window, wide-eyed and resembling a frightened woodland creature rather than a human teenager.

“Um,” she stammered, “could I maybe get a picture with you?”

Louis froze, his hand still clutching one of the takeout bags with the girl’s fingers grasping the other end, connecting them. Louis stared at her, feeling a strange pull at his heartstrings that he soon realised was because she looked so much like the twins had at her age.

He should’ve said no, but he couldn’t.

“Just a quick one,” Louis told her, feeling a burst of relief and guilt all at once when her face lit up in response.

Louis knew even as he agreed that it was a mistake, but he justified things to himself by rationalising that it couldn’t really get any worse. The whole world already knew he was in LA and that it likely had to do with Harry. There wasn’t much more harm to be done.

The girl’s hands were shaking too much to take the picture, so Louis did it himself, snapping it without a care for how either of them looked before handing the phone back to her. “There you go, love,” he said with a forced smile.

The girl looked thrilled, but Louis just felt sick to his stomach.

It was only later, as they neared the condo on Sherbourne, that Sam voiced her opinion on the matter.

“I don’t know if you should have done that,” Sam said quietly from the passenger seat. Well, it was too late now.

They didn’t talk at all for the remainder of the drive. When Louis walked inside the condo, it was empty except for Mark, who he quickly discussed things with before deciding that Louis would book him a flight home the next morning now that Sam was around.

After that, Louis gave Sam a brief tour of the place, assuring her that if the sectional wasn’t up to
snuff that he would buy her an air mattress. She just nodded wearily along and then asked to use Louis’s shower.

Louis was grateful for the reprieve while Sam was in his bathroom. There was something oddly soothing about being alone while knowing you weren’t really, and the muffled sound of the spray coming through the closed door was a gentle reassurance that Louis wasn’t the only human left on earth.

He could feel himself spiralling into a dark headspace, one he wasn’t sure he’d be able to crawl out of without help, and he scrambled to pull out his phone, realising even so that Harry’s playlist had become something of a literal lifeline. He wasn’t sure yet what he was going to do without it.

There was a pleasant buzz that descended on Louis’s brain once the earbuds were back in his ears, the phone tucked securely in his hands with the next song already queued to play. Then suddenly, some chaotic inner part of him wondered what would happen if he ripped the flash drive out of the phone right then and there and tossed it out the window, never to be seen again.

Louis hit play instead.

September 15, 2012

Somerset, England

Louis would never admit it to anyone, but he was bored out of his mind. Weddings were just…dull. Even when they were weekend-long parties thrown by the absurdly rich. That might have made it worse, though, honestly.

The only saving grace was that Harry was there with him, and Niall was easily distracted by the hordes of pretty women strolling through the place, which made it very easy to take Harry by the arm and lead him off to a distant corner where they wouldn’t be disturbed.

Harry was persuaded with just a waggle of Louis’s eyebrows.

There hadn’t been much time between actual work and all the travel to luxuriate in bed like they both wanted to. Louis had gotten over his qualms about sex relatively quickly, which was a shame since Harry and he were in the process of moving out of their flat into separate living situations.

Louis had done his best to tell himself that it was better this way, for both of them, but he mostly just felt regret over not getting his head screwed on straight sooner.

Harry, at least, seemed to be enjoying the process, now that he’d been reassured that he and Louis would still see a fair bit of each other, that is.

Management couldn’t have been more pleased if they’d planned it themselves. Apparently, rumours about Louis and Harry were only gaining more traction. There was little Modest could do to combat the constant stream of tweets and edits and conspiracy theories floating around the internet—some had more merit than others, and Harry rather enjoyed reading the more ridiculous ones out loud to Louis when they curled up in bed at night.

Cutting Harry and Louis’s time in public together was about the only tactic they had left, which is why Louis was so keen on making the most of an occasion such as this where it would have
seemed strange to split them up. Both Louis and Harry were good friends with James; one of them choosing not to attend the wedding would have only cast more suspicion on things.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked in a low voice as Louis led him away from the throng of chattering wedding guests who barely even noticed their departure.

“I dunno,” Louis replied. “Anywhere.” He hadn’t thought his plan through much further than ‘get Harry alone, stat’.

Doing so was a little bit more difficult than he’d expected. Ditching Eleanor had been the easiest bit somehow. She was instantly distracted by the celebrity riffraff attending the event and it had been simple enough to point out a group of girls Louis vaguely recognised from some shit series his sister watched, and El had disappeared just like that.

Escaping the party itself was much harder. Practically everyone they passed wanted a chat, and eventually Louis was forced to pretend he was feeling ill from a bit of overindulgence at the open bar, which finally led to someone pointing out a private bathroom he could use for however long he needed.

Louis pulled Harry along with a meaningful glance, his trousers already starting to feel tighter just from the anticipation of what was coming next. They barely made it into the loo before Louis was on Harry, covering him entirely as they pressed up against the wall with one of Harry’s hands fisted in the shower curtain.

Louis kissed him greedily, with little finesse, both of them rutting up against each other like horny teenagers—which they were; or well, Harry was, at least.

Harry kissed back just as messily, too much enthusiasm and not enough experience to be considered objectively ‘good’ by anyone’s standards, but his mouth was warm and wet and it belonged to Harry, and that was all Louis cared about.

So needless to say, Louis didn’t put up much of a fight when that mouth finally unlatched itself from his to move down, down, down, until Harry was kneeling on the tile floor with his head and hands at Louis’s belt, staring up at the older boy with saliva on his lips and tears sticking to his eyelashes. Louis almost came in his pants.

“Is this all right?” Harry asked, which Louis thought was the stupidest question in the whole world.

Louis couldn’t manage a coherent verbal response; he just nodded intensely and stood with one arm braced against the wall just to keep himself from collapsing while Harry painstakingly freed him from his trousers. Louis couldn’t look. He had to keep his eyes closed. He knew if he so much as caught a glimpse of Harry with his pink cheeks and pink lips, his tongue darting out of his mouth in a way that felt innocent and sultry all at the same time, that he would come right then and there, all over Harry’s pretty face.

Louis grunted when Harry finally took him into his mouth, an unattractive sound that echoed off the tiled walls, but Harry wasn’t deterred, slowly taking Louis’s cock down, further than Louis thought possible until he suddenly remembered all the joking that had taken place in the X Factor house after the girls had found out that Harry didn’t have a gag reflex.

Harry had barely pulled off once and then swallowed Louis back down again before Louis was coming in hot jerking pulses against the back of Harry’s throat. Harry leaned back until just the head was still in his mouth and then swallowed, coughing a little when he finally pulled away.
“Sorry,” Louis breathed, opening his eyes again to stare down at Harry, who was an utter wreck. If Louis had been physically capable of getting hard again so soon, the sight of Harry’s face right then would have done it. “Your turn?” he suggested, reaching down to give Harry a hand as he stood up.

Harry nodded eagerly, his eyes widening as Louis lifted his arms above his head and pinned his wrists against the wall.

“Can you keep them here, like this?” Louis asked, waiting until Harry nodded before releasing his grip. “Good boy.” The image of Harry’s cheeks flushing a deep rose at Louis’s praise was forever burned into his brain.

Louis took his time descending Harry’s body. He traced a finger under Harry’s left arm, pretending he could feel the outline of his star tattoo, now filled in dark and showing starkly through the thin white fabric of his dress-shirt. It was favourite, for now at least, despite its simplicity, because when Harry had gotten it filled in the day after the VMAs, he’d informed Louis that he’d been waiting for the right occasion to arise before he had it finished. The occasion in question being the first time they had sex. So yeah, Louis thought it was pretty special.

But there were other parts of Harry still to appreciate.

Louis could have spent all day trying to memorise Harry if he had the time, and maybe someday they would, but right now he had other things on his mind. Namely the bulge in Harry’s trousers that he kept pressing insistently against his thigh as the Louis leisurely brushed his fingers against Harry’s puffy nipples, his quivering tummy, his soft hips, before finally alighting on his belt buckle and yanking it undone with a few careless pulls.

Louis dropped to his knees then and had barely unbuttoned Harry’s fly when the door to the toilet abruptly swung open, revealing Eleanor. She swayed in the doorway for a few seconds while Harry and Louis stared at her, dumbstruck, before finally vomiting right there onto the floor in front of them.
Chapter 31

February 8, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis felt sick to his stomach after the song ended. The sex had been memorable, sure, but he knew that wasn’t why Harry had chosen that particular date. He’d picked it because what had happened after.

After Eleanor had burst in on them in the washroom, everything had gone to shit. Louis remembered cleaning her up while Harry watched, on tenterhooks, neither of them sure how much she’d seen or would remember in the morning. If she had noticed anything, she didn’t say a word to either them or anyone else, at least so far as Louis knew.

That didn’t stop him from having a full-blown panic attack for a good twenty-four hours while Harry watched nervously in the background, unable to do anything about it. Harry’s presence, at least, tempered things somewhat. But then Harry left. And Louis had a full-scale meltdown in his absence.

The tweet had been something he’d instantly regretted. Hows this, Larry is the biggest load of bullshit I’ve ever heard. I’m happy why can’t you accept that. Louis knew deleting it would only make things worse. So he’d kept it up, ignored his notifications, and pretended he’d done it in the interest of the greater good.

Harry had avoided him outside of work for a solid week after that.

Sam finally emerged from the shower a few minutes after Louis had finished listening, dressed in fresh clothes and looking marginally better than she had when he’d picked her up.

“You ready to head over to the hospital?” Louis asked her, sitting up a little in bed as she walked over to the dresser to retriever her glasses.

Sam just nodded.

Louis could tell she was still a bit miffed over what had happened at the drive-thru, which was unfortunate since he was going to have to tell her before they got to Cedars-Sinai about Harry and the incident with the paparazzo earlier.

He managed to hold out till they were in the car, his hand hovering over the shifter while Sam looked on with an expression of mild concern.

“Are you all right?” she asked politely.
No. Louis was not all right. “Something might’ve happened before you got here,” he told her.

“Might have?”

“Something did happen,” Louis corrected. He sucked in a deep breath. “People know about Harry.”


Louis pulled out of the garage slowly, focusing on the mirrors rather than Sam’s panicked face. “Pap snuck in and got a photo, tweeted it out before I deleted the rest.”

“Deleted how?” Louis sighed and gave her a meaningful look, which Sam followed up with a disapproving frown. “Louis—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. If it helps, apparently the pap hasn’t said a word about me. Everyone’s too focused on Harry anyhow.” Louis thought that he would have preferred it to be the other way around, the spotlight on his altercation with some lowlife paparazzo rather than speculation about Harry’s condition at Cedars-Sinai.

“Does Jaime know yet?” Sam asked, as Louis had anticipated.

“No yet,” he admitted. “I called her and told her to call me back once she wakes up. Don’t want her to see the news herself before she gets back to me, but there’s no telling what she’ll check first.” Louis kept driving, not daring to so much as glance at Sam’s face as she processed this information.

“Well, we shouldn’t say anything till we talk to her,” Sam finally concluded. Louis nodded; he’d expected nothing else. “I assume the press don’t know all the details?”

Louis shook his head. “It’s just rumours for now.”

“All right, well Jaime will have to talk to Harry’s people and figure out what kind of statement to make when the time comes. Are there any leaks we need to watch out for?” Gone was the timid, frail young woman from earlier. Sam always operated at her peak during a crisis.

“Zayn and Lottie know,” Louis told her, “but I don’t think we have to worry about them.”

“All right.” Sam said, apparently satisfied, “things sound like they’ll be manageable, even if it’s not the ideal scenario.” It was a bit naïve of them to think they could keep a lid on Harry’s condition forever, anyway.

When Louis and Sam reached the corridor outside Harry’s room, there were two angry faces awaiting them. Liam’s softened a bit at the sight of Sam, whom he was rather fond of, but Gemma had no such reaction, instead marching up to Louis and jabbing him point-blank in the chest as she started yelling.

“Are you fucking braindead, Louis?” she demanded, loud enough that it caught the attention of the group of nurses down at the end of the corridor, one of whom turned and started to walk toward them at the noise.

“You’re gonna get us thrown out,” Louis warned her as he settled his hands on her upper arms, but it only made Gemma’s expression harden.

“I couldn’t give less of a fuck,” she hissed, breaking out of his hold to take a step back. “You’re really taking selfies with fans with this shitstorm hanging over our heads? How do you think that’s
“Going to look to the press?”

“Well, what was I supposed to do, Gemma? Tell her to fuck off? How would that have looked?”

“I can’t believe you,” Gemma said. She shook her head in disgust and walked away, slipping through the door to Harry’s hospital room and letting it clang shut behind her with an air of finality.

Liam moved forward in her absence, approaching cautiously until he was close enough to touch Louis. “Mate, I think we should probably leave,” he said softly as he dropped a heavy hand on Louis’s shoulder.

Louis nodded, too worn out to disagree. There was a pit of swirling guilt inside him that he knew would only fade with time.

Sam wasn’t the type to roll out the ‘I told you so’s, which Louis was inordinately grateful for as they made their way out to the car in silence.

Louis got behind the wheel again even though his hands were shaking. It would have made more sense for Sam to drive, probably, but she only had a licence in case of emergencies. Louis didn’t want to call this an emergency, so he drove.

“I’m sorry for bailing on you earlier,” Louis said to Liam in a low tone once they were about halfway back to the condo. Louis could hear Sam typing away in the backseat, and he was graceful that the pace didn’t so much as slow when he spoke; it gave the illusion that she wasn’t listening to every single word.

Liam made a small sound in the back of his throat like he was surprised to hear Louis’s apology. “It’s all right, mate,” he replied easily. “I may not like it, but I get why you needed space.”

Louis nodded, grateful for Liam’s understanding, but Liam wasn’t done yet.

“I’m just worried about you,” Liam told him. “You’d tell me if things got really bad, yeah?”

“Of course I would,” Louis replied dismissively, wondering to himself if Harry had ever told anyone when things had gotten bad for him, or if he’d been too afraid no one would listen.

When they returned to the condo, Louis busied himself setting Sam up with everything she needed to have a proper night’s sleep on the sectional, checking in with her and then double-checking again to make sure she was every bit as comfortable as she could be before he finally disappeared into the master bedroom to re-join Liam.

The other man was already in bed, covers tucked under his armpits as he dozed peacefully on his side. Louis watched him a moment before going into the bathroom to brush his teeth. He paused, staring at his reflection in the mirror, suddenly understanding why everyone had seemed so worried about him.

He looked strung-out, worse even than when he and Harry had first been on the rocks, worse than when Louis and Zayn had turned to sampling every drug under the sun just for a brief reprieve from all the shit going on in the band and their personal lives—and for Louis, those two things had always been irrevocably tied together. Louis looked like a zombie, and apparently all the sleep in the world wasn’t helping.

Everything else aside, Louis realised that in the end, it might be the stress that finally did him in.
Unsettled by his own image, Louis washed his face even though he knew it wouldn’t make a
difference, and then changed out of his clothes before climbing into bed with Liam.

He set his phone next to him on the pillow, turning the volume down so he could just barely hear
the music emanating faintly from the speakers, and closed his eyes.

October 15, 2012

London, England

Louis still couldn’t believe Harry had somehow talked him into getting more tattoos. Tattoos,
plural. Multiple. And it had been a hell of a lot less enjoyable for Louis than Harry had made it
look every time he got his, seeing as Harry was always glassy-eyed and unreasonably horny
afterwards. Louis, upon leaving Skunx that morning, had just felt irritable and itchy, which wasn’t
ideal when they had a music video shoot immediately after.

“You’re wearing my shirt,” Harry remarked as they got in the car at the end of the day. They’d
both decided to head to Louis’s flat for the night purely because it was closer.

“D’you want it back?” Louis asked, raising his eyebrows as he glanced down at the frankly
unremarkable soft white Henley that he’d most likely grabbed off of Harry’s floor that morning
without realising.

Harry hummed pensively. “Maybe tomorrow.” The way Harry said it made Louis think that he was
definitely planning on wearing the shirt tomorrow, and it took him a minute to remember that they
had an interview the next day.

Louis rolled his eyes at the realisation. Harry loved leaving breadcrumbs for the more observant
fans, no matter how much it stressed Louis out to have their relationship put under a microscope in
front of the whole internet.

Right now, Louis was just relieved that they were on their way home, far too exhausted to have any
kind of actual fight about Harry’s off-and-on secret messages to the fans. He let Harry drive even
though the younger boy was absolutely atrocious at it, mostly because Louis’s arm itched like hell
and he felt it would be too distracting for him to pay attention to the road.

“When’s it supposed to stop hurting so damn much?” Louis grumbled, glaring down at his bandage
as they drove.

“What?” Harry glanced over at him for barely a second and nearly hit the kerb. “Oh, you mean the
tats? Yeah, I dunno, really. Mine never hurt much after. Or, like, they don’t hurt enough to bother
me, I guess.” He was still talking in that slow spacey way that belied the semi in his pants, but if
Harry thought Louis was going to help him out with it when they got home, he had another thing
coming.

Louis stared at the side of Harry’s head in bewilderment. Honestly, it wasn’t even fair that Harry’s
body reacted the way it did to pain, completely overloading the poor boy with a rush of endorphins
so overwhelming that he actually enjoyed it, while the rest of the mere mortals had to suffer and
endure.

“You’re a proper freak of nature, Harold,” Louis told him.
Harry just smiled and overlaid his hand on top of Louis’s, giving it a gentle squeeze. “You love it.”

Louis did love it, and that was the problem.

Harry drove like a speed demon all the way back to Louis’s flat, worse than even Louis himself, and by the time they pulled into the garage, Louis was feeling a bit carsick.

“You okay?” Harry asked him as Louis turned his keys in the lock. “You look a bit poorly is all.”

“Fine,” Louis mumbled. He squeezed his eyes shut for just a moment as he opened the door to let them in. “Just need a glass of water and some paracetamol.” He was annoyed with himself for being such a baby over the tattoos, but—they really did hurt.

Harry shifted into nursemaid mode the second he stepped foot into Louis’s flat. “Sit your bum down there,” he said in a sing-song voice, gently pushing Louis down onto his own sofa and putting a firm hand on his chest when he immediately tried to get back up again. “Just let me take care of it,” Harry said. His tone made it clear there would be no room for argument.

The thing was that Louis knew Harry loved taking care of people. Hell, he liked doing the boys’ laundry, even, and no one liked doing laundry. But Louis had grown up in a house with too many people and too many responsibilities. And he felt a jarring sense of unease every time Harry tried to wait on him.

This time, Louis forced it down and sat back against the sofa cushions with his eyes closed, allowing Harry to take the reins.

Louis jolted a little when Harry plopped down next to him on the sofa a few minutes later. He opened his eyes to find an entire basket full of sundries in the other boy’s lap and squinted at them in confusion as Harry handed him a glass and a couple of tablets to take.

Louis swallowed them down unquestioningly and then startled again when Harry took the glass away before tugging at his bandaged arm.

“Need to clean it,” Harry explained, already meticulously unwrapping the Louis’s arm without looking up.

Louis watched him work, wordlessly nervous, taking care not to move at all as Harry soaked a flannel into a pitcher of soapy water before dabbing it gently onto Louis’s skin.

Louis hissed, despite his efforts to keep the noise in, and Harry looked up in concern.

“I’m fine,” Louis told him through gritted teeth. “You can keep going.”

The pain and the irritating itch finally subsided a bit after Harry had finished washing the tattoos. Louis hummed a little at the feeling of Harry’s fingers on his skin as he rubbed the lotion in. Harry looked overjoyed at his response.

“You know…” Harry started to say, still rubbing gentle circles against the ink even though Louis thought he’d probably done enough already, and there was still his own tattoo to take care of as well. “Since you’re not being so stodgy about tattoos anymore, I was thinking maybe we could get some couple’s tattoos.” He looked up at Louis imploringly as his hands stilled.

“Couple’s tattoos?” Louis questioned. “Like getting our names tatted on each other?” He didn’t mean to sound so incredulous, but the idea was out there, even for Harry.
“No, um, like…hang on.” Harry jumped up and darted out of the room, returning a few seconds later with his laptop under his arm.

Louis looked on curiously as Harry opened it and pulled up Pinterest, which Louis had only ever seen his mum and sister use, before actually logging in himself.

“You have a Pinterest?” Louis asked, garnering an annoyed look from Harry in return. “Sorry.”

Harry ignored the jab and clicked a few more times before angling the screen toward Louis. “See?”

Louis examined the collection of photos on Harry’s laptop. “I don’t get it,” he finally admitted.

Harry let out a long-suffering sigh. “They’re matching tattoos,” he explained as if Louis were in primary school, “for couples.” He pointed out a few different matching pairs: a rope and anchor, ship and compass, heart and arrow, rose and dagger. “I thought, you know, we could get some so we have something that’s just for us.”

Louis didn’t think that tattooing a heart and arrow was all that subtle, but he wasn’t about to say as much. “So you like all of these?” he asked instead.

Harry nodded eagerly.

“Can I pick which ones we get, then?”

Another nod.

Louis scanned the page carefully, giving his decision a few minutes of deliberation before he opened his mouth. “I mean, we travel a lot, yeah? The ship and compass would be the easiest to pass off as just…cool tattoos.”

Harry was frowning slightly like he didn’t fully agree, but he nodded anyway, his eyes still lingering on the picture of the rose and dagger still full-sized on the page. He exited out of it and scooted closer to Louis, resting his head on the older boy’s shoulder.

“You know we can always get the other ones later,” Louis reassured him, murmuring the words into Harry’s thick curls. “Anniversary presents to ourselves.”

Harry snorted, but Louis could tell he was pleased. “Do we even have an anniversary?”

“We’ll make one up,” Louis said stupidly. “That way it’ll be just ours. We can just pick a random date or something. Like…September 28th. That seems good.”

Louis was babbling in that way that he always did when Harry was staring too deeply into his eyes, and the slightly floaty feeling now that the pain relievers were kicking in was doing nothing to help matters.

“You want our anniversary to be in September?” Harry asked, incredulous. “September’s boring.”

“Not anymore, it isn’t,” Louis pointed out.

Harry rolled his eyes even as he leaned in to peck a kiss between Louis’s eyebrows. “Then, September it is.”

February 8, 2021
There was only a single beat of silence after the song ended before Liam opened his mouth. “S’that one of the ones Harry wrote for you?” he asked, the words coming out like mush.

Louis started a little. “Oh,” he replied without answering. “I thought you were asleep.”

“You’re loud,” Liam complained, but there was no heat to it.

Louis huffed out a laugh. “Sorry, mate.”

Liam shifted a little against the sheets. “Too worried to sleep,” he mumbled, though Louis could tell from the timbre of his voice that he was on the verge of unconsciousness already.

“Yeah,” Louis replied with a sigh. “Yeah, me too.”
I know a few of you were looking forward to this chapter in particular, so enjoy!

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostesupd8s
Tumblr: @vondrostes

February 9, 2021
Los Angeles, California

When Louis woke up a couple hours later, there was no disorientation or grogginess. He knew immediately that it was still the middle of the night, and he knew that if he didn’t get his arse out of bed and to the toilet right that second, he would piss himself. And Liam probably wouldn’t appreciate that much.

Louis waddled to the toilet like a toddler who’d had too much juice before bed. By the time he flopped back onto the sheets, flat on his back and eyes wide as he stared up at the ceiling, he was far too awake to even think about going back to sleep.

Louis laid there for a minute or two and then got back up, retreating into the bathroom again so he wouldn’t wake Liam. He sat on the toilet with the lights dimmed and stared at nothing, wondering just how long he could hold out before he decided to pop some sleeping tablets instead of doing things the natural way.

The paper bag full of toiletries sitting on the counter caught Louis’s eye as he sat there, waiting. He still wanted to tidy Harry up a bit. Louis wanted to do it now, in fact, even though it was gone midnight and he still hadn’t asked for permission from either Anne or Gemma. He was still worried they might think it was an invasion of Harry’s privacy, or worse, that Louis was getting off on it somehow.

Louis just wanted to do something kind for Harry, to take care of him.

Harry, for all his tendencies toward caretaking, also loved to be pampered, to be taken care of in return by the people he trusted most. Once upon a time, that had been Louis, and when Louis took care of Harry, he worshipped him.

It was that thought that had Louis reaching for his mobile despite how late it was, and despite the fact that Gemma had screamed in his face when they’d last spoken, the tension between them still unresolved. Louis wasn’t sure if she was even awake or if she would answer the phone if she was, but he was determined to at least try.

“Louis?” She didn’t sound angry anymore, at least. Just tired. “You know it’s after midnight, right?”

“Yeah, sorry,” Louis breathed, pausing for a few beats before continuing. “And sorry for earlier,”
he added. “For being an idiot. I know it’s not an excuse, but I just didn’t want to deal with having
to say no, but you were right, and I shouldn’t have done it.”

There was silence on the other end and for a moment, Louis thought Gemma had hung up on him.
“Is that what you called for, then?” she finally asked.

Louis winced at his own transparency. “Not exactly….”

Gemma sighed. “Well, out with it.”

“I bought some stuff for Harry earlier,” Louis said, stringing the words together almost too quickly
to be understood. “I was wondering if it would be all right with you if I—”

“Stuff?”

“Yeah, erm. Like, shaving cream and things. Because I know the nurses don’t really take care of
that. I just thought….”

“Oh.”

“It’s not like—” Louis’s face was burning. “I just thought it might be nice for him, when he wakes
up, you know, if he was cleaned up a bit.”

“Oh,” Gemma said through a yawn, but the sceptical note was gone, filling Louis with a sense of
relief. “I suppose that’s all right, then. Do you want me to come with?”

“If you want to,” Louis replied automatically, even though he really didn’t fancy the thought of her
tagging along, watching him with Harry. There was nothing truly private about what he was
planning to do, but it still felt that way.

Gemma yawned again. “I’d rather go back to bed if I’m honest,” she replied, infusing Louis with another surge of relief. “Your name’s already on the visitors list, they should let you in on your
own even though it’s after hours.” With the amount of celebrities that funnelled in and out of
Cedars-Sinai, visiting hours were usually more of a suggestion.

“All right. Erm, thanks.”

“Mhmm.”

The connection ended and the screen of Louis’s phone quickly faded to black.

Louis got dressed in the dark and was careful not to wake either Liam or Sam as he exited the
condo with the bag of grooming supplies clutched in his left hand. The drive to the hospital was
oddly pleasant; Louis had almost forgotten how nice Beverly Hills at midnight could be. No
traffic, no sun—just the perfect mix of neon lights and endless road, cut short in this case by the
nearness of Louis’s destination.

The hospital itself was a bit eerie at night. It was practically empty, of course, and Louis made a
beeline for the nurse’s station on the third floor as soon as he stepped out of the lifts, terrified
despite Gemma’s reassurances that he would be thrown out if someone caught him in Harry’s
room.

The nurse waiting there was nice enough, patiently listening to Louis as he stumbled through an
explanation of what he was there for and nodding in approval.
“It’s customary for family to handle those things,” the nurse told him with only a touch of apprehension, “but if you’re on the list and the family has no objections….”

Louis was suddenly tempted to blurt out that he was Harry’s *boyfriend* for some unfathomable reason but just barely managed to keep his mouth shut.

The nurse had a quick perusal of Louis’s bag before he went in, just in case. Her eyes widened ever-so slightly at the sight of the nail varnish sitting at the very bottom of the bag, but she said nothing of it, only telling Louis to be careful and to hit the call button if he needed any help.

Louis thanked her quickly and then hurried to Harry’s room.

The lights had been turned off. Louis flicked them on as he entered, but dimmed them almost immediately, lowering the brightness until it was nearly as dark as it had been when he’d first walked in.

Harry was lying just as Louis had left him the day prior. Not a thing about him had changed in the hours since. Not that Louis had expected there to be any difference, but the sight of Harry, frozen in time except for the gradually growing stubble around his jaw, would never not be jarring.

Louis decided to start there.

Harry had always hated shaving but hated the scraggly dark blonde hairs that grew on his unwilling face even more, a constant nuisance that Louis had tried to take care for him when he’d been around to do so. After they’d split for the last time, Louis had seen more and more pictures of Harry in the tabloids sporting a stubbly goatee, until finally the pictures had stopped altogether, and Louis didn’t have any way of knowing what Harry looked like anymore.

But when Louis had gotten there just after Harry had been brought in, he’d been relatively clean-shaven, just the barest hint of growth on his upper lip and chin. He didn’t think Gemma or any of the nurses had been the ones to shave him, which meant that Harry must have done it himself, just before—

Louis shut that train of thought down and scooted his chair closer, pulling out his phone to put on another song before squirting a bit of the shaving gel into his hand and gently massaging it into Harry’s face.

There was no bolt of electricity when their skin touched, only a hollow sense of longing throbbing in the centre of Louis’s chest. He ignored it, moving his fingers in broad sweeping strokes over Harry’s cheeks as the music thrummed and swelled in his ears.

October 22, 2012

Doncaster, England

Louis really shouldn’t have been so nervous. Harry had been to his house before. It wasn’t anything new.

But he was worried, because, well…it was the first time they were going home together, to the house where Louis’s whole family still lived, since they’d officially gotten together. Louis was terrified his mum would figure it out the second she saw the two of them, and he really didn’t want
to lie to her. He just didn’t want to tell her the truth either.

If Louis told his family, it would only be fair to let Harry tell his, and the possibility of even more people knowing scared Louis too much to contemplate for more than a second.

Things had gone fairly well that morning. Louis had played in a charity football game at Keepmoat, something he could’ve only dreamed of as a young lad, and Harry had been there in the stands the whole time, cheering him on.

It was perfect, practically, and here Louis was on the ride home, ruining it just like he ruined everything else. He squeezed Harry’s hand where it was laying on the centre console between them and ignored the questioning look he received in response.

But Harry didn’t let it go like Louis had expected. “You’re acting weird,” Harry said a few minutes later, when they were nearly to the house. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Louis answered quickly, giving Harry’s hand another squeeze, to reassure him—to reassure himself. “Just tired. Sore.”

“There’s probably enough time before dinner that you could have a hot bath,” Harry suggested, and it was easy to hear the suggestive note in his voice through the feigned nonchalance.

Louis turned away from the road for a quick second to smile at Harry. “Yeah, all right,” he said, knowing all-too well just what it was he was agreeing to. “A bath sounds nice.”

A bath did sound nice. Unfortunately, Harry was much more of a tease than Louis had banked on.

Louis didn’t realise this, however, until he was already stripped down and lying naked in the bath Harry had run for him, complete with some kind of foamy blue bath liquid that had presumably been stolen from Lottie’s things. Harry had ducked out of the bathroom while Louis was getting changed out of his footie kit, and when the door opened again, Louis fully expected to see Harry standing there just as naked as he was.

But Harry was still completely clothed when he walked in with a bottle of shampoo in his hand. “Yours is out,” he explained, nodding toward the bottle on the edge of the tub, the bottom caked in the barest remnants of shampoo. Definitely not enough to use on Louis’s hair, which was apparently what Harry was planning.

“Oh,” Louis replied, trying not to let the disappointment shine through as Harry perched on the corner of the tub next to his head, already slopping some of the shampoo into his palm and lathering up his hands.

“Slide down a little,” Harry urged, nudging Louis’s shoulder with his elbow until the older boy dipped his head in the water enough to get his hair wet.

Any disappointment Louis had felt faded as soon as Harry tangled his fingers in Louis’s hair, massaging gentle circles into his scalp until he was thoroughly soaped up.

It was like the attention Harry had showed him when he’d cared for Louis’s tattoos, but more intimate somehow, and not just because Louis was completely naked under the thin sheet of milky water.

Harry’s hands in his hair shouldn’t have been enough to get Louis going, but he couldn’t stop thinking about how intense it really was, to have all of Harry’s focus on him, just him, and nothing else, as Harry carefully rinsed the suds out before guiding Louis down again to duck his head under
“Feeling better?” Harry asked once he was finished.

Louis looked at him helplessly and tried to communicate with only his eyes just what a state Harry had left him in. It didn’t take much for the younger boy to catch on.

“Can I—?” Harry asked, nodding down at where Louis’s cock, hard now between his legs, was just barely peeking above the surface of the bathwater.

“Please,” Louis said with a loud exhale, no longer caring how desperate he seemed. His throat produced a sound he’d never made before when Harry’s hand, slick and damp in the soapy water, finally closed around the base of his cock, tugging gently, still teasing. “Harry,” he choked out, pleading with his eyes for the other boy to go faster.

Harry didn’t indulge him at first, instead waiting until Louis was squirming in the tub and near tears before he upped the pace.

“I’m so proud of you,” Harry murmured in Louis’s ear as his hand worked faster and faster over Louis’s cock. “You looked so fit out there, wanted you to throw me onto the grass and fuck me right there on the footie pitch with everyone watching.”

Louis came hard, unable to even get a single word out in warning before he was spilling over Harry’s fist, still panting and oversensitive as he finally pried Harry off. He slumped back against the edge of the tub with a sigh and noted the way that Harry was carefully palming the crotch of his trousers with his left hand.

Louis nodded toward him. “Want me to take care of that?” he asked, still a bit breathless after his own orgasm.

Harry scrunched up his nose cutely. “Dinner’s nearly done by now, I think.”

“I’ll make it quick.” In an ideal world, Louis would have Harry spread out on his childhood bed so he could fuck him proper, like Harry had wanted, but unfortunately for both of them, the Tomlinson house was as full as ever and there was no chance of anything more than a hasty blowjob between them.

“Later,” Harry said with a cheeky wink, the word a promise.

February 9, 2021
Los Angeles, California

By the time the song finished, Louis had set the razor down and went about mopping up Harry’s face with a damp flannel, leaving him looking younger and even more vulnerable than before.

It physically hurt Louis to look at him like that, but he wasn’t done yet.

Harry was still covered in bandages, but Louis knew that the cuts had healed well enough that the nurses were no longer worried about them being reopened by a bit of gentle jostling. Still, he was painstakingly careful with Harry’s body as he propped him up with a pillow behind his back,
enough that Louis had access to the cascade of chocolate curls that had been tucked into a neat ponytail at the base of Harry’s neck until now.

Louis scooted closer, letting Harry’s forehead fall against his shoulder as he poured a bit of conditioning solution into his hands, carefully working it through the Harry’s long hair.

Harry would have cried if he could have seen the state his curls were in. They were ratty, greasy, limp, and tangled worse than a rat’s nest when Louis finally freed them from the hair grip that had been keeping it hidden. For a single terrifying second, Louis was worried the hair wasn’t salvageable, that they’d have to cut it to undo the mess, but he was determined to not let it come to that.

All of his hair gone was the last thing Harry needed to wake up to.

Detangling Harry’s curls was a struggle. Louis carefully worked at them with copious amounts of conditioner and a hair pick, pulling apart each knot with unwavering concentration. He must have worked on it for nearly an hour, the intensity of his focus making his hands tremble a bit in frustration, but finally, it was done.

Louis ran his fingers through the damp curls with a grateful sigh. He didn’t linger long; he was touching Harry for Harry’s sake, not his own. He applied a bit of dry shampoo to combat some of the lingering grease and tamed the mess of curls with a loose braid before laying Harry back against the pillows. Louis stared down at him, satisfied with his work.

It would have been enough for Louis to leave him like that. The nurses sponge-bathed him every so often, so anything else was just ancillary, but Louis couldn’t shake the desire to really make sure that Harry was taken care of, that he felt good in some way, just in case he was inside his own head, on some level aware of what was happening to him.

The sleeves of the hospital gown were large enough that Louis didn’t have to fight to apply a bit of deodorant. It was rather unnecessary, considering it would just be removed during his next bath, but Louis was hoping the smell would be a familiar one to Harry’s mind.

Harry’s lips were dry the same way they always were when he wasn’t constantly moisturizing them, so Louis carefully applied a bit of lip balm too before stowing it on the little table beside the bed for later. That was something he could do for Harry on repeat visits, at least.

Lastly was the chipped, flaking varnish on Harry’s fingernails. Louis scrubbed it off quickly, wincing at the smell of the acetone as it filled the air in the room. He hoped that would fade soon; he didn’t really want to have to explain himself to one of the nurses if they came in before he left.

The colour he’d chosen was a baby pink, almost unnoticeable except for a subtle shimmer when the light hit it just right. Louis thought Harry would appreciate that. He always preferred a nice shade of pink in private, when he didn’t have to worry about what anyone thought about it.

None of Harry’s visitors were people he had to worry about being judged by, but Louis thought he would appreciate the subtlety of it, anyway. It was just for him, to know that, when he woke up, he’d been taken care of. Loved.

Louis swallowed hard as he put the varnish away, giving Harry a final once-over as he stood. Like this, with the exception of the bandages and his feeding tube, of course, Harry no longer looked like the victim of a horrific accident. He looked peaceful, like he was just sleeping.

Louis had to fight not to cry as he fled the room.
Chapter 33

February 9, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis felt like he was being pulled apart at the seams when he finally made it out of the hospital. He walked across the car park with his hands shoved into his coat pockets, shivering a little at the slight wind. He fully intended to pass out as soon as he got back to the condo.

His phone buzzed in his pocket before he even reached the car. Louis skidded to a halt, a growl of frustration breaking out of his throat as he ripped the device out of his coat to answer it.

It was Jaime. Louis crumpled.

“You looked, didn’t you,” he said morosely after answering. He was already moving forward again before she had a chance to reply, walking quicker now back to the car.

“I don’t even know what to say.” Jaime’s voice was quiet, even, and that was the biggest sign of all that she was beyond furious.

Louis didn’t know what to say either. But he stayed on the line as he walked to his car and got in the driver’s seat, putting the keys in the ignition while Jaime breathed heavily in his ear, but not turning them.

“Explain,” Jaime continued quietly, “please.”

Louis didn’t know where to start and admitted as much, being met with a long-suffering sigh from Jaime in response.

“Let’s start with why there are pictures of Harry Styles floating around the internet attached to a headline that says he was hospitalised for a suspected drug overdose. Because that seems to be the front page of every major online publication this morning.”

Louis pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, hoping to stave off the stress-induced headache he could already feel forming behind his eyes. “I didn’t think it would spread that fast,” he admitted. There was little information to back up the photo, and something that big debuting on social media was always a bit suspect. But maybe— “Someone talked?” Louis assumed.
“The Sun claims they have a source who saw Harry at Cedars-Sinai. They didn’t say it was the person who took the photo, but it’s easy enough to connect the dots.”

“Shit.” Apparently, Louis’s threats hadn’t had much of an effect. Or maybe they’d had too much. Maybe if he’d offered to buy off the pap instead of threatening to call the cops…. Well, it was too late now.

“I expect I don’t need to tell you what a stupid idea it is to be seen with fans when something this big is going on,” Jaime continued, her voice still as calm as ever.

That was only worsening Louis’s anxiety. At least if she were yelling at him it would be a bit of a distraction from everything else he was feeling.

“Yeah, I know,” Louis replied in a near-whisper. His phone beeped in his ear. Louis brought it down and glanced at the screen to find that Lottie was calling him. Well, she’d have to wait.

“What are we going to do?” he asked, ignoring the persistent beeping.

“We aren’t going to do anything,” Jaime told him. “I’m already working on a press release. We should confirm that Harry is in hospital, but obviously, mentioning why is off the table until his condition changes. I’ll have it sent over to his publicists and forward a copy to Anne and Gemma to look over in case they want to make any alterations.”

Louis noticed that she hadn’t offered to send a copy to him, but he supposed that was probably for the best. He’d already fucked things up enough as it was.

“Is there anything you want me to do?” he asked tiredly, already knowing what Jaime’s answer was going to be, but obligated to ask anyway, just for peace of mind.

“I think you’ve done enough. I’ll call you.” And that was it.

Louis slumped against the steering wheel, letting his eyes flutter closed with the phone still clutched in his hand. It buzzed again, prompting him to sit up. Lottie.

“Sorry,” Louis said as he answered. “I was in the middle of a phone call with Jaime when you rang me the first time.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Lottie replied, her voice making her sound every bit as tired and sad as Louis felt himself. “So everyone knows now, I guess.”

“More or less.”

“What are you going to do?”

Louis shrugged even though she couldn’t see him. “Wait for someone smarter than me to tell me what to do,” he replied nonchalantly. “Same thing I’ve always done.”


“Could’ve fooled me.” Louis had a hard time pointing to any decision he’d made in the last decade and calling it smart. And Harry. Harry had been the worst decision of them all.

She sighed. “I don’t want to have a fight,” she told him. “I just woke up to a bunch of reporters hounding me for comments, and I haven’t even been able to nip out of the flat for coffee just in case someone recognises me.”
“Oh, shit,” Louis muttered. “Yeah, sorry about that. They aren’t bothering Fizzy and the twins, are they?”

“’Fraid so, but I’ve already talked to them. They know not to say anything.”

Louis groaned, resisting the urge to bash his forehead repeatedly into the steering wheel. “I’m sorry,” he said again, even though the apologies were useless now. “I wish I could fix all this.”

“We’ll get through this, Lou,” Lottie told him, and really, it should have been him comforting her, not the other way around. “I know you’re doing your best. But I’m still worried about you.”

“I’ll be all right,” Louis reassured her. “I know how to handle the press.” It didn’t mean he always used that knowledge to the best of his abilities, though.

“That’s not what I meant.”

Louis scrunched his eyes shut tight. “Then what?” he asked, gritting his teeth against the impending answer. He already knew what she’d say.

“It’s just…it’s been more than a week, Lou.”

“I know that.”

“I just think we should talk about it. What’s going to happen if—”

“Lottie, I don’t want to have this conversation,” Louis said, voice growing hard. He knew the statistics already. He knew the window of time Harry had was narrowing at an astronomical pace.

“Okay, but just—if something happens, you’ll call me, right?” Her voice was higher-pitched than normal and tinged with a little desperation.

Louis wondered if she’d been waiting for him to reach out to her since the last time they’d talked. Fuck, he was a bad brother. A bad everything, really. He’d always been shit at maintaining proper relationships. A one-track mind, Harry had used to say. Focused on one thing at the expense of everything else. And as per usual, that one thing happened to be Harry himself.

“Yeah, Lots, I’ll call. I’m sorry I haven’t been keeping up.”

“It’s all right,” she said quietly in a tone that made it very clear it wasn’t all right, even though they both knew she was just as capable of picking up the phone as he was. “I know things are hard right now.”

“Yeah.” Louis sucked in a deep breath. “But I’m still sorry.”

“I know.” There was a long silence before Lottie spoke up again. “I miss you.”

“I miss you, too,” Louis told her. “I can—I’ll fly you out for the South American leg if you want.” It felt weird to be planning ahead for the future when he still wasn’t even sure what was going to happen tomorrow, but Louis knew Lottie needed that small bit of reassurance.

“Yeah, that’d be nice.”

Louis could hear a bit of a smile in her voice now, and it eased a little bit of the weight resting on his shoulders. “Good. And if you need me to send any lawyers round, don’t hesitate to let me know.”
Lottie laughed. “I’ll be fine, Lou. I can handle myself.”

“Well, the option’s always there if you need it,” Louis insisted. He sighed and finally straightened up. He wasn’t sure how long exactly he’d been sat in the Cedars-Sinai car park in a dark car, but he knew he should head back to the condo and try to get a little sleep. “I should probably go,” he told his sister regretfully.

“I’d better let you get off to bed, then. It’s rather late there already, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Louis replied. “Pretty late.” He didn’t mention the fact that the only reason he was even up was because he hadn’t been able to go back to sleep in the first place. It would only give Lottie another reason to needlessly worry about him.

“Goodnight, then. Don’t forget to call me.”

“I won’t, I won’t. Night, Lots.”

Louis hung up, set his phone down with a sigh, and finally turned the keys in the ignition. He was exhausted; tired enough that he felt like he might pass out right there behind the wheel. Which of course meant that when he finally got back to the condo and walked into the master bedroom with every intention of falling face-first into bed without even changing, Liam was sat upright on the mattress, the lamp behind him casting a moody glow over his sombre features.

“Oh, sod off,” Louis muttered under his breath as he leant down to take off his shoes.

He hadn’t really intended for Liam to hear it but received an affronted huff of air in response anyway.

“Where were you?” Liam asked accusatorily.

“Hospital.”

“At half-one?”

Louis arched an eyebrow as he straightened up to meet Liam’s challenging gaze head on. “You’re the one who doesn’t want me to avoid Harry,” he pointed out.

“I didn’t mean for you to go sneaking out at all hours of the night,” Liam shot back.

“Wasn’t sneaking out.” Louis quickly shed his shirt and joggers before climbing onto the bed next to Liam, curling into the sheets and facing the wall as he spoke. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“Sorry about that.”

It wasn’t really Liam’s fault, but Louis didn’t have the energy to explain himself over something so insignificant.

“Do you want to talk?” Liam continued.

Louis wasn’t sure if he was being intentionally obtuse or if Liam genuinely had no clue that Louis’s whole body was radiating tension and bone-deep weariness. “Not really,” Louis replied, making an effort to sound amicable. A confrontation would only make Liam more obstinate.

“Okay.”

Louis’s eyes remained open as Liam settled back into bed behind him and then turned off the light.
He’d been on the verge of collapse before, but his minor spat with Liam had triggered a sudden surge of energy he couldn’t quite fight down on his own.

This time, Louis waited until Liam’s breathing evened out into a tell-tale sleeping rhythm before he pulled out his phone and put it to his ear to listen as he drifted off.

November 11, 2012
London, England

Things were difficult, to say the least.

None of the boys had really anticipated just how much work there was, beforehand even, that went into making a film, and the endless meetings on top of rehearsals and recording and everything else were really starting to take their toll.

Harry was kipping whenever he could, but it wasn’t nearly enough. Sometimes he was near tears with sleep deprivation, and it destroyed Louis to see him like that, unable to do anything to fix it.

Their sex life had taken a corresponding dive. Simply put, neither of them had the energy. Louis wasn’t even sure when the last time he’d had a proper wank was.

So he was understandably irritated when, with his hand halfway down Harry’s trousers, Liam suddenly waltzed into the loo and loudly announced: “Management wants to see you, mate!”

Harry and Louis both froze, the former still pinned against the wall of the cubicle they’d tucked themselves into in one of the public toilets in Syco’s offices, hoping to take advantage of the brief reprieve they’d been afforded for lunch before they were due in yet another meeting with Ben Winston and a bunch of executives Louis didn’t give two shits about.

Liam hadn’t actually addressed either of them by name, which meant responding was a risk, but Louis was confident that Liam was looking for him based on the smug tone.

Louis sighed softly and pushed Harry away as he unlatched the door. He poked his head out to find Liam squinting at him from the sinks. “What?” Louis asked, his voice laced with irritation.

“I told you,” Liam said. “Management wants to see you before the meeting.” He was still frowning at Louis like he couldn’t figure out what was going on. “Were you wanking in there?”

“Maybe,” Louis joked. “Why, you wanna lend me a hand?” He accentuated the statement with a cheeky eyebrow waggle and ignored the way Harry was shifting uncomfortably against the wall in his peripheral vision.

Liam just rolled his eyes. “You’d best hurry,” he said, his fingers playing with the door handle like he couldn’t wait to leave. “Dick’s in a mood.”

“He’ll be in a worse one if he hears you calling him that,” Louis pointed out. “I’ll be out in a minute, yeah?” He was already starting to duck back inside the cubicle when Liam opened his mouth again.

“Hey, you haven’t seen Harry, have you?”
Louis winced. “No, haven’t done. Why?”

“Management wants to see him, too, apparently.”

Louis tipped his head back, out of Liam’s sight, and bit back a groan of frustration. Of course they did. “I’ll track him down after I’m done,” he said pointedly. “Must have his phone off.” They both did, actually, which Liam had probably figured out already since he’d been looking for Louis in the first place. Hiding this thing between them was a pain in the arse. It was like they could never fully cover their tracks, no matter how hard they tried.

“All right. Best not keep them waiting, though.”

“Right.”

Louis held his breath until he was certain Liam had left and then turned to Harry, who had sucked his lower lip into his mouth to anxiously chew on it. Louis couldn’t help but thumb at Harry’s mouth, freeing the cherry-red lip from its prison with a tender swipe.

“Give it a good thirty seconds or so before you follow me out. I’ll wait for you by the lifts, all right?” Louis punctuated the question with a quick kiss on the lips before darting out of the cubicle.

The meeting went about how Louis had expected once he found out that he and Harry were Modest’s sole audience.

Harry stared down at his lap in grim-faced silence, a metre away from Louis, who stared boldly back at Griffiths and Magee as the two boys were read the riot act over the upcoming film.

They were not to interact unless directed otherwise by Ben while crew was around and the cameras were rolling. They were not to do anything on camera that wasn’t directly prescribed by Ben. Ben, Ben, Ben, Ben, Ben. Louis knew Harry was properly fond of the man, but by the time they were finally free to go, he couldn’t help but harbour a tiny piece of resentment for the director, even though he knew deep down that Ben wasn’t to blame for the restrictions being put on them.

And then came the ‘suggestions’.

Louis was surprised by how little of management’s lecture was directed toward him. There was the usual, of course. Go on more dates with Eleanor. Try to look like you actually want to be there. Blah blah blah. But it was Harry who got the real bulk of it this time.

They wanted him to cut his hair shorter, something that had a flicker of distress crossing Harry’s face for a brief second before he managed to hide it. They wanted him to work out more, to dress better, to look more like the frontman of a teenage boyband should. Louis knew Harry didn’t even want to be the frontman, let alone look like one, but he bore the brunt of their castigation in bitter silence.

Louis held his tongue for Harry’s sake until they were finished and had left Modest’s offices side by side. “Well, that was a load of utter bollocks,” Louis grumbled loudly. He grabbed for Harry’s hand just because he could, because they were no longer in Modest’s purview and there was no one to tell him off for it.

Louis was intending to drag Harry back to the lifts and then down to the canteen to grab a bite before their next meeting, since they’d foregone going to lunch with the other lads to get off in the loo—which they hadn’t even managed. Now Louis was hungry and horny, but they only had time to fulfil one of those needs before they were summoned back upstairs to the conference room.
And well, if Louis wanted to hand-feed Harry a slice of strawberry shortcake in the middle of the Syco lounge where anyone could walk by and see them, that was his prerogative. The movie hadn’t started filming yet.

They only made it a few steps out the door.

“Louis....” Harry paused right there in the middle of the corridor, his grip on Louis’s hand forcing the older boy to stop as well. “I don’t know how much longer I can keep hiding this,” he confessed quietly, his eyes downcast and watery.

Louis pretended not to notice the way he’d said ‘I’ instead of ‘we’ and moved in closer to press his free hand against Harry’s warm cheek.

“We’ll just have to be better about it,” Louis told him. “We’ll be more careful.” It would be hard, but they could manage it. Together.

Louis would do anything to keep what they had. Even if it meant changing everything about them on the outside to protect it.
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Happy Thanksgiving! We're getting close to the halfway mark (and I'm getting very close to actually being done writing this, which means I have to start thinking about what comes next).

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostesupd8s
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February 9, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis woke up tangled in his sheets in an otherwise empty bed, his mind feeling lighter than it had in days.

Louis could hear the muffled clatter of pots and pans from the kitchen before he even opened the door, so he wasn’t surprised to find Liam, Sam, and Mark all huddled around the island counter-top eating breakfast. What was surprising was the sight of Niall standing over the stove with a spatula in his hand, carefully watching over a frying pan full of sizzling bacon.

“Oh,” Louis said quietly, drawing the eyes of everyone else in the condo as he wandered into the kitchen to join them.

Niall raised an eyebrow as he rearranged the strips of bacon, demonstrating his own muted surprise. “Thought you’d be asleep forever,” he said nonchalantly, as if he were the one that belonged there and Louis was the interloper. In response to Louis’s questioning look, Niall replied, “Seemed like you could do with having some friends around. I’m not due back in the studio till the weekend.”

Louis nodded. “Yeah, thanks, mate.” Things between him and Niall may not have been as good as they used to be, but Louis wasn’t about to turn down a bit of company.

Louis supposed that Niall’s words meant he knew all about the headlines from the day before, which wasn’t exactly a shock considering how widespread they must have become in the interim. Louis still felt a bit unsettled by it, however. It was an unpleasant reminder that he no longer had any semblance of control over this situation with Harry.

It wasn’t until after he’d finished cooking and they were midway through eating their breakfast, though, that Niall dared to actually bring up what had happened.

“You don’t think Zayn would say anything to the press, do you?” he wondered aloud, and everyone stopped what they were doing to look at him with various levels of concern.

“He wouldn’t,” Liam replied quickly. Louis wasn’t strictly sure that was true considering the things Zayn had revealed about the band before, and in light of how poorly Louis’s conversation
with the other man had gone, but Liam’s next words offered slightly more comfort. “I texted him to let him know we’re handling it for now, anyway. He knows to ignore them.”

Louis nodded in assurance. In any case, if there was one thing Zayn was good at these days, it was minding his own business.

The morning passed by in a blur after that. There was more food laid out on the island than Louis could possibly hope to eat thanks to Niall’s inability to properly portion with his eyes. Once Louis was full to bursting, it was time to see Sam and Mark off before they left for the airport.

Louis was surprised at the catch in his voice when he walked through the door with them to say his goodbyes. “I’ll see you in a couple weeks, then,” he said to Mark, pulling the burly man in for a hug.

They’d decided between all the chaos the previous night that Mark would go home to spend some time with his family like he deserved now that Sam was there to take his place, and that he would fly back to meet Louis at the start of the next tour leg to resume his duties.

Louis was both sad and relieved to have him gone, all at once. With the amount of time they spent together, Mark was close enough to be considered a friend, but he was still an employee, and Louis hated feeling like he monopolised the other man’s life. A bit of a break—a bit of space—would do them both some good.

After ending the hug, Louis leaned down to kiss Sam on the cheek, advising her to drive safe and watching from the stoop as they climbed into the rental car and drove off.

Liam’s hand on his shoulder gave him a sudden start.

“Sorry, mate,” Liam said easily. “We’re ready to go whenever you are.”

Louis nodded and turned to follow him back inside the condo. “We should probably clean up a bit first,” he remarked upon taking in the disastrous state of the kitchen, which Niall had left in absolute ruins while cooking.

With all three of them working together, it didn’t take too long to put back together, and before the hour was up, they were on their way to Cedars-Sinai once again.

Louis opted to sit alone in the back of Niall’s car with one headphone resting loosely in his left ear. He listened to the next song on low volume while Niall drove, eyes closed, head resting gently against the sun-warmed glass, while memories of a much colder winter floated through his head.

December 25, 2012
Doncaster, England

“Well, you look lovely.”

Louis’s sarcastic tone wasn’t lost on Harry, who laughed and laughed at the older boy’s deadpan expression.

“Yeah,” Harry replied once he’d caught his breath again, “I’m a mess, aren’t I?”
“Just a bit,” Louis replied, smiling. “But don’t worry, I still think you’re pretty.”

The mess in question was Harry’s face framed by an all-too obvious bandage covering the stitches on his chin, an injury Louis had had the misfortune to hear about from the tabloids before Harry himself, and thus couldn’t stop taking the piss out of him over it.

It was the best way Louis had of coping with the fact that Harry could have very well died if things had gone just slightly differently, and Louis knew there wasn’t a damn thing he could have done to stop it. He couldn’t do anything to make Harry feel better either, at least not physically, so the banter was pretty much all they had left.

“Happy belated birthday,” Harry continued. “Sorry I couldn’t find time to give you a proper call yesterday.”

Louis waved a hand dismissively. “It’s fine. We were both busy.” They were each in their respective childhood bedrooms, having scheduled a bit of time after opening presents that morning to Skype just so they could see each other’s faces on Christmas even though they were spending the holidays apart.

Louis wasn’t sure what Harry had told his family he was doing when he’d called Louis, but Louis had lied to his own mother, and he still felt sort of sick over it. Though technically, it was more bending the truth. When Louis had told his mum that he was having a lads’ catch-up, he’d really meant one lad in particular.

“Get anything good?” Louis asked leadingly.

Harry’s smile widened. “The journal’s really nice, thank you. I feel bad I only got you underwear.”

“It was nice underwear,” Louis replied defensively, even though there was no real reason to protect Harry from his own self-deprecation. There was something intimate, though, about Harry feeling comfortable enough to buy Louis pants, and not as a joke either, but the kind that were soft and expensive and that Harry thought would make Louis’s arse look nice. “I’m wearing a pair right now, in fact.”

“Oh?” Harry’s eyebrow arched not unexpectedly.

Louis knew exactly what he was angling for from Harry, and he knew that Harry would give it to him even though they only had an hour or so to themselves before they were both expected to re-join the Christmas festivities with their families.

“The blue ones,” Louis clarified, watching with a smile as Harry’s eyes brightened.

“Show me,” Harry said, looking young and over-eager in a way that shouldn’t have been so endearing, wouldn’t have been if Louis hadn’t been so completely, utterly gone for him.

Louis rolled his eyes and stood up, taking a step back from the laptop and adjusting the screen so that his body was in view of the camera. He slid down his joggers, watching with a smile as Harry’s eyes widened, and then turned around so his arse was the focus of Harry’s gaze.

“Like what you see?” Louis teased. When he spun back around again, his joggers still hanging loosely at his knees, he could see Harry’s hand migrating down over his own lap. It was probably the least sexy thing Louis had ever done, but Harry’s slightly glassy eyes indicated he felt otherwise. “Apparently so.”

Harry pulled his hand back regretfully. “We probably shouldn’t, though….”
“Yeah,” Louis replied, already pulling his joggers back up over his hips. “I don’t even have a lock on my door. We’re lucky none of my sisters have come in already.”

Harry laughed at that, instantly dissolving the tension that had built up between them. Then he winced, laughter cutting off abruptly as he thumbed at the bandage on his chin.

“You all right?” Louis asked. He found himself hoping, almost bitterly, that Harry’s chin would heal good as new and that he wouldn’t even have a scar. A reminder. It wasn’t a fair thing to ask from the universe, not when Harry had dealt with Eleanor for so long, but Louis wished for it anyway.

“Yeah, it’s just annoying,” Harry replied, his brows scrunched together in obvious discomfort.

If Louis had been there, he would have pressed his lips to Harry’s forehead until all the wrinkles disappeared—but he wasn’t, and he couldn’t.

“We should probably hang up soon,” Harry continued. “Mum wants me to help with Christmas dinner and that.”

Louis nodded, his stomach sinking a little at the thought of already having to say goodbye to Harry so soon. It would be a while yet before they saw each other again.

“Harry, can I ask you something before you go?” It was a question that would only put more wrinkles on Harry’s face, but Louis had to know. He waited until Harry nodded before continuing. “Do you like her? Like, actually like her?”

Harry’s expression tightened, almost imperceptibly. “You like Eleanor, don’t you?” he countered, dodging the question.

Louis had to struggle to keep from snapping at him. It wasn’t Harry’s fault that Louis hadn’t told him about how much he had grown to resent Eleanor since this whole thing started. It wasn’t Harry’s fault that Louis was hiding from his own boyfriend, even, the fact that he might not actually like girls after all, at least not the way Harry sometimes did.

“It’s not really the same thing,” Louis replied carefully.

Harry’s silence was telling. “I don’t really know what answer you want me to give you,” he said finally.

Not that one.

“Never mind,” Louis replied quickly. He felt sick to his stomach at the thought that Harry might feel the same way about someone else that he did about Louis, never mind the fact that they had never even agreed to make this thing about them exclusive, but he wasn’t willing to compromise the rest of his holiday just to fight about it. “I should probably go, as well. Don’t want the littles finding out about you, yeah? Lottie’d take the piss, for sure.”

That got Harry to smile a little. “Afraid of your baby sister, Louis?” he teased.

“I’d have to be stupid not to be,” Louis replied with a cheeky smile.

Harry laughed, pink-cheeked and beautiful, the way Louis wanted him always. “Happy Christmas, Lou.”

“Happy Christmas, Harry.”
Louis was startled when upon reaching the hospital, Niall opened up the boot to procure a guitar case from the back. “What’s that for?” he asked, bewildered. Niall wasn’t seriously expecting to get some work in at Harry’s bedside, was he?

“Hailee suggested it,” Niall answered, huffing a little as he shouldered the case and slammed the boot closed. “She said it might be good for Harry.”

Louis bristled a little at the idea of Niall’s girlfriend offering suggestions on what was ‘good for Harry’, but he managed to hold his tongue.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Liam chimed in with a sideways glance toward Louis, as if he were afraid Louis would argue against it. “If he can hear us, then it should help, right?”

Liam, Liam, Liam. Always the mediator. Even after a decade of futile attempts at peace-making between people who were never going to see things from the other’s perspective.

Louis just nodded and followed them inside, steeling himself against the odd looks they attracted from passers-by as they made their way to the lifts. They managed to make it to the third floor without consequence, the nurses on that level paying them barely any attention at all as they walked past the nurse’s station with an entire musical instrument strapped to Niall’s back.

Maybe the staff was used to it. They probably got their fair share of rock stars, after all.

Niall stopped just inside the doorway when he walked in, causing both Liam and Louis to bump into him as they tried to get inside. “Whoa,” he said, finally moving out of the way to let him by. “Well, he looks a hell of a lot better than before.”

Louis almost did a double-take before remembering that Harry’s rejuvenated appearance was his own handiwork. Judging from the covert glance Liam slid him, he must’ve guessed the truth as well. Only Niall remained in the dark, babbling a bit about how he’d wondered if Anne and Gemma were planning to hire a caretaker for Harry and how it was a tad earlier than he’d expected them to do so.

Louis didn’t want to hear any of it. “What are you going to play?” he asked, abruptly cutting Niall off mid-sentence.

“I kind of thought we’d sing him something together, actually,” Niall replied, rubbing a hand against the back of his neck a bit sheepishly.

Louis opened his mouth but couldn’t quite come up with an adequate response. Something about the idea of singing with Liam and Niall after years apart—with Harry in the room, no less, but unable to participate—just felt wrong. But Louis didn’t want to give voice to that feeling, especially not with Niall and Liam both looking at him expectantly, as if they wanted him to make the decision about what song they would sing.

“Something from the band?” Liam suggested off-hand when the silence lengthened and Louis had still said nothing in response to Niall.
“No,” Louis replied quickly, making it clear that he was not open to compromise. “We should just pick something he likes. You know some Fleetwood, right?” He nodded toward Niall, who returned the gesture easily.

“Landslide?” Niall offered, looking between Liam and Louis for confirmation. “It was one of his favourites.”

And one Harry had never covered, at least. Louis wondered if that was another reason Niall had selected it.

“I’ll have to look up the lyrics.” Liam grumbled, already pulling out his phone to do just that.

Louis would have laughed at him if the mood wasn’t so sombre. Of course, Liam, who could barely remember the lyrics to the songs he’d written himself, would have to Google the lyrics to fucking Landslide so they could sing to Harry, who was in a coma and probably didn’t give a damn what they sounded like.

Louis sat down next to Harry while Niall tuned his guitar and Liam searched for lyrics on his phone. He pulled his chair as close as possible, not really caring what the other two men might think.

Now that he had implicit permission to touch Harry (platonically, of course) it was like he couldn’t rid himself of the temptation. Louis settled for taking Harry’s hand, the left, even more heavily tattooed along his arm than the last time he’d seen him, and stroked gently along his palm, as if hoping the gentle sensation would invoke some reaction.

It didn’t, not that Louis really expected it to. Harry didn’t move, and Louis told himself he wasn’t disappointed by that. A lie, one that probably showed plain as day on his face when he looked up to meet the twin stares of concern emanating from Niall and Liam.

“You gonna get us started then?” Louis asked, a bit rudely, directing the question at Niall.

The younger man nodded. His fingers moved over the strings and softly plucked out the first few notes of a guitar riff Louis hadn’t heard in years.

Louis’s eyes fluttered shut, his mind yanked instantly back in time, brain filled with visions of Harry dancing through their kitchen in nothing but his pants singing along with Stevie’s voice.

Niall’s voice was the first to chime in, starting the song off alone. Liam caught on by the second line, lending a baritone to Niall’s higher-pitched rasp. Louis nodded along, finally joining in on, “Oh, mirror in the sky, what is love?”

He kept his eyes shut tight, his hand clasped even tighter around Harry’s, and fought to keep his voice steady as he sang in time with the other two. He could barely hear them over the rushing sound in his chest and his head, but he pushed on even so.

It was harder than it should’ve been, Louis’s voice finally breaking at, “Well, I’ve been afraid of changing, ’cos I’ve built my life around you.” His eyes fluttered open again and drifted over to Harry, who lay as still and peaceful as ever.

Louis felt his chest grow tighter as Niall transitioned into the brief guitar solo, the simplistic melody so sweet and sad and painfully familiar that it made it almost too difficult to continue.

The song was over all too quickly, the last few notes fading out under Niall’s fingers just as the remainder of Louis’s anxiety melted away. The three of them sat steeped in the ensuing silence,
like the grim ghosts of Harry’s past hovering over his deathbed.

Louis stared at Harry with pleading eyes and desperately begged with God or the universe for something to happen. Subconsciously, he realised he must have been expecting it. No matter how rational he tried to remain, there was a small part of him that had expected Harry’s eyes to open as soon as the song ended, like Sleeping Beauty waking after true love’s first kiss.

But this wasn’t a fairy tale.
Louis couldn’t bear to look Niall or Liam in the eye once the song was done. Any trace of Louis’s good mood from earlier that morning had vanished, leaving only a dull aching emptiness in its wake.

Niall and Liam soon gave up on trying to include Louis in their hushed conversation after a few failed attempts to which Louis had responded with only monosyllabic answers or an unhelpful grunt. Liam had finally given him a withering look that Louis had staunchly ignored before turning instead to Harry once more.

Louis clung to Harry’s hand like it was a lifeline, not letting go even when Anne and Gemma stopped by. Gemma informed the three of them that she and Anne were going to be out most of the afternoon discussing the media situation with Harry’s team, deciding what to say and how to proceed now that the news about Harry was mostly out of the bag.

Louis bit his tongue against the urge to ask to be included in that conversation. He didn’t have any right to Harry’s life, his privacy, his story.

Louis caught notice of the way Anne’s eyes lingered on where his hand was attached to Harry’s as she left the room. Louis issued a challenging stare in rebuttal, but she didn’t utter a word of protest, nor did her expression change from one of carefully schooled neutrality.

Not that she had to say anything at all. Louis already knew how she felt about his relationship with Harry. He was grateful to be spared the lecture.

Louis only drew closer to Harry once they were gone, still clinging tightly to the his hand even as he allowed his head to rest lightly on Harry’s thighs. Louis could feel Liam’s eyes on him, burning a hole through the back of his skull, but Louis was patiently ignoring him. He closed his eyes for a minute and breathed in deeply, trying to catch a bit of the scent he knew as being uniquely Harry underneath the sterile hospital smell that permeated the room.

“You awake, mate?” Liam’s soft voice permeated the haze slowly filling Louis’s mind only a few minutes later. Or maybe it had been longer than that. It was hard to be certain.
Louis lifted his head without answering to find Liam and Niall stood at the end of Harry’s bed, staring down at him expectantly. He sat up slowly. “What’s up?”

“We were thinking about grabbing some lunch,” Liam replied. “There’s an Indian place a few blocks away. You wanna come with?”

Louis knew the path of least resistance would be to agree, but he spared barely half a second to consider it before answering. “I’m good, thanks.”

Liam’s mouth twisted into a frown. He and Niall exchanged an uneasy glance. “You want us to pick something up for you?” Liam tried instead. He was trying so hard to be helpful, but it wasn’t what Louis needed right then.

Louis shook his head. “Not hungry.”

“Louis, you can’t just—”

“I said, I’m not hungry,” Louis snapped, turning the full force of his glare on Liam, who took a reflexive step back.

“Fine,” Liam said, hands raised in surrender. “Have it your way, then.” He and Niall walked out of the hospital room without uttering another word to Louis, though Niall at least had the decency to look vaguely apologetic on the way out.

Louis leaned away from Harry as soon as they were gone just far enough to turn down the lights in the room before resuming his resting position on Harry’s thighs. He breathed in deeply with his nose buried in the blankets before letting it out with a sigh.

Louis knew he was being irrational and that neither Liam nor Niall deserved his ire; they were just trying to help. But he felt like he was suffering from an emotional hangover, and suddenly, the last thing in the world he wanted was to be separated from Harry ever again.

Louis switched to his other cheek to look at Harry while he laid there, and then after a moment of consideration, brought out his phone to listen to another song. He played it through his speakers on low, letting the music echo softly through the room. Maybe Harry could hear it, maybe he couldn’t, but it didn’t matter. This song was for Louis.

March 2, 2013
Cardiff, Wales

Louis wasn’t much of a dancer. Well, none of them were—good dancers, at least—but even that didn’t stop Harry from trying.

He flailed and wobbled on the dance floor with all the grace of a giraffe compressed into a human body, laughing all the while, and Louis envied him. But he envied the girls dancing next to him even more.

Jealousy was a strong motivator. Louis hadn’t foreseen himself setting foot on the dance floor when they’d decided to go to Oceana after the gig. He was far more keen on having a few overpriced drinks rather than pretending to mingle with girls he had no interest in taking home after
they left the club—and wouldn’t have done even if he wasn’t “dating” Eleanor. But Harry had wanted to dance. And now Louis wanted to dance with Harry.

He sidled up to the other boy under the guise of trying to dance with one of the girls who had latched on to Harry. She spared Louis a fleeting glance, something that annoyed him even more, and Louis was grateful when the lights dimmed during the transition to the next song and he had the opportunity to cheekily grope at Harry’s arse, grabbing a small handful of bum and squeezing hard enough to make Harry jump.

Harry froze in the next second, glancing around in alarm before finally catching Louis’s eye. Louis winked and Harry visibly relaxed before sticking his tongue out at Louis in response.

The blonde girl between them drew closer to Harry, presumably thinking the gesture was meant for her instead. She reached up to touch Harry’s hair and he shook it off with a laugh.

Louis, already more than a little drunk, childishly mimed stabbing her from behind, causing another laugh to tumble out of Harry’s mouth.

They danced like that for a frustratingly long while, Louis stealing every chance he could to get his hands on Harry, sneaking touches whenever the lights were down. But it was never enough to satisfy the burning itch in his gut, fuelled by alcohol and anticipation in equal measure.

Finally, Louis couldn’t take anymore, and he stepped away with a loud exclamation of, “Loo!” before giving Harry’s hand a pointed tug as he passed him by.

Louis was hanging out against the back wall of the toilets for all of two minutes before Harry came bursting through the door, wild-eyed and breathless. He surveyed the area frantically, and once he was certain they were the only occupants, nodded toward the larger cubicle.

Louis fully expected trousers to come off as soon as he stepped inside after Harry, but instead he found himself with an armful of the younger boy, Harry’s limbs wrapped around him like an octopus. Louis went stumbling backwards with Harry’s mouth attached to his until his head finally collided with the side of the cubicle, producing a loud, wavering thud.

“Ow,” Louis mumbled miserably even while Harry moved his lips down across Louis’s throat, sucking marks into the skin just below the collar of his shirt. “Be careful,” he warned. They couldn’t afford any slip-ups, any noticeable marks they’d have to explain away or have Lou cover up.

“I know,” Harry replied, having the audacity to sound annoyed even while he was rucking up Louis’s shirt to pinch at his nipples.

Louis twisted away with a sharp shout, practically dropping Harry in the process. “You know I don’t like that,” he said with an accusatory glare.

Harry’s answering smile wasn’t apologetic in the least. He leant back against the far wall of the cubicle and stretched out the long lines of his body in open temptation. “Sorry, guess I’m still a little drunk.”

“You had one cocktail,” Louis reminded him.

“Dick-drunk, then.”

“You haven’t had that yet, either.”
“But I want it,” Harry replied, letting his eyes and mouth go lax like he was imagining just that. “Want you.”

“Yeah?” Louis retorted, pushing off the wall and stepping toward Harry as if issuing a challenge. “That’s not what it looked like when you were all over Niall at the show.”

“Were you jealous?”

Louis wasn’t really, not of Niall, at least, but he could tell that Harry was in a playful mood and wanted him to go along with it. “You should’ve known better,” he said hotly as he took another step forward, pushing up into Harry’s space and slotting perfectly into the gap between his thighs. Louis shoved his hips up against Harry’s, feeling an answering hardness there.

“Gonna teach me a lesson?” Harry taunted. His lips were shiny with spit. Louis wanted to bite them.

So he did, attacking Harry’s mouth with an uncharacteristic amount of force. Usually Louis liked to take his time, kissing Harry like it was the last time he’d ever get the chance, but this was quick and hurried, to match the pace of their hips grinding into each other through their jeans.

Louis kissed him through it, even after he’d already come and was gripping Harry by the arse, grinding Harry’s crotch against his thigh until he too was shuddering with his orgasm and went limp against the wall.

Harry stared at Louis through sex-hazy eyes. “If I’d known all it would take to get you to fuck me like this was a bit of flirting with Niall, I’d have tried it ages ago.”

Louis’s spent cock gave a valiant twitch from within the confines of his jeans at Harry’s breathless words. They hadn’t done more than trading blowjobs and handjobs, but that didn’t mean Louis hadn’t thought about it. A lot. This was the first time Harry had ever openly alluded to it himself, though, and Louis felt a bit dizzy all of a sudden.

He stated as much to Harry, who immediately put a hand against Louis’s forehead and clucked his tongue like a proper mother hen. “Shouldn’t have drank so much,” he chided gently. “Now we’ll have to get you sobered up again so I can suck you off back at the hotel.”

Louis kissed Harry hard, swallowing up the last syllable with all the urgency of a starving man. “I love you,” he said stupidly and drunkenly once he’d pulled away again.

Harry gave a placating smile. “Come on, let’s get out of here.” He didn’t return the sentiment.

February 9, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis was in a hospital room, but something was different.

He was surrounded by people, he realised, or rather he and Harry both were, encircled by countless doctors and nurses hovering over Harry. And Louis was still holding Harry’s hand, but he couldn’t see his face. There was a gauzy curtain hanging over his chest, leaving his belly exposed.
Louis stared at the swollen mound in confusion as the doctors swarmed Harry, uttering incomprehensible medical jargon while poking and prodding at Harry’s stomach, which Louis finally recognised as belonging to that of someone heavily pregnant.

But Harry wasn’t pregnant. He couldn’t get pregnant. Why were they in hospital?

Suddenly, Louis was being ushered out of his chair by a gaggle of faceless nurses. Harry’s hand slipped free from his and he was left bereft, but it was like none of his limbs would move to allow him to fight back against the nurses who had accosted him out of nowhere.

They kept pushing him back, further than should have been possible inside such a tiny room, muttering mouse-like assurances that Harry would be okay, that their baby would be okay.

“What baby?” Louis wanted to scream, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t seem to make the words come out.

Louis was dreaming, he realised. He was dreaming, and in this dream, Harry was in hospital because they were together and having a family. In this dream, Harry was awake, and now Louis no longer wanted to be.

Fingers suddenly threaded through his own, a soft and familiar touch Louis hadn’t felt in years. He knew without looking up who was standing next to him, and he squeezed his eyes shut, afraid that if he looked at her it would shatter this beautiful and absurd illusion and send him hurtling back toward reality.

“You have to wake up, Boo Bear.”

“Don’t want to,” Louis replied, stubbornly refusing to open his eyes.

“Harry needs you.”

There was the sound of a baby crying sounding in the room, and then it was muffled, like someone had stuffed a load of cotton into his ears. But Jay’s voice was strong as ever. “Wake up, baby. Wake up.”

Louis was forcibly yanked toward consciousness like an anchor at the end of a heavy iron chain, slowly at first, and then all at once dropped back into reality.

The room was still dark when Louis’s eyes opened. He was facing the empty chairs at the foot of Harry’s bed, surprised to see they were still vacant. He must’ve not been asleep for long if Niall and Liam still weren’t back.

There was something that had changed, though, and Louis couldn’t quite identify what it was. He lifted his head, scouring the room for whatever had woken him up.

There was a quiet sound from behind him. A muffled whimper.

Louis turned, eyes alighting first on Harry’s hands splayed out over the hospital linens. His fingers were twitching.

Louis’s heart nearly stopped. He had to check with himself, make sure he wasn’t still dreaming. But no, this was real. Harry’s eyes were open.

“Fuck,” Louis muttered, practically kicking his chair into the wall in his haste to get up. He pressed the call button repeatedly and tried not to panic. He wasn’t sure what to say to Harry—whether
Harry could even understand him—as he hovered uselessly over the younger man, whose green eyes had filled with tears as he swallowed frantically around the feeding tube down his throat.

He kept whimpering at Louis, unable to speak, and Louis couldn’t think of anything to do but hold his hand while they waited for a doctor to arrive.

Louis was terrified. He didn’t know anything about comas, but the twitching of Harry’s fingers in his was so weak he could barely feel it, and he wasn’t sure if that was normal. He hadn’t thought about the possibility that when Harry finally woke up, he might not be the same Harry at all, and now that Louis was faced with that possibility, he wasn’t sure how he was going to cope if that were the case.

Louis swallowed in time with each flex of Harry’s throat around the feeding tube, unable to stop the sympathetic action. His grip on Harry’s hand tightened, and then the door behind them suddenly burst open, and in flooded a stream of doctors and nurses.

Louis was quickly shuffled off to the side as the group of medical professionals surrounded Harry’s bed, but he was hesitant to leave even if Harry couldn’t actually see that he was still stood there. Part of Louis was convinced that Harry could sense his presence, that he’d know if Louis abandoned him. Again.

“Sir, we need you to leave the room,” a nurse finally told Louis amidst the chaos ensuing over Harry.

“But—”

Louis hadn’t even gotten the second word out before the door opened again, revealing Niall and Liam in the doorway. They froze at the sight of the doctors stood over Harry, and Louis realised he probably should leave right then after all, if only just to keep Niall and Liam from adding to the chaos.

Louis herded the two of them back out into the corridor, after which he leant against the wall just outside Harry’s room and promptly slumped down to the floor.

“Was that—?” Liam asked at the same time as Niall said, “Is he…?”

Louis nodded tiredly. He wasn’t sure what to say. How to explain. The morning spent with Liam and Niall in Harry’s hospital room suddenly seemed so far away.

“I don’t know if he’s….” Louis stopped. “I don’t know what to expect.”

Liam frowned, crossing his arms over his chest. “Did he say anything?”

Louis stared up at him sceptically. “He had a tube down his throat, Liam. No, he didn’t say anything.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.” Liam looked down at his feet, his cheeks glowing bright red, and Louis actually felt a little bad for him.

Niall seemed less bothered by the whole situation, but maybe that was just because he was more of an optimist than either Liam or Louis. “How long till we can see him, do you think?”

“No clue.” Louis rubbed at his eyes. He wasn’t sure how soon he could bear to be in the same room as Harry, speaking to him again for the first time in forever. His chest cramped up at just the thought of it. “Fuck.”
“You all right, mate?” Liam asked worriedly.

Louis puts his head in his hands, takes a deep breath. “I need a minute, I think. To think.” He stood up before Niall or Liam could reply and made a beeline for the balcony at the end of the corridor.

They didn’t follow, something Louis was grateful for, and he sat down with another heavy sigh before reaching into his pockets to grab out his phone and earbuds. He was torn now between the desire to listen to every remaining song on the playlist in one fell swoop and the urge to rip the flash drive out of his phone and toss it over the side of the building.

But Louis wasn’t as young and dumb and impulsive as he used to be, so he settled for a happy medium. He’d continue listening to Harry’s playlist, but he’d do it at his own pace, not rushing through it just because Harry was awake.

Because Harry was awake.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

I had a lot of fun reading everyone's reactions to the last chapter for obvious reasons, but now that Harry's awake, it doesn't mean everything is going to be sunshine and roses!!

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April 2, 2013

London, England

Memories from the shows were harder to hold onto than anything else.

It hadn’t been like that at first. In the beginning, each new show had been a sharp pinprick of memory, easy to resurrect from the recesses of Louis’s mind. But as time went on and performing live became the new normal, it was harder to dig out what had happened where, at which show, and when.

By the time they got into the swing of things on the Take Me Home Tour, even the shows they had just performed seemed like a blur as soon as they stepped off stage.

This one was different though.

And it wasn’t just because they were performing at the O2, which was never not exhilarating. No, it was because of the fight Louis and Harry had just minutes before they went on stage, which in hindsight, wasn’t one of their better ideas.

The show had gone off okay, despite it, and during What Makes You Beautiful, Harry had reached out past Niall to touch Louis’s shoulder in apology, making him crumble. Louis felt bad that he was always the stubborn one, always forcing Harry to bridge the gap because Louis simply wouldn’t budge, but this time he felt justified.

Because Harry was acting like a lunatic.

Things went to shit again as soon as the show was over, their earlier moment of making-up with Niall crammed between them all-but forgotten.

In hindsight, the argument hadn’t been anyone’s fault, not really. Both Louis and Harry had been under an insane amount of stress with the film and the tour to worry about, and things with management had recently taken a turn for the worse. Anyone would have cracked under those circumstances.

What Louis couldn’t forgive was the way Harry started in on him again almost as soon as they’d gone backstage, voicing his complaints in an angry, hushed whisper.
“I thought we were through with this,” Louis replied, a little too loudly; the other boys glanced curiously in their direction as they all changed into clean clothes.

That shut Harry up, but Louis could still feel the fury radiating off the younger boy, even after they’d left the arena and caught their car home to Louis’s place as they’d agreed to do before the fight even started. Harry remained silent for the drive at least, which was one small thing to be grateful for.

It only lasted until they walked through the front door, Harry staring down at Louis while he pulled off his shoes in the entryway.

“I’m not going to let you ignore this.”

“Oh okay,” Louis replied flatly.

That took the wind out of Harry’s sails a little, but he managed to recover before Louis straightened up to face him again. The look on his face was one of grim determination. Louis might have laughed at it under other circumstances. Harry was cute when he tried to look menacing. But there was nothing cute about this at all.

“I’m sick of this shit, Lou,” he said, his voice ratcheting up in volume as he spoke. “Is being upset about that a crime now? We never even see each other when we’re not working!”

That hadn’t escaped Louis’s notice either: the fact that suddenly, they were no longer allowed to share hotel rooms, or spend any time together outside of a strictly professional context. They weren’t even put together in interviews anymore, with or without one of the other boys as a buffer. It was like management didn’t trust them not to fuck up in front of the cameras and accidentally—or purposely—reveal their secret to the whole world in a way that they couldn’t cover up and deny.

“And what do you expect me to do about it?” Louis demanded, letting his exasperation seep through. They’d had this argument a thousand times before—but never like this.

There were tears sprouting in the corners of Harry’s eyes, pinpricks of moisture dampening his dark eyelashes. “I can’t take all this sneaking around,” he said slowly. “We’re going to get caught and I have fucking nightmares about it—”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t come around here anymore.”

Harry took a wobbling step back, looking like he’d been physically struck. “What?”

“You could stay at Ben’s when we’re in London,” Louis told him. “It’ll be easier for you that way. You can’t get caught if you’re not doing anything suspicious in the first place, right? We’ll see each other enough on the rest of the tour anyway.”

Harry looked horrified, and it took everything in Louis’s power not to reach out to wipe that expression off his face. This was necessary, he told himself. This was the right thing to do for them both.

“You’re kicking me out?” Harry asked, sounding scandalised.

“You never moved in,” Louis pointed out. It was Louis’s name on the lease, his clothes in the bedroom closet, Louis’s groceries—what little there were—in the fridge. Apart from a few knick-knacks here and there that Harry had left lying around, there was no solid evidence he’d ever even set foot in the place.
Harry’s expression didn’t change. The wrinkle in the centre of his forehead drew Louis’s eyes, sucking him in like a bottomless abyss. “Why are you doing this?” Harry asked desperately, though he should have known—had to know—what Louis’s answer would be.

“I’m not willing to risk all of this.” Not even for you.

Louis didn’t say it out loud, but he might as well have.

Harry sucked in a quiet breath and took another step away from Louis to grab his coat from where he’d discarded it earlier on the banister. Louis took that as his cue to walk past into the kitchen, where he promptly opened the fridge and cracked open a beer.

He drank it at the kitchen table, only half-listening while Harry spoke over the phone with Ben, his voice steady at first before lapsing into quiet sobs. And still Louis said nothing.

He didn’t even see Harry leave, but the sound of the front door slamming shut and the ensuing silence felt like a festering wound. But Louis didn’t cry. He couldn’t cry. He couldn’t muster up the energy to care anymore.

They were too young for these burdens. And Louis wasn’t strong enough to shoulder the weight for them both.

February 9, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis was shaking when Liam finally went out to the little balcony on the side of the building to retrieve him after so many minutes had passed. Louis was startled to find he was freezing when Liam frowned down at him and shrugged off his hoodie to offer it to Louis.

“Thanks,” Louis muttered, finally shoving his mobile back in his pocket. He’d been staring at it in relative silence for god only knew how long after the song had ended. Louis pulled on Liam’s sweatshirt and rolled up the sleeves, just a tad too long, before standing up. He knew he couldn’t hide out there forever.

“Anne and Gemma just got here,” Liam told him. He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “They’re still waiting for the doctors to tell them what happened, but I thought you might want to….”

Louis didn’t want to, not at all, but he knew he had a responsibility to give Harry’s mother and sister whatever answers he could provide. “Okay,” he said with a nod.

He followed Liam back inside, fists clenching of their own accord at his sides when he spotted Gemma and Anne wrapped around each other in the corridor just outside Harry’s room. They were stood just outside the door, looking in through the small windowed gap in the solid barrier between them and Harry, but there wasn’t anything of note that could be made out past the cluster of doctors and nurses still crowded around the bed.

Louis nodded hesitantly toward Gemma as he approached. She was paler than usual, her freckles standing out starkly on her wan face.
“You all right?” Louis asked just because it seemed like the proper thing to do.

Gemma almost smiled. “Are you?”

Louis didn’t have a good response for that.

Anne finally turned to face him then, her features pinched and drawn. “You were there?” she asked quietly. “When he—?”

Louis nodded. “He didn’t say anything,” he told her quickly. It was obvious that would be the first question out of her mouth. “I’m not sure how lucid he really was.”

That wasn’t the news Anne wanted to hear, surely, and it wasn’t the news Louis wanted to give her, but it was the truth. He didn’t know much more than the rest of them, and that wouldn’t change until the doctors gave them something to go on.

They waited in silence for a few more minutes, all demonstrating variable states of anxiety, with Niall being the most visibly calm and Gemma’s nervousness practically palpable.

Finally, the door opened again, and out streamed the group of doctors and nurses in an endless line, reminding Louis of a clown-car. Bringing up the rear were two women in dark scrubs stood on either side of a small gurney as they wheeled Harry out.

He was crying, fat tears spilling from both eyes as they pushed him past the small congregation standing in the corridor, but even though the feeding tube had been removed from his throat, he didn’t say a word as he rolled on by. Harry didn’t acknowledge them at all, in fact, not even Anne, who had clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a sob as soon as her son had come into view.

And then Harry was gone, just like that, and they were left with only one of the doctors to turn to for answers.

The man was older, and he looked exhausted. Louis wondered if he was that was because of Harry or if he was just heading for the tail-end of his shift. He hoped it was the latter. Louis didn’t think he could bear any more bad news.

“Unfortunately, there’s not much I can tell you right now about his condition,” the doctor led with, which was one of the last things any of them wanted to hear. “I know you’re looking for answers, but all I can tell you is that he’s not out of the woods yet.”

And the news only got worse.

Anne gave a little hitching sob at the back of her throat, just barely audible.

“Where are they taking him?” Louis asked, after taking one glance at her and realising she was in no state to ask any questions about Harry.

The doctor turned slightly to face Louis instead. “We need to run some tests,” he explained. “Waking up from a comatose state isn’t like in the movies. It might be a while before he’s what we would consider fully conscious.”

Louis frowned, but before he could reply, Gemma stepped in to address the doctor. “But he’s awake now, right? Isn’t that a good thing?”

The doctor’s hesitation before he answered seemed to indicate otherwise. “It’s not that simple,” he finally told her. Anne looked stricken. “Harry’s prognosis is relatively good, so there’s no reason
not to be optimistic,” he quickly assured them. “There’s no traumatic brain injury to worry about and he was only comatose for just over a week, all of which gives him the best chance of making a full recovery.”

“But?” Louis prompted. He didn’t expect it to be all sunshine and roses now that Harry was awake. The doctor’s lips pursed into a tight line across his face. “There’s no guarantee he’ll regain full brain function. If he does, it may take some time to adjust. We’ll know more once we’ve done some tests.”

Louis nodded and tried not to let the weight of that admonition crush him to pieces as he wandered over to rest against the far wall of the corridor, head bowed and breathing heavily. He didn’t see Liam approach, but flinched at the soft touch to his elbow.

“Sorry,” Liam murmured when Louis looked up. “We’re going to sit inside Harry’s room for a bit in case something happens. You want to stay out here?”

Louis shook his head. He knew he should make more of an effort. “I’m good. I’ll—” He pushed off the wall without finishing the thought and headed back into Harry’s vacated room with the others. It felt colder now, without him, and Louis had to painstakingly avoid looking at the empty bed where Harry had once lain.

Louis sat down next to Gemma in one of the empty chairs and wrapped an arm around her shoulders after a moment’s hesitation. She leaned into it, prompting Louis to breathe out a little sigh of relief.

“I’ve been reading about people in comas,” Gemma said hesitantly. Everyone looked at her in surprise, but she kept going, either not noticing or not caring. “Apparently, sometimes they wake up but only for a little bit, and then after they just drop dead. Like that.” She snapped her fingers and everyone else in the room flinched.

Anne’s face hardened as she reached over to put a hand over her daughter’s, lowering Gemma’s hand back down to her lap. “You shouldn’t talk like that,” she chided, her expression taut with worry.

“Well, it’s true,” Gemma argued.

Louis took a good look at her. She seemed manic almost. He wondered if he could get her to take a Xanax, or have Anne get one down her instead just so she’d calm down.

“That’s only a concern for people who had brain injuries, I think,” Louis gently corrected her. “Harry’s going to be fine.”

Louis wasn’t himself convinced of that much, but the reassurance seemed to help some, as did the anti-anxiety medication he managed to slip her just a few minutes later under Anne’s watchful eye. He contemplated taking some himself, but then decided against it. He really wanted to get drunk instead, like properly plastered. Louis wondered if he could talk Liam into it. Niall would be easy enough.

They waited maybe another half hour, Gemma getting woozier all the while, before a nurse came back in to speak to them. It wasn’t good news.

“All I can tell you is that he’s stable and responsive, but still nonverbal,” she said, in that clinically-detached tone Louis was starting to resent after hearing it from a whole stable of doctors and nurses in the past week. “We’re still doing tests to make sure there’s nothing that could jeopardise his
condition. The earliest you’ll be able to see him is tomorrow morning, but we’ll keep you informed if anything else happens.”

“Great,” Louis replied automatically. He failed to sound sincere and earned a withering look from the nurse herself, who answered with a haughty sniff before looking away.

She didn’t seem to be done with the discussion, but Louis was. He hopped out of the chair and brushed past the nurse, exiting the room without another word. He waited in the corridor outside instead with his back against the wall, listening to the soft murmur of unintelligible voices emanating from within.

Despite his earlier words of comfort uttered to Gemma, Louis was terrified that she was right and that something would go horribly wrong now. The nurse telling them that Harry was apparently ‘nonverbal’ hadn’t done anything to assuage that fear.

Louis’s fingers were shaking when he pulled out his phone again. He needed to tell Jaime and Lottie what had happened, but he wasn’t up to fielding a bona fide phone call from either. He kept his text short and to the point.

_Harry woke up. Don’t know anything else yet._

He was careful to miss out the part where he’d been the one at Harry’s bedside when it happened, mostly because he knew Lottie would freak out and call him the second she heard. And Louis wasn’t ready to have that conversation with her just yet.

Louis turned his phone to airplane mode as soon as the messages had been sent. He didn’t need the residual anxiety that he knew would come from waiting for a response.

The door opened just as he was tucking his phone back inside his pocket. Out came the nurse, who gave Louis a quick dirty look before departing, followed by Liam, Niall, Anne, and Gemma. Anne was holding Gemma’s hand, her daughter looking a little unsteady on her feet, though she wasn’t fully out of it just yet.

“Don’t think she liked me very much,” Louis remarked to Liam as he drew closer.

Liam’s eyebrows shifted upwards. “Yeah, you tend to have that effect on people.”

Louis might have been offended if he’d had the energy for it. “Back home, then?” he asked with a defeated sigh.

“We were actually thinking of going to get something to eat,” Anne replied, taking a step toward him with Gemma still in tow. “You’re all welcome to join us if you’d like.”

Louis just stared at her. And what then? Sitting at a table while fantasising over a plate of pasta about how much better things would be now that Harry was awake?

Louis was still struggling to figure out where he would possibly fit into things now that Harry might potentially have a say in who was allowed in to see him. Louis wasn’t so sure his name would be on the list. He wasn’t coping well with the idea.

Liam answered quickly, saving Louis from having to think up a believable excuse. “We already ate.” He turned slightly, evidently remembering that Louis hadn’t been with them. “Unless you want to go?”

Louis shook his head. “Not hungry.”
“Niall?”

“Appreciate the offer, but I think I’d better stay with the lads.” He gave Anne a pursed-lip smile, something she struggled to return.

“All right, well.” She paused to collect herself. “Guess we’d better head out. I’ll let you know when they tell us we can see him again.”

Louis wanted to ask if that was the best idea, but it was neither the time nor place. He nodded, watching them go ahead toward the lifts before turning back to face Liam and Niall.

“I know you won’t like it,” Louis said firmly, “but I’m having a drink when we get back.”

Liam’s expression tightened, his mouth forming a grim line across his face before he mustered up an answer. “I think the situation might warrant it this time.”

And that meant things were truly dire, indeed.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

The suspense is building....

Just so you guys know, I am probably going to start uploading twice a week once this is finished, just so I'm not sitting on something half-finished while I'm posting other things. So something to look forward to. :)

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostesupd8s
Tumblr: @vondrostes

February 9, 2021
Los Angeles, California

With Liam on board, it was a simple matter to leave the necessary preparations for getting pissed in Niall’s capable hands.

Since Niall was a bottomless pit with an inhumanly high tolerance for alcohol, that meant an extra case of beer and more snacks than he could possibly carry by himself. Liam went with him into the shop; Louis opted to stay in the car.

Another wave of sadness hit Louis as soon as Niall and Liam got out, the car shuddering as the doors swung shut on either side.

There was too much to think about, too many possibilities to consider. Louis felt adrift in an endless sea of potential futures—none of which felt within his grasp, though all were equally as likely. Maybe Harry would refuse to see him. Maybe they’d strike a truce. Maybe they’d get back together. Maybe Harry wouldn’t be the same Harry anymore.

Louis closed his eyes, hoping it would help. It didn’t. His fingers itched to reach for his phone, to pull it out so he could lose himself in another one of Harry’s songs, a guarantee of his former affection, or obsession, maybe—a guarantee Louis might not have for much longer. But he couldn’t make any of his muscles move at all. He could hardly even breathe.

Louis was sobbing when the doors opened again. Liam poked his head in, caught sight of Louis’s face, and froze. Niall looked just as petrified, but it was Liam who closed the passenger-side door again before going round to the back to climb in next to Louis. He wrapped his arms around the older man’s shoulders and held on tight, letting Louis’s tears soak into the thin fabric of his cotton t-shirt.

“It’s okay,” Liam murmured. “You can cry if it helps.”

Louis wasn’t sure how Liam had known those were the words he most needed to hear, but he cried even harder, unable to form words at all. He heard Liam telling Niall it was okay to head back and was vaguely aware of the movement of the car around him as they drove, but he remained trapped
in his own head as he sobbed, completely overcome by the enormity of what had happened.

Harry was awake, for better or worse. And Louis wasn’t prepared to deal with that.

Louis had settled down some on the drive back, but he still took a minute to fully collect himself while Niall made two trips into the condo with their shopping bags. Liam lingered in the backseat with a hand on Louis’s back until he felt ready to leave the car again. Louis was grateful for his quiet understanding.

“Feeling better?” Liam asked when Louis’s breathing finally evened out.

“I will be when I’ve had a fucking drink,” Louis muttered as he reached past Liam to get the door.

Liam hovered over Louis like he was an invalid the whole twenty yards from the car to the front door of the condo, but Louis didn’t much mind the attention. It was better than being left alone.

Niall was already elbow deep in Louis’s cupboards when they walked inside. Louis headed straight over to join him, ignoring the look of moderated concern he received from Niall as he approached.

Louis was sort of afraid that Liam would renege on his earlier agreement to get drunk together after seeing Louis’s emotional breakdown in the car, but he only watched in silence as Niall and Louis procured every bit of alcohol there was to be had and placed everything neatly on the counter.

By the time they’d finished, with Niall’s snack assortment completely surrounding the display of bottles and glasses, it could have passed for something meant for a party, a celebration. And they should have been celebrating, even though the mood was more suited for a funeral.

“How drunk are we planning on getting?” Liam asked a bit dubiously as he took in the sheer amount of alcohol laid out for the three of them, though Niall would undoubtedly end up imbibing most of it by the night’s end.

The door to the second bedroom, now Sam’s instead of Mark’s, opened before Louis could formulate a response. The woman in question poked her head out in curiosity, her eyebrows drawing together with a look of mild concern as soon as she noticed the display on the kitchen counter. “What’s going on?” she asked.

Louis jolted, realising that Sam still had no idea what had just happened at the hospital. He’d texted Lottie and Jaime to let them know almost immediately, but he’d neglected to tell Sam.

“Give me a minute,” Louis said to Liam and Niall before hurrying over to her. He herded Sam back into her room with his body and quietly closed the door. “So Harry’s awake,” Louis said without prelude once the door was shut behind them.

Sam’s eyes widened by degrees. “Like, awake-awake?” she questioned in a hushed tone, even though there was no one to overhear.

Louis started to nod, and then stopped. “Well,” he amended, “it might be a little while before he’s up to having visitors, but he’s conscious at least.”

“Are you going to stay?”

Louis froze. That was the question, wasn’t it? Now that Harry was awake, Louis was free to move on with his life.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.
Because Sam was Sam, and she trusted Louis implicitly, she didn’t push him to make a decision right then. Louis wouldn’t have been able to even if she had cornered him into it. Everything was still too uncertain.

Sam offered Louis a few brief words of comfort, not enough to overwhelm him again, thankfully, and then sent him back out into the front room to re-join Liam and Niall. Neither made a big deal of his brief absence, instead offering him an ice-cold cranberry vodka just as soon he stepped foot in the kitchen.

“Thanks,” Louis murmured before taking a large swig. It burned going down, but not unpleasantly so; Niall was a better mixologist than most bartenders when he put his mind to it.

Louis finished his glass quickly and had Niall make another, and then another, drinking until the room was spinning and he had to lie down on the floor in front of the sectional. Louis was vaguely aware of Liam prying a half-empty glass from his hands and saying something to him about lying down on the sofa instead, but Louis was straddling the dangerous line between blissfully and blackout drunk and couldn’t quite figure out how to respond in English.

Liam recognised the signs easily enough and brought Louis a glass of tap water just a few minutes later. Louis accepted it gratefully and felt his head start to clear almost as soon as he’d finished. But when he tried to lay back down again, Liam didn’t let him, instead tugging forcefully at Louis’s hand in an effort to make him stand up.

“Where are we going?” Louis demanded as Liam hauled the smaller man to his feet.

“Your room,” Liam answered with a grunt. “Sam said we’re too loud. She can’t get any work done.”

“What work?”

“I dunno; stuff with Jaime I guess. Don’t you have a fucking tour going right now?”

Louis blinked at Liam in confusion. “Oh yeah,” he said. “Right. The tour.” It was hard enough to keep every facet of his life, the compartmentalization of personal and professional, together in his head even when he was sober. Drunk Louis didn’t have a chance.

Liam snorted, apparently finding something humorous in Louis’s response, or maybe the look of childish bemusement on his face. Maybe both. “Come on, I know you can still walk.”

Louis could, but he didn’t want to. Alcohol made him lazy, and walking was too much effort. The distance between the sectional and the master bedroom seemed like kilometres.

The short walk cleared his head a little, though. When he walked into the bedroom still on Liam’s arm, Niall was already camped out in the middle of the bed with a packet of crisps on his chest, flicking through channels on the telly so quickly Louis couldn’t even tell what was playing onscreen before Niall had switched to the next.

“Hate American telly,” Niall muttered as he finally gave up and tossed the remote onto the floor. He scooted over as the other men approached, letting Louis have the middle of the bed while Liam slotted in right behind him, helping to cocoon Louis between them.

Louis snagged a crisp as soon as he’d settled in. The sound of crunching was like thunder fracturing the silence.

“What’s going to happen now?” Niall asked out of nowhere in a too-loud voice, like being drunk
somehow impaired his ability to hear properly. “I mean, Harry’s awake so like…what now?”

He looked to Louis for an answer and Louis physically recoiled, swallowing the rest of his crisp too fast and feeling it scrape unpleasantly at the back of his throat on the way down.

“How the fuck should I know?” Louis retorted. The hard edge to his voice cut through the haze of booze and made Niall flinch. Louis would have felt bad if he wasn’t so occupied with trying to keep himself from bursting out of his own skin.

Niall didn’t back down, surprisingly. “Well, you’re not going to just leave without even talking to him, are you?”

Louis felt his nostrils flare of their own accord. He considered the question for a minute. “I don’t know. Maybe.” The answer was true enough even though Louis was leaving out the part where he really, desperately didn’t want to leave without seeing Harry again, even though every atom of his being was telling him it would be easier to run.

Liam snorted. “No, he’s not,” he told Niall, before shifting to address Louis without missing a beat. “Especially not after what Harry left you.”

Louis’s skull nearly collided with the headboard. “Why do you insist on blabbing about that in front of everyone?” he hissed, ignoring Niall entirely.

Liam shrugged. “I’m drunk.”

“You weren’t with Anne,” Louis pointed out.

Liam just shrugged again, completely unapologetic.

Niall kept looking between them quizzically, a line forming between his furrowed brows. “What’s he on about?” Niall demanded.

Louis closed his eyes and sighed loudly.

The only saving grace was that Liam had effectively changed the subject to something Louis could probably handle discussing, and in the process had derailed Niall completely in his former quest for answers about the future of Louis and Harry’s relationship.

There was something to be said for the fact that Louis would rather deal with Harry’s fucking suicide playlist than think about what would come next now that Harry was alive and awake again.

Finally, Louis pulled out his phone and showed Niall the playlist, explaining in as few details possible just what it was.

Niall just gave a non-committal, “Huh,” in response, and then asked to listen to one.

Louis agreed in hopes that it would at least keep him from talking about Harry for the next five minutes.

He scrolled drunkenly to get to the next unheard song, the clumsy movement of his finger nearly resulting in him choosing the song after the one he’d intended instead. Louis almost swallowed his tongue when he noticed the date on that one.

Thankfully, the next one on the docket was safe enough, even though he knew it would hurt a bit to think about. But then again, they all did.
April 28, 2013

Paris, France

The biggest problem with being in a relationship—or whatever they were—with someone you were also in a band with, is that you were in a band with them even when you were fighting. And in Louis’s case, he and Harry had no choice but to be around each other nearly twenty-four-seven with the time demands of tour and the documentary.

The only notable exception was the separate hotel rooms they’d been booked on nearly every stop courtesy of management. If Modest was truly trying to drive a wedge between the two boys, they were doing a bang-up job of it.

In this case, however, Louis was grateful for the space. And at the same time, he desperately missed Harry every second that they were apart. Sometimes Louis missed him even when they were standing in the same room, only mere metres apart from each other. That realisation had come with its own unique brand of distress.

Louis was doing his best to be as nice as possible to Harry to make up for how thoroughly he’d hurt him before when he’d decided they should take a break from each other—or at least, from having sex with each other—and it was working, somewhat, at least.

Harry had seemed marginally happier around Louis after a while, but Louis couldn’t quite tell if Harry’s amity was sincere or not. There were always cameras around now. None of them had had the opportunity to be truly genuine in quite a while. It was hard to say what was and wasn’t real anymore.

But the expression of distress on Harry’s face after Lou finished cutting his hair seemed real.

“Looking good,” Louis remarked casually as Harry examined himself in the mirror. It was a small peace offering. And Louis did think it looked good. Everything looked good on Harry.

The younger boy didn’t respond, still frowning at his own reflection as he tugged a hand through his newly shorn curls. “I hate it,” Harry said at last, his voice blunt and unforgiving.

Louis was surprised. He’d been all smiles while they were getting their respective trimmings, cute as a button for the cameras just like he always was. The smile hadn’t dropped off his face until Lou had left their room, one they were sharing this time due to the fact that Niall would be bunking with them as well when he got back from his outing with Zayn and Liam.

“Why didn’t you say anything about it?” Louis asked.

It wasn’t meant to be accusatory. Louis wasn’t blaming Harry for anything, but the wounded glare Harry shot him in response clearly communicated that Harry had taken the question the wrong way.

“I already told her the last time that I wanted to grow out my hair,” Harry said in a bitter voice. “And she laughed at me.”

“Why are you so set on growing it out?” Louis asked cautiously, trying to tell the other boy with his eyes that he didn’t mean it in any sort of judgmental way. He was genuinely curious. He
wondered if the reason had anything to do with the way Harry still painted his nails when he knew no one would see, or how his favourite colour was actually pink even though he never wore it and would lie if asked.

Harry just shrugged. “I just want to.”

Louis frowned. Harry was clearly trying to downplay the importance of this, whatever the real issue was, which mean he likely hadn’t given it his all when he’d confronted Lou. She had a tendency to walk all over anyone who would let her, and Harry had probably given her every opportunity to do so.

Louis wouldn’t make that same mistake. “I’ll talk to her about it next time,” he said decisively, making it clear that Harry wasn’t to argue with him unless he suddenly changed his mind about not wanting a haircut.


“Because I love you.” It felt like the right thing to say, surprisingly, even though they were still in the middle of a protracted argument about the state of their relationship.

“You kicked me out of your house,” Harry pointed out. He shrunk in on himself a little, as if expecting reprisal.

And that was its own form of hurt, for Louis instead. “I was trying to protect you. Us.” It might have sounded like a shitty excuse, but it was an honest one. Everything Louis did, every decision—good or bad—he made them because he thought it would help keep the whole world from crashing down around their ears.

Everything felt so precious and fragile still. Harry most of all.

“Can I kiss you?” Louis asked, before Harry had a chance to say anything at all.

For a moment, he thought the answer was going to be ‘no’, but then Harry nodded. His forehead was scrunched up in concentration, his fists balled up against his sides. He looked like someone nervous to be kissed for the very first time as Louis slowly approached him, and that made Louis feel horrible for ever making Harry doubt that he deserved to be loved.

Louis reached toward him like someone trying to handle a sculpture made entirely of fractured glass. Harry flinched at the first touch of Louis’s fingers against his skin but made no move to back away.

He was still sat with Louis standing over him, and it felt weird for Louis to have to lean down to press his lips against Harry’s. He did it once, twice, then again. Softly each time, making it clear he wasn’t asking for anything more. He missed being close to Harry, feeling like they were so tangled up in each other that they’d ceased to become separate entities. He wasn’t sure Harry had ever felt the same way, but it didn’t matter.

Love was unequal. Louis had made his peace with that already.

“Haz, I—” Louis’s hand was clammy against Harry’s warm cheek. His throat tightened up, but he had to get this out there, had to tell Harry how he really felt. “When I said I loved you, I meant it, you know. And it’s not about the sex for me, even though it’s a nice bonus.”

That made Harry laugh, which was a good sign, so Louis kept going.
“I know it’s hard to be apart sometimes, but I want to make this work,” he said softly, drawing his fingers down the curve of Harry’s jaw. He pinched his chin, tugging him closer so Louis could press a chaste kiss to the centre of his mouth. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“I don’t want to lose you, either.” It wasn’t ‘I love you’, but it was enough.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

I should be finished writing this in four weeks at my current pace, with a final word count of around 250k. So there's a lot of road left, but things are really gonna start heating up soon in the present timeline. ;)

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostesupd8s
Tumblr: @vondrostes

February 9, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis felt a bit dizzy by the end of the song, but it wasn’t because of either the music or the memory. No, the problem was quite simply the alcohol swilling around in the pit of his empty stomach, probably searing his stomach lining right off, and slowly inching him closer to vomiting with every passing second.

Louis rubbed at his eyes for a moment and rolled over into Liam’s side, silently willing himself to overcome the sudden nausea. It didn’t work. Louis covered his mouth just in case and headbutted Liam.

Luckily for both of them, Liam moved without any further prompting, allowing Louis to bolt out of bed and into the loo.

Once in motion, Louis was afraid he wouldn’t even make it to the toilet and left the door wide open on the way in. But of course, once he was stationed with his head hanging over the bowl, the urge to vomit suddenly subsided to a tolerable level, leaving him stranded there with Niall and Liam peering in at him with matching expressions of mixed curiosity and concern through the doorway.

“Door,” Louis moaned with his cheek pressed to the seat.

Liam jumped into action and quickly closed the door to give Louis a bit of privacy. It didn’t do anything to quell the quiet murmur of his and Niall’s voices on the other side, however. Louis reached up to turn on the faucet, letting the water drown them out.

Louis didn’t feel like throwing up anymore, but he still felt sick to his stomach. He knew if he returned to his bed he’d end up right back in the loo again in no time.

A tactical chunder suddenly seemed like the best plan in the world.

After Louis had successfully put two fingers down his throat, emptied his stomach of its foul contents, and brushed his teeth, he opened the door to the bedroom again to find Niall already passed out flat on his stomach in the middle of the bed, snoring loudly.

“That was fast,” Louis remarked with a slight rasp to Liam, who was sitting against the headboard
with his knees up, tapping furiously at his phone.

“Well, he’s not as young as he used to be,” Liam replied.

Louis snorted.

“You okay?” Liam asked before Louis had a chance to take a step forward. He put his phone down on the duvet next to Niall and climbed out of bed. “C’mon, let’s make a cup of tea.” He didn’t give Louis the opportunity to protest.

The kitchen felt eerily silent without Niall’s omnipresent noise to temper it. Louis still hadn’t said anything apart from his initial comment after emerging from the toilet. He was content to watch as Liam busied himself with putting the kettle on before turning to the fridge pulling out a seemingly assortment of items.

“Don’t you have cheese anywhere?” Liam finally asked, throwing his hands up in frustration.

“Bottom drawer,” Louis told him. “You’re really going to make cheese toasties?” he asked, hazarding a guess at Liam’s intentions.

“You need to eat,” Liam said without turning around.

Louis did feel a lot better once he had something of substance in his stomach and a mug of hot tea clasped between his hands. Liam sat next to him, gently rubbing Louis’s back while they sat close together on the absurdly large sectional, enormous expanses of space stretching out on either side of them. But neither felt the need to move.

If Liam had been anyone else, the gesture might have been unwelcome, even from one of Louis’s sisters. He hated feeling infantilised, out of control. He felt that way too much these days. But Liam was a source of stability, a quietly grounding presence. Louis was adult enough to know he needed that.

“Are you sober enough to have a serious conversation?” Liam asked once Louis had finished his tea. His hand stilled on Louis’s back before drawing away completely.

Louis sighed. “About what?” He knew there wasn’t any running away from this one. “You know I don’t want to talk about it,” he added before Liam could reply.

“I know.” Liam didn’t say anything else.

“Well, I don’t know what you want from me, then,” Louis said truthfully.

“I want you to tell me you aren’t going to book a flight the second you wake up tomorrow,” Liam replied.

“I wouldn’t do that.” The answer was immediate, reflexive, defensive. The look on Liam’s face made it clear he didn’t believe it. “I wouldn’t,” Louis insisted.

“Okay. But you need to talk to him.”

Louis flopped back against the sofa cushions. “What if he doesn’t want to talk?” he demanded with an angry sigh.

Liam didn’t bite. “Then we’ll cross that bridge if we come to it.” He stared at Louis intently, unflinching. “You can’t just not say anything and hope it all goes away. Letting things go back to
the way they were before…it wouldn’t be good for either one of you.”

Louis wanted to make a glib comment about Liam suddenly becoming his therapist, but he couldn’t muster up the energy. And as much as he hated to admit it, even to himself, Liam was right. It wasn’t like Louis had been happy with the way things had been before. Harry certainly hadn’t been, though whether that had anything to do with Louis or not was still up in the air, he supposed. A lot could change in three years.

“I’m tired,” Louis said abruptly. He tried to get up from the sofa but Liam’s hand on his wrist wouldn’t let him.

“Louis…” Liam said warningly.

Louis wrinkled his nose in annoyance. “I promise not to leave the country without telling you first, and I’ll talk to Harry if he lets me. Happy?”

Liam looked equally annoyed as he nodded in acknowledgment, but he didn’t voice a complaint. “Let’s get you to bed, then.”

The two of them stumbled back into the bedroom, at which point they were met with the issue of Niall hogging most of the available space on the bed. Liam carefully nudged him back over to one side without even waking him somehow, and then gestured for Louis to get in.

“Promise you won’t puke on me?” Liam teased.

Louis gave him a weak smack on the shoulder. “Oh, shut up. I’ll sleep on the end if you’re really that fussed about it.”

Liam slipped into the middle without replying, leaving Louis to lie awkwardly on the end as promised. He realised immediately that Liam had tricked him into taking the worst spot on the bed, but it was convenient if he did end up needing to vomit again.

Louis pressed his forehead into the space between Liam’s shoulder blades and closed his eyes, breathing in deeply, matching their rhythms. He was acutely aware of the moment Liam fell asleep, but he couldn’t quite get there himself. The bed was suddenly too warm, too stifling.

Louis carefully rolled out, padding quietly back into the loo. He closed the door behind him before turning the light on and winced at the sudden brightness.

He wasn’t feeling poorly again, which was a relief, but he sat down next to the toilet anyway before pulling out his phone.

In his more sober state of mind, Louis couldn’t get the date of the next song out of his head. It may have been Harry with the nearly eidetic memory, but there were certain days Louis had etched into his own mind. This was one of them.

May 9, 2013

Stockholm Sweden

Louis could have kissed Ben Winston on the bloody mouth. Finally, after countless stops spent in
separate hotel rooms, he and Harry were sharing a fucking tent in a campground just outside of Stockholm, all because Ben had miscounted the luggage they were bringing and had left them one tent short.

Louis’s eagerness to volunteer to share Harry’s tent must have been as obvious as the sun in the sky above them, but Louis was so elated by the prospect of having Harry to himself again that he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Harry seemed pleasantly surprised by Louis’s enthusiasm. He was so quick to forgive, and Louis was grateful for it.

He soaked in Harry’s vibrant energy like sunshine as they luxuriated through the afternoon, drank it up like a life-giving elixir when the dark settled in around them and all the lads lay down on a tarp a little farther out into the woods so they could stare up at the stars in silence.

Louis tangled his fingers with Harry under the cover of night and felt a reassuring squeeze in response.

They were on each other as soon as they’d climbed into their tent together afterward, mouths clashing in a furious battle of warmth and wet tongues. Louis ended up on top of his bag in the nest of sleeping bags and blankets on the ground, with Harry settled in over him, covering him completely.

He was so tall now, Louis marvelled as they continued kissing. But Louis still felt as if he could contain all of Harry in just the palm of his hand if he wanted to.

Inside their tent, away from the cameras and the prying eyes of the crew, they could be themselves—as long as they were quiet about it. Harry was never much good at that.

Louis clapped a hand over Harry’s mouth as he tugged the younger boy’s hips into place, letting Harry rut down into him while he laid kisses along Harry’s throat. Louis threaded the fingers of his free hand into Harry’s hair, getting a firm grip on him so he could return Harry’s desperate thrusts in kind.

Harry wasn’t so sensitive still that he’d come undone in seconds without even a hand on his cock, but he had other triggers, ones that Louis was starting to become intimately familiar with.

“Stop,” Harry gasped, yanking Louis’s hand away from his mouth so he could speak, but he left Louis’s fingers tangled in his hair, still pulling sharply at the fast-growing curls. “Stop, stop, I’m gonna come if you don’t—”

“That’s the point,” Louis said, not letting up for a second.

Harry’s next few words halted him dead in his tracks. “Wanna come with you inside me.”

Louis’s hand stilled, his fingers finally falling out of Harry’s hair. “I don’t—” Louis stuttered. “We need—”

Harry rolled off Louis and onto his stomach next to the older boy’s sleeping bag, reaching for his backpack tucked into the far corner of the tent. He came back with a bottle of lube and a strip of condoms less than a minute later. Harry was expecting this, Louis realised with a flash of heat coursing through his stomach. Anticipating it.

Louis accepted the proffered items wordlessly and watched through hooded eyes as Harry kicked off his t-shirt and trousers before settling back down against the sleeping bag on his side with his
knees up.

Louis approached him cautiously with the lube and condoms in hand. He knew the mechanics. He’d watched enough porn, read enough articles that he was familiar with how things worked, but it was different, doing it for real.

“You’re sure about this?” Louis asked hesitantly. He wasn’t even sure of himself, not completely, and he wasn’t the one about to have someone’s fingers in his arse.

“Yeah,” Harry breathed. The expression on his face couldn’t be described as anything other than hungry. He was still hard somehow, his cock laid flat against his belly, but he didn’t move his hands from his sides to so much as touch it.

Louis stared down evaluatingly at Harry for a moment before deciding the position was impractical. He grabbed his own pillow, realising he was going to have to go without one after this was over with, but it was a worthy sacrifice.

Harry lifted up at Louis’s prompting so he could fit the pillow under his hips, giving Louis a better angle to work with.

Louis’s hands were trembling as he uncapped the tube of lubricant and squirted a little out onto his fingers. It wasn’t quite as watery as he was expecting, but more viscous, like a gel. It reminded him a little of toothpaste, actually, though it thankfully didn’t smell the least bit similar.

Louis pressed into Harry gently with a single finger, monitoring his face for any signs of pain or distress. There was nothing but slack-mouthed euphoria, a hastily gasped out, “More,” as Louis pushed deeper and then pulled out again.

Emboldened by Harry’s reaction, Louis moved on to two fingers, and then almost as quickly to three, until Harry was a sweaty, panting mess underneath him, desperately begging for Louis’s cock.

Louis already knew there wasn’t a chance in hell this was going to last longer than a minute, tops, but he was determined to make good on Harry’s request that he come while Louis was still inside him.

Louis fumbled with the condom for a minute while Harry just blinked up at him slowly without moving a muscle. Once it was on, Louis wrapped a hand around the base of his dick as he pressed up against Harry before slowly pushing in.

Harry’s mouth closed, the air rushing out of his nostrils while he continued to stare at Louis. The refusal to break eye contact was intimidating, but it gave him something to focus on other than the suffocatingly tight heat around his cock.

Louis stilled with his hips pressed flush against Harry’s arse, bringing his still-slick hand down to start wanking him off, hoping Harry was still close enough that this wouldn’t end embarrassingly for Louis.

“You can move,” Harry urged through a gasp. His hips shifted against Louis’s and Louis squeezed a little tighter as a reflex.

“Can’t,” Louis bit out. He was never going to live this down. He stroked Harry harder, pulling more noise out of him, not enough to wake the others. “Need you to tell me when you’re close.” Being inside Harry, unable to do anything about it, was agony. Louis wouldn’t have traded it for anything.
It was only a few seconds later that Harry’s quiet moans suddenly sharpened in pitch. “Close,” he said, bucking up into Louis’s hand unthinkingly, shifting their bodies in a way that had Louis biting his lip against the orgasm coiling tight in his lower belly. “Gonna—”

Louis pulled out without warning and slammed back in before Harry could finish speaking, forcing an abortive whine out of his mouth instead.

He sped up the movement of his hand to match the pace of his thrusts, trying to coax an orgasm out of Harry as quickly as possible.

Time wasn’t on his side. Harry was too tight, and too wet, and the sight of his face contorted in a familiar expression of ecstasy was too much for Louis’s brain to handle. He hadn’t been inside of anything that wasn’t his own hand or Harry’s mouth since the first time with Hannah all those years ago, and Louis’s self-control was already shot after days spent with no time to relieve himself at all.

Louis came with a cry that was half-surprise, half-disappointment, his hand stuttering over Harry’s cock as the younger boy bucked up into it, searching for more.

Louis rebelled against his body’s natural instincts to shove himself even deeper into Harry and stay there, forcing himself to keep the rhythm he’d set instead even as he spilled into the condom. He could tell Harry was right on the verge of coming from the way he was twisting wildly under Louis’s hand, and Louis didn’t let up for a second.

Louis was just on the verge of painful oversensitivity when Harry’s body finally locked up underneath him, his face scrunched up like he’d been stabbed even while his cock spurted in Louis’s hand and his arse clenched around Louis’s softening cock.

Louis pulled out as soon as Harry’s muscles relaxed, both letting out twin hisses of mild discomfort as they disconnected.

Louis made short work of the condom, rolling it into a sheet of tissue before stashing it into one of the side pockets on his bag, before lying back down again next to Harry, who curled into him instinctively.

“Was that okay?” Louis whispered. The air between them somehow felt more charged than it had before they’d fucked, and he wasn’t sure what to make of that.

“Good,” Harry mumbled, almost incoherently. He was already half-asleep.

“I love you,” Louis said into his curls.

Harry answered with a soft sigh, his lips pressed against Louis’s throat. A few seconds passed, and then his lips moved, sending a shiver down Louis’s spine. “Love you, too.”

February 9, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis tipped his head back against the wall and absently wondered if he was obligated to tell Harry he’d used some of the songs on the playlist as unintentional wank material. Or wank inspiration,
rather. Harry had always been rather good at writing sex songs. It was kind of unfair, actually.

This time, however, Louis was determined not to give in. He knew from experience that he wouldn’t be able to stomach the guilt. Especially not now that Harry was actually awake, and Louis would ostensibly have to face him within the next day or so. Louis didn’t think he could look Harry in the eye if he allowed himself to get off while thinking about their first time together, despite the travesty it had been.

But no matter how hard he tried to think of anything else, Louis’s brain wouldn’t let him escape the memory. He wasn’t drunk enough anymore to not be horny, either, which wasn’t something Louis ever expected to complain about.

In the end, it took an entire ten minutes of standing directly under the freezing cold spray in the shower for the beginning of Louis’s erection to go down, and another five of him reassuring himself it was safe to climb back into bed with Liam and that he wouldn’t wake up accidentally humping his friend’s arse in the middle of the night.

But no amount of mental coaching could prepare him for the inevitability of facing Harry the next day. So Louis didn’t even try.
Louis woke up with his cheek pressed against the tile and the stale tang of bile still lingering at the back at his throat.

It took him a while to remember what he was doing on the floor next to the toilet, and even longer to piece together the events leading up to it. When he remembered Harry, whimpering in a hospital bed, unable to speak even though he’d awoken from the comatose state he’d been trapped in for an entire week, Louis suddenly felt like he’d been electrocuted.

Louis inched forward on his face toward where his phone was lying discarded on the floor a few yards away. He couldn’t recall how it had gotten there. He hoped the screen wasn’t cracked.

It wasn’t, thankfully, but at some point Louis must have turned off airplane mode, because he had six missed calls, all from Gemma.

He sat up and dialled her back with shaking fingers.

“It’s about time,” she commented upon answering. Her voice sounded a bit raw, like she’d been crying.

Louis immediately wanted to hang up, already afraid of what she might say next.

“Yeah, I….” He stopped. There was really no point in trying to come up with a dignified excuse for why he’d been passed out on the bathroom floor. “Never mind. Did something happen?”

The answer to that was obvious. Gemma wouldn’t have been trying so hard to get a hold of him otherwise. It was just a question now of what exactly had occurred that had her so frantic.

“Harry’s fully conscious now,” she replied thickly. “He’s talking. They’ve said he’s allowed visitors.”

Louis heart dropped into his stomach. “Oh.” He wasn’t sure what else to say. Was he allowed to ask if he could visit Harry? Did he even want to? He knew at some point he would have to get it over with. Maybe sooner would be better than letting the anticipation build into something uglier.
and even more unpleasant.

“I think you should come see him,” Gemma said, saving Louis the trouble of having to decide either way. “He wouldn’t say much to me or Mum, really.”

“And you think he’ll talk to me?” Louis replied, bewildered at the thought. He and Harry hadn’t spoken once in nearly three years with the exception of the reunion talks, during which Harry had only communicated with Louis to tell him to fuck off. Louis wasn’t sure any of that was bound to change now just because of what had happened.

“Well, I’ve got to try something, haven’t I?” Gemma said defiantly.

Louis had the feeling Gemma’s initial meeting with her brother had gone more poorly than she was letting on. He wasn’t going to interrogate her about it, though. It wasn’t any of his business how Harry got on with his family.

“I’ll be by in half an hour or so,” Louis finally said in defeat.

“Thank you,” Gemma replied in a small voice.

Louis hung up with a sigh and peeled himself off the bathroom tile.

He had no idea what to expect from his impending visit to Cedars-Sinai and the fear of the unknown was already eating him alive. But it wasn’t like he had any other choice but to go and see Harry. He’d promised Gemma and Liam both, now.

Louis carefully tiptoed out of the bathroom and through the master bedroom, careful not to wake Liam or Niall as he passed by. It would have been easier to ask them to tag along on his first meeting with Harry, just to have them acting as a buffer, but it wouldn’t be fair to either himself or Harry, and Louis was mature enough to recognise that he needed to do this on his own.

It was difficult to get changed and freshened up without waking them, but Louis managed somehow. He decided to forego breakfast after a cursory look around the cupboards and in the fridge. He wasn’t sure he could even stomach solid food anyway.

Louis tapped lightly on Sam’s door and waited a few seconds before opening it to let himself inside. She was sat upright in bed, still rubbing the sleep from her eyes with her hair a messy haystack piled on top of her head. Louis felt bad for waking her.

“Harry’s awake,” he said quietly once he was certain she was conscious enough to register the words. “I’m heading over to see him, but I don’t want to wake up the others yet. Can you let them know if they’re up before I’m back?”

Sam scrunched her face up in confusion as she blinked sleepily up at Louis. “You’re going alone?”

“Just for a bit.” Louis didn’t explain himself, but thankfully Sam didn’t ask.

“Okay,” she said, flopping back down onto the mattress to hug her pillow.

Louis was pretty sure she’d fallen asleep again before he’d even left the room.

He was bricking it before he even left the condo, and then it took a good five tries to actually get the keys in the ignition, his hands were shaking so badly. Louis was reminded unpleasantly of the dream he’d had the day before as he raced to the hospital alone.
Louis wasn’t sure what he was planning to say to Harry once he got there. He was hoping Gemma would have some advice, or words of guidance, because Louis was fairly certain he was destined to royally fuck everything up as soon as he opened his mouth.

Louis still didn’t know if Harry even wanted to see him. Gemma might not have told him Louis was coming at all.

Louis’s fingers drummed a nervous rhythm against the steering wheel in time with the percussion that opened the next song on Harry’s playlist as he drove, letting the music distract him for just a few minutes, and hopefully preserving his sanity until he managed to make it to Cedars-Sinai.

June 12, 2013
Miami, Florida

Louis wouldn’t have minded the whole yacht party thing if it had actually been an opportunity for the lads to have some fun on their day off and not a bare-faced attempt at drumming up some publicity. They were in full view of the marina still, giving the photographers every opportunity to snatch a few pictures of the boys in their swim regalia while they attempted to enjoy themselves despite the scrutiny.

Louis was more pissed off at the fact that he and Harry weren’t even allowed to go round to the sea-facing side of the yacht, or inside even, without the company of the other boys. Apparently even just their absence, or the merest suggestion that they might be alone together, was enough to cause a stir.

Louis knew that wasn’t altogether incorrect, but it was an annoyance regardless.

So as soon as they were given the all-clear by their handlers, their scheduled ‘candid photoshoot’ over with for the day, Louis immediately dragged Harry to the back of the boat for some private time.

Private time that was interrupted almost as soon as Louis got his mouth on Harry’s neck, his hands on the other boy’s lower back, rucking up the loose t-shirt he’d thrown on to keep himself from burning. Harry’s skin was sun-warm regardless; Louis wanted to lay across his back and bask in it forever.

Louis pushed him toward one of the chaise lounges with that very intention, or something like it, when a glint of light out on the shore suddenly caught his eye. It took him a few precious seconds to figure out just what had caused the disturbance, and by the time his brain caught up to his eyes, it was too late for Louis to do much of anything about it.

“Photographer,” Louis hissed, ducking down reflexively before the man had a chance to set up his camera.

Harry blinked down at him, slower on the uptake. When he tried to follow Louis down too, Louis had to put a hand on his knee to stop him.

“Just stay there,” Louis warned. He stared up at Harry’s face as it morphed through a variety of expressions and tried to think of a solution.
Harry was panicking. Louis wanted to panic too, but he couldn’t, not with Harry already so close to losing it. One of them had to maintain some semblance of control, had to reign things in so they wouldn’t fuck this up.

They were lucky Louis had spotted the pap when he did. But what Louis should have done was bolt in the other direction, not get down between Harry’s knees at the edge of the chaise lounge he’d been planning on bending Harry over just seconds ago.

Now Louis was trapped there between Harry’s legs with no way of knowing whether he’d be spotted if he tried to make a break for it now.

“Harry, please calm down,” Louis urged in a quiet voice from where he was still crouched on the deck.

“What if he saw?” Harry’s eyes darted around without focusing on anything at all. Louis wished he could reach up and grab Harry by the chin, force him to look down at Louis himself until he calmed the fuck down.

“I thought you didn’t want to hide anymore,” Louis pointed out, hoping it would put a positive spin on things at the very least.

It didn’t.

“I don’t want people to find out from the front page of The fucking Sun, Louis!” he hissed. “I wanted to do it on my terms, not theirs!”

While that was admirable, it wasn’t very realistic. Louis didn’t have much hope for a future in which either of them would ever get to direct their own public narratives.

“Harry, look at me,” Louis instructed. He was a little taken off-guard when Harry obeyed without hesitation, staring down intently into Louis’s eyes, though he still looked a little helpless and scared. “Just focus on me, okay? I promise he didn’t see anything. He didn’t even have his camera out yet.”

Harry bit down hard on his lower lip, still visibly apprehensive. “But what if he did see,” he fretted. “What if he says something?”

“He didn’t see anything,” Louis said firmly, with a sharp squeeze to the fleshy insides of Harry’s thighs. “And he’s not going to say anything, because you’re going to make a phone call, all right?”

Harry blinked down at him in confusion for a few seconds before realising what Louis was getting at, just as Louis bit down hard right below his kneecap.

Harry buckled, just managing to save himself by grabbing hold of the deck railing.

“You are not going to blow me while a photographer is right there,” he hissed, but he was already taking out his phone to do as Louis had asked. “Anyone could come back here!”

“Then we’d better make it quick,” Louis replied with a shit-eating grin as he tugged mercilessly at the waistband of Harry’s swim trunks.

Harry was expressive when he got off. He couldn’t keep a straight face to save his life, and he was even worse at staying quiet. He’d never learned how to hide his own reactions because there had never been any need, not like there had in Louis’s house, with four younger siblings who might
Louis loved that Harry was so unapologetically shameless. He loved watching him come undone. A part of him loved knowing that anyone could come around the corner and see what they were doing, but Louis wouldn’t let that happen.

And Louis took smug satisfaction in the fact that the photographer on the beach, who clearly hadn’t gotten the memo that he was meant to be there hours ago, would never know the juicy spectacle he was just missing below the railing of the yacht.

Harry came down Louis’s throat with his own index finger between his teeth, the other pressed against his ear, his knees shaking, anxiety forgotten. Louis pressed a delicate kiss to both of his thighs and gently tugged his trunks back up into place.

“Better?” Louis asked.

Harry rolled his eyes. “That was stupid, and you know it.”

“Worked though, didn’t it? That photographer gone yet?”

Louis waited while Harry scanned the shore. “Seems like.”

“Good,” Louis said, already tugging Harry down toward him. “Means I can do this.” He kissed Harry full on the mouth, laughing at a little at the way Harry cringed away from the taste on instinct before relaxing into the feeling.

This was just for them now.

February 10, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis wasn’t faring much better with his nerves when he finally met Gemma outside Harry’s new hospital room, this one on the eighth storey. It was quieter there, with less of the hustle and bustle that had been characteristic of the lower floors. Louis sort of missed the noise. It had been a welcome distraction at times. Here, he was left with nothing but his own thoughts.

“Hey,” Louis said to Gemma as he approached. He kept his voice low, not sure if Harry could hear him through the walls.

She didn’t respond, only glancing up at Louis for a split second when he stopped in front of where she was sat against the wall.

“Is it okay for me to go in there alone?” he asked softly. Louis still didn’t even know if Harry wanted to see him. He wouldn’t have wanted to see Harry if their positions had been reversed.

Gemma just nodded, her arms crossed over her chest like she was trying desperately to hold herself together. She’d obviously just been crying for who knows how long. Somehow Harry waking up hadn’t seemed to fix much at all.

Louis breathed out heavily through his nose and faced the door. The one saving grace of Gemma standing there next to him was that he couldn’t linger outside dithering over whether to go in for
quite as long as he might have if he had been alone instead. Her presence goaded Louis into action, his fingers stretching forward toward the door handle.

Louis pushed it open with his heart pounding away inside of his chest and gradually ascending into his throat as more and more of the room was revealed.

It was nicer than any hospital room Louis had ever been in, resembling a hotel suite more than something located at a medical facility. The only real giveaway was the heart monitor next to the bed where Harry was laying with his head resting gently on a stack of pillows, his position nearly vertical.

Harry’s eyes were closed, but Louis could tell immediately that he was awake.

Still, Louis said nothing as he entered. He closed the door behind himself and took a seat in the chair the farthest distance away from Harry’s bed. Louis didn’t bother to move it from where it already was; he didn’t want to admit defeat in any form even if the feeling of it was already crushing him to bits.

Then he waited.

It was a few minutes before Harry finally opened his eyes. He scrutinised Louis wordlessly. When he finally spoke, his voice was rasping but unexpectedly familiar. “I asked Gemma who painted my nails while I was asleep. She said it was probably you.”

It wasn’t the opener Louis had anticipated.

He struggled to come up with a response, mouth dry and palms clammy against his thighs, staining his trackies dark with sweat. “I didn’t think you’d mind,” Louis finally settled on as a response. He wondered if Harry could hear the strain in his voice. He wondered if Harry knew he wanted nothing more than to turn tail and run straight out the door again.

It was some testament to his…whatever it was he still felt for Harry, that Louis didn’t do just that.


“I’ve had a lot of practice,” Louis said. His voice still sounded slightly strangled, but he didn’t think that was going away any time soon.

“Recently?”

Louis shook his head.

Harry stared down at his own fingernails, considering. “Guess it’s just like riding a bike.”

“Suppose so, yeah.”

The silence stretched out between them, lengthening into something thin and fragile like a strand of spiderweb ever-so tenuously linking the two of them together. Until Harry’s voice cut in again, severing the string effortlessly.

“I suppose you want to know why,” he said. His voice was painfully casually considering the topic at hand.

Louis wasn’t quite sure how to respond. How he should respond. He would’ve rather said nothing at all, but that didn’t feel like it was even an option. “I wasn’t going to ask,” Louis replied
cautiously, “if that’s what you were worried about.”

Harry gave a minute shake of the head. “I wasn’t worried. I just don’t have a good answer.” Harry was right. That wasn’t a good answer. Not in the slightest.

Louis felt his nerves prickling; anger rose quickly to the surface. “So what, it was just a spur of the moment decision?” Louis hadn’t meant it to sound so accusing, but that’s how it came out.

Harry’s eyes quickly filled with tears as he stared back at Louis, who remained frozen in his chair, unable to react in any way at all. “Do you really want me to answer that?” Harry asked thickly. He blinked away the moisture gathering at the corners of his eyes with disturbing efficiency.

“Not really, no,” Louis replied in a feeble voice. “But you should if it’ll make you feel better. To talk about it, or whatever.” Louis could have kicked himself. He’d barely been in the room all of five minutes with Harry and already he was mucking things up.

Harry laughed but it didn’t imbue Louis with any sort of comfort. He sounded tired, more than anything. Too tired to be bitter or upset by Louis’s insensitivity. “I don’t think anything would make me feel better right now,” he told Louis, and the honesty dripping out of his voice hurt more than anything.

Louis stared at him apprehensively. “Do you want me to go?” he asked.

Harry hesitated, and then shook his head.

“I can’t stay too long,” Louis told him regretfully. “But I can come back.”

“Okay.” It didn’t sound like it was okay, judging from Harry’s voice, but Louis wasn’t about to question it.

The truth was, now that Harry was here, alive, within reach, Louis didn’t want to leave. Every muscle in his body had been screaming at him to run when he’d first walked into the room, but now he was being pulled in the other direction, toward Harry himself beyond all discernible reason.

That was the way it had always been with them. That was the way it would always be.
Happy New Year! I decided I'm close enough to finishing this that I can start posting here twice a week. I have other long fics queued up to work on after this (and a ton of Requests), but I don't want to worry about posting them here until this is complete. :) Enjoy!

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February 10, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Despite Harry’s unexpected insistence that Louis stay with him, he fell back asleep after only just a few minutes of quiet, leaving Louis little choice but to head back to the condo to tell the others what had happened. The other alternative, waiting there until Harry woke up again, was not only impractical, but also scared the holy hell out of him.

Gemma was still waiting outside in the hallways when Louis slipped out of Harry’s room. She glanced up at him expectantly. Louis wasn’t quite sure what to say to her.

“He seems…okay.” It was a poor summation of Harry’s condition, all things considered, but Louis didn’t have it in him to come up with anything better.

“Better?” she asked hopefully.

Anything was better than before, Louis thought to himself, but he supposed that no, that wasn’t strictly true. “We talked a bit,” he hedged. “He’s asleep now.”

Louis had panicked a little when Harry’s eyes had drifted closed on him out of nowhere, but it soon became clear that Harry’s peaceful slumber was nothing like the comatose state he had been trapped in previously. Still, Louis had felt on edge just seeing him like that. Some part of him was still afraid of Harry falling asleep and never waking back up.

Gemma opened her mouth as if to respond, and then closed it again. Louis gave her a questioning look.

“He called emergency services on himself,” Louis reminded her even though the same thought had crossed his mind more than once, had made him shiver-sick at the thought of ever leaving Harry’s side again despite how impractical it was to think he could keep Harry safe forever. Especially if Harry didn’t want him to.
“I know, it’s just…. I’m worried about him. He’s not himself. He wasn’t himself before any of this happened.” Gemma gazed up at Louis, pleading with wide, watery eyes for him to understand her predicament, and he did. He just wasn’t sure how to help.

“I’m staying for a while, I think,” Louis told her eventually. “Until I have to go back on tour again.”

Gemma looked relieved. Louis caught himself wondering if Harry had said something to her, about him, and then quickly stifled the thought. If Harry wanted him around, he could tell Louis himself.

“Did you and Anne talk to Harry’s publicist yet?” Louis asked instead of the question he was burning to voice instead. “Since he woke up, I mean.”

Gemma shook her head. “We’re meant to have another meeting in just a bit. Mum’s at the flat still, getting ready, but I didn’t want to leave him alone for too long.”

“I’ll bring Niall and Liam by in a little while,” Louis replied automatically. “You can go back and do whatever you need to do.”

“Yeah, thanks. I’m sure Harry’s dying to see them.”

There was an awkward moment in which Louis wasn’t sure what to say, so he leaned on his excuse of needing to get back to the others. Gemma’s smile was tight-lipped, obviously forced, as they exchanged goodbyes before Louis headed back to the lifts.

There was a weight settled heavily on Louis’s shoulders that he hadn’t even been conscious of until it vanished just as soon as the lift doors closed on him. But he already knew the reprieve wouldn’t last long.

Louis thumbed at his mobile sat in his front pocket as the lift descended. He had new texts from both Lottie and Jaime in response to his message about Harry, but he hadn’t quite mustered up the courage to look at them yet. He knew he should, though, or the dread would only get worse.

He forced himself to address them when he finally reached the car. The replies weren’t anything other than what he’d expected, but Louis still felt that queasy mixture of catharsis and anxiety as he opened them both.

From Lottie: is everything okay? call me. :c

From Jaime: I’ve contacted Harry’s team. Keeping myself updated on his progress. Call me when you have a chance.

Louis didn’t respond to either.

Instead he settled his phone in the cupholder, turned the keys in the ignition, and hit play on the next song in the playlist, listening as he made the familiar drive back from Cedars-Sinai to the condo on full autopilot, his mind swirling with thoughts of the past and future all mixing together into one big mess.

June 16, 2013

Louisville, Kentucky
Louis was exhausted, plain and simple.

They were barely two years into this lifestyle and already he felt at his wit’s end. He wanted to take a vacation for a year, spend it doing nothing but sitting out on the beach soaking up the sun with Harry at his side.

Harry couldn’t have felt differently. He loved touring, more than anything. And Louis got it, he really did—or at least he tried to. There was something almost otherworldly about having an arena full of thousands of people all singing the words to your own songs back to you.

But Harry thrived on that in a way that none of the rest of them did. Louis knew he got a little depressed now when they took longer breaks, that it took him longer to get back into the rhythm of normal life (if anything about their lives could be considered normal anymore) than the other lads did.

It was too bad Harry’s body hadn’t gotten the memo.

They were currently in the thick of their American leg of tour, just starting out really, and already Harry was practically bedridden between shows just so he could perform.

Louis had heard their personal trainer talking to Paul about it: apparently, he thought the issue was overexertion. Ever since the movie had been announced, Harry had taken to hitting the gym even more than Liam, which had seemed like a good thing initially, but was now just another quirk Louis was starting to blame on management and the fans.

Louis just wanted Harry to get some fucking rest.

But Louis wanted rest, too, so when his phone buzzed on the nightstand next to his hotel bed—the one good thing about Harry’s back issues was that their time on the bus had been minimised—he was tempted to just ignore it.

But Louis had always been bad at resisting temptation, and even worse at making good decisions. He picked up on the third ring, answering with his eyes shut tight, like that would help him rest somehow even though he was still awake when he had no desire to be.

“Haz, we got off-stage like an hour ago,” Louis complained quietly into the receiver before Harry had a chance to say anything. “I need sleep. We’re leaving at like six, remember?”

There was no response.

“Harry?”

“Sorry, I’m just—” Harry’s voice was tight, his breathing a bit laboured. “Can you come to my room, please?”

“Yeah,” Louis replied without even having to think about it. “Of course.”

Under other circumstances, Louis might have thought that Harry was inviting him over for a booty call, but they both valued their beauty sleep far too much to do much between back-to-back performances anymore. And Harry had sounded a bit off, but not in a good way. Louis was worried.

They’d exchanged extra copies of their room keys when they’d checked in anyway, just in case, so
Louis let himself inside without even bothering to knock first. The room was dark. He fumbled to find
the switch to the overhead light in the entryway, finally managing to flick it on after a few
seconds of clumsily groping at the wall, loud enough that Harry could definitely hear.

With the light on, Louis could see that Harry was lying face-down on top of the covers, completely
naked except for one sock. Louis approached him slowly, waiting for a reaction, but there was
nothing. Not even when Louis reached down and carefully peeled off the last remaining scrap of
fabric adorning Harry’s body, tossing it into the pile where the rest of his clothes from the show
had been messily discarded next to the bed.

“Have you been lying here since we got back?”

“Mhmm,” Harry replied weakly, face still smushed into the pillow.

Louis sighed and settled a careful hand against the small of Harry’s back. “Can you get up for me,
love? We need to get you in the shower.”

“Hurts.”

“I know,” Louis replied patiently. “That’s why you need the shower. Some hot water to loosen you
up, yeah?”

Harry’s answering grunt didn’t sound too agreeable, but he shifted enough that Louis could get
a hand under him. He whimpered a little, when Louis got him onto his feet—that was the biggest
clue that something was really wrong. Harry’s pain tolerance was absurdly high. If his back was
bothering him this much it must have been in really bad shape.

Louis made a mental note to text Paul when he had the chance. They should get Harry checked out
by an actual doctor, and at the very least, have their trainer stretch him out and medicate him
before the next show.

Louis hated watching Harry suffer like this.

Getting him into the shower was a task and a half. Every littlest movement seemed to genuinely
hurt Harry enough that even Louis winced in sympathy each time he let out a breathy gasp at being
jostled the wrong way.

When they finally got him into the tub, Harry’s face was pale and pinched from the pain. Louis
quickly turned on the water, hoping the heat would provide a little bit of immediate relief.

Louis sat down on the toilet next to the shower while Harry soaked, waiting patiently beside him
for some kind of positive change in Harry’s condition.

After thirty minutes or so, during which Louis nearly nodded off a few times, he decided it had
been long enough. He stood up and pulled back the curtain to reveal Harry still stood exactly where
Louis had put him, head tilted back just a little to catch the water cascading down onto his naked
back.

He looked beautiful like that, with the water streaming down his face, dampening his curls against
his ears and neck. There was no other word for it.

Louis leaned in to kiss him with no warning given, ignoring the water drenching his head and torso
as he pressed his mouth to Harry’s. Harry jerked a little in surprise and then relaxed into it, gently
returning the kiss with languid movements of his lips and tongue, nothing hurried or frantic about
it for once.
“You ready to come out?” Louis asked, pulling away and pushing back the drenched bits of his hair so it wasn’t hanging in his eyes. “Wanna rub your back and get you to bed before too long.”

Harry’s eyes brightened a little at the realisation that Louis wasn’t planning to leave his side tonight, and he nodded eagerly.

It was much easier to get him out of the shower than it had been to get him in; Harry was back in his bed in under a minute. Apparently, the hot water had done him some good.

Louis made him take a few pain-relievers with some water before he let him lie down again. Harry settled into the mattress with a happy sigh, exposing the long naked line of his body to Louis with no shame whatsoever.

Not that he had anything to be ashamed of.

“If it hurts too much,” Louis said as he placed a careful hand in the middle of Harry’s lower back, where he knew the pain was usually the worst, “just tell me to stop, all right? I don’t want to hurt you.”

Harry nodded, looking like he was biting back some other response, but he never voiced it.

Louis was methodical in his ministrations, not wanting to get too caught up in the feeling of his hands on Harry’s body. This wasn’t for himself, after all. But it was hard not to be affected in some small way. Even just the knowledge that Harry was offering himself up into Louis’s hands like this, letting Louis take care of him while he was at his most vulnerable…it had him completely floored.

Louis could see the tension bleeding out of Harry’s muscles while he worked to soothe the strain that had been building for months. By the time Louis’s hands finally stilled, his arms simply too tired to continue, Harry was breathing softly through his open mouth, his eyes fully closed as he straddled the line between consciousness and sleep.

And for a moment, Louis thought he was asleep, but then he suddenly spoke.

“You care about me so much,” Harry said quietly. “And it makes me sad.”

“Why?” Louis asked, bewildered by the comment that had seemingly emerged from nowhere. He couldn’t even fathom what Harry could have been thinking about that would have prompted something like that.

“I don’t deserve it. I’m not good enough.” He was half-asleep already if the slurring of his words was any indication, and as much as Louis wanted to wake him up to continue the conversation, it was easier to let Harry slip all the way under with Louis’s hand still tracing soothing spirals along the column of his spine.

“You are good enough,” Louis reassured him, though he wasn’t even sure Harry was conscious enough to hear him anymore. “You’re perfect.”

February 10, 2021

Los Angeles, California
Louis didn’t feel remotely ready to face Liam and Niall’s questions by the time he returned to the condo, but he knew he had little choice in the matter. And besides, it wasn’t like avoiding his problems had worked very well for him in the past.

When he walked in, however, only Sam and Niall were sitting in the kitchen, with Liam nowhere to be found.

“Liam still asleep?” Louis questioned in a low voice, not wanting to wake him up if that were the case.

Niall just nodded in answer. He stared at Louis curiously, like he wanted to ask about Harry but didn’t quite know if he was allowed.

Louis didn’t really want to encourage him, but he knew that keeping quiet would only lead to more questions when Niall’s patience finally ran out.

“Harry was awake when I went in to see him,” Louis told Sam and Niall both as he sat down at the countertop between them. There was an array of fruit and cereal laid out, but Louis didn’t know yet if he wanted to eat. “Like properly awake. Talking and stuff.”

“What did he say?” Niall pressed.

Louis shrugged. “Not a whole lot, really. He’s pretty knackered still. We just talked about… talking, I guess. Like whether he was ready to talk about what happened.” Louis reached for the mug in front of him and took a hearty sip, ignoring the particularly bitter taste of the already lukewarm tea.

“I’m guessing he’s not,” Niall said cautiously.

Louis nodded. “Might be a while,” he admitted

Sam said nothing, but Louis could see her carefully scrutinising him out of the corner of his eye as he carried on his conversation with Niall. Neither of them had a chance to say anything else before the door to the master bedroom finally opened, however.

Out stumbled Liam, bleary-eyed and looking predictably hungover, wearing just his pants.

“There’s a lady present,” Louis said, just to be a dick.

Liam replied with a two-fingered salute. “Like she hasn’t already seen worse from you.”

That got a small laugh out of Sam, who—to be perfectly fair—had definitely seen worse from Louis.

“How come you two aren’t hungover?” Liam demanded irritably as he wandered over and picked up a banana off the counter. He peeled it with clumsy fingers, from the wrong end, smashing half of the damn thing into paste in his eagerness to get it out of the skin.

“Practise,” Louis and Niall both said in unison.

Liam glared at them and forced down his banana.

“So Harry’s awake,” Louis said once Liam was finished. He’d decided there was no easing into the news.

Liam dropped his banana skin into the bin with an open-mouthed expression of surprise. “Like
awake-awake?”

“Yeah. I’ve already been to see him, actually.”

Liam’s brows drew together. “Without us?”

“You were asleep,” Louis pointed out.

“Well, you could’ve woken us up.”

“You can see him once we’re finished eating if you want to stop complaining,” Louis punctuated the statement with a glare. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with hungover Liam and all the bitching and moaning that traditionally accompanied it.

“Fine.” Liam’s mouth snapped shut with a grimace as he reached for yet another banana.

Louis ignored him and turned to Sam instead. “You’re welcome to come with us,” he told her, wondering if the hopeful note in his voice was as audible to her ears as it was his. As much as he loved Liam and Niall—or used to, wanted to, it all felt the same—he wasn’t sure he could endure both them and Harry all at once.

Sam shrugged. “I’ve never met Harry before,” she reminded Louis. “I don’t want to make him feel uncomfortable, you know? Like he’s being gawked at.”

“You could wait outside his room,” Louis offered in an attempt at compromise, but Sam was already shaking her head.

“It’s probably best if I not get too involved.”

Louis wondered if she was trying to subtly communicate that she thought Louis shouldn’t be so involved in Harry’s life either, but he wasn’t about to ask with Niall and Liam sitting right there and listening to every word exchanged between them. “Suit yourself,” he replied nonchalantly before getting up to pour himself a bowl of cereal at last.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

So look forward to updates on Mondays and Thursdays until this is completed! I'm hoping to actually finish writing the last few chapters this weekend, but it will definitely be done in the next week or two which is such a strange thing to think about since I've been writing this since the beginning of March 2018.

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February 10, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis was predictably antsy on their way to the hospital in a way he was just about growing numb to. What he didn’t expect was for both Niall and Liam’s moods to be just as sour, with the latter looking almost as nervous as Louis usually did during these visits by the time they reached the car park at Cedars-Sinai.

Louis might have been bold enough to ask Liam what was bothering him if Niall hadn’t been there. As it was, he decided to leave it alone for now.

Louis’s mind was filled with panicked thoughts about what he should say to Harry as the three of them walked through the hospital reception and got into the lifts. Louis had to stop Niall when he made to press the button for the third floor; he’d forgotten to tell the others earlier that Harry had been moved to the luxury suites on the eighth.

“How luxurious is ‘luxury’, then?” Niall inquired curiously.

Louis shrugged. It wasn’t like he’d gotten a full tour of the place. “The bedside seating is nicer. Didn’t get a look at the shower, but I imagine more than one cubic metre of space is one of the selling points. Maybe they’ll actually bring him edible food.”

Niall laughed. Liam just continued to look vaguely ill beside him.

Louis was becoming somewhat concerned by Liam’s unexpected aversion to seeing Harry when they reached his room, so much so that he found he didn’t trust Liam to go in there without speaking to him about it first.

“How all, why don’t you go on in first,” Louis suggested as he subtly tugged at the hem of Liam’s shirt, pulling him back before he could reach for the door. They were alone in the hallway; Gemma and Anne having presumably left to speak with Harry’s team about making an announcement.

Niall spun around, looking confused. “I thought we were meant to see him together.”

“I’ve already had some time with him myself,” Louis rationalised. “You should see him on your
own, too, if you want.”

Liam looked even more uneasy at Louis’s words, but Niall was quick to agree, shrugging immediately in acquiescence. “Yeah, all right.” He sucked in a quick breath and then opened the door to Harry’s room to let himself in.

Louis remained silent after the door had closed behind him. He was tempted to listen in on just the beginning of their conversation, curious how Harry would react, but he was disappointed; not a single sound permeated the physical barriers between himself and Harry.

Louis turned to Liam instead, who had taken to chewing nervously at his thumbnail. “What is with you all of a sudden?” Louis demanded.

Liam’s eyes darted around frantically as he attempted to find something to focus on that wasn’t Louis’s face. “You’re not really going to make me go in there alone, are you?” he asked, voice bordering on a whine.

Louis stared back at him in disbelief. “What?”

“Lou, I wasn’t even friends with Harry before all this happened,” Liam replied plaintively. “He pretty much hated me for siding with you when everything went to shit. What the hell am I supposed to even say to him?”

Louis continued to stare, hardly unable to process the words coming out of Liam’s mouth. “You’re shitting me, right?”

“What?” Now it was Liam’s turn to look baffled.

That just made Louis angrier. “After all this bullshit about how I need to confront my issues with Harry and actually talk to him? Now you’re the one who’s too scared to look him in the eye?”

“Louis—”

“Oh, shut up, Liam. Figure it out. I’ll lock you in there myself if I have to.”

Liam’s face scrunched up in the way it always did when he was really upset but couldn’t find the words to express it. Louis turned away from him, not wanting to give himself the chance to feel bad for Liam when he had every right to be minged off over Liam’s hypocrisy.

Niall looked almost as rattled as Liam had earlier when he finally emerged from Harry’s room just a few minutes later. He was uncharacteristically quiet while Louis bullied Liam into going inside next, the two of them continuing their argument in hushed whispers as Niall just stood there, staring at nothing.

Louis managed to get Liam to go in after nearly a minute, and then he turned to Niall, surprised to find that the other man hadn’t moved and that his frown had only deepened.

“You okay, mate?” Louis asked in concern.

Niall nodded, seeming to physically shake himself out of whatever funk he’d fallen into with the movement of his head. “Yeah, yeah. Fine.”

Louis crooked an eyebrow, not buying it for a second. “How was he?” he asked, already expecting Niall to reply with some made-up answer meant to appease Louis.
But Niall just shrugged. “Tired, I guess. I’d thought the last thing you’d want to do after waking up from a coma would be to go back to sleep, but he could barely keep his eyes open.”

Louis nodded in acknowledgment. “His body still needs some rest, I suppose.” He was dying to ask Niall more but managed to keep his tongue in check for now. If Niall didn’t want to tell him what had happened with Harry, then that was his business.

They stood together quietly with their backs up against the wall until Liam came back out again, looking considerably paler than when he’d gone in.

“Your turn,” he remarked a bit nastily to Louis as he passed.

Louis marched inside without dithering just to prove that he could, but he felt the cold clench of fear as soon as the door had softly shut behind him.

Harry was still lying in bed, propped up on a mountain of pillows. He stared back at Louis without blinking while Louis in turn tried to fix his expression into something that less resembled a wild animal caught in a hunter’s trap. He said nothing all the while, waiting for Harry to break the silence instead, but then when he didn’t, Louis realised it had stretched on for far too long to pretend things were even remotely okay between them.

“Hey again,” Louis eked out. He felt the bizarre urge to wave at Harry, even though they were only a couple metres apart.

“Hi.” Harry had the covers tucked all the way up to his chin, obscuring everything but his face from view. He looked apprehensive still, like he wanted to crawl all the way under and hide from Louis, and that hurt more than expected.

Louis scratched at the back of his neck, waiting for Harry to say something else. He didn’t.

“Look,” Louis started again, “I’m going to be honest with you: I don’t really know how I feel yet about being here.”

“But you are here.”

“Yeah, I am.”

Louis still wasn’t sure what to say next, but it didn’t matter. The door opened suddenly, revealing Anne and Gemma, who bustled into the room with their arms laden with grocery bags.

“Oh,” Anne said, freezing in place when she noticed Louis. “The boys didn’t tell us you were in here.”

“Sorry,” Louis replied automatically. “I can leave.”

“No,” Gemma cut in hastily. “You don’t have to—”

“It’s fine.” Louis glanced at Harry, half-hoping he would voice a protest as well, but he remained silent. “I suppose I’ll see you later, yeah?”

Harry just nodded.

It wasn’t until Louis stepped back out into the hallway that he realised why both Liam and Niall had neglected to mention the fact that he was in Harry’s room to the girls. They were fighting; arguing in hushed whispers with their heads pushed together, their physical closeness belying the
twin expressions of frustration on both men’s faces.

“What’s with you lot?” Louis demanded in a too-loud voice.

They both stopped talking in unison and turned to face him with mildly guilty expressions.

“Nothing,” Liam finally filled in after a few seconds where they both just stood there, dead silent. “Anne kick you out, then?”

“Yeah, something like that.” Louis certainly wasn’t about to tell Liam that he’d essentially kicked himself out just to get away from the awkwardness of the encounter. At some point he was going to have to square things with Harry and figure out where exactly they stood, but that didn’t have to be today. “I figured we should head back for now. Give them some time together.”

Neither Liam nor Niall kicked up a fuss, so that was that.

None of them attempted to make conversation as they made their way back through the hospital and into the car park, which suited Louis just fine. He put in his earphones as soon as he climbed into the car as a preventative measure, in case Liam or Niall suddenly got brave. He had no desire to listen to either of them right now.

July 9, 2013

Toronto, Canada

Louis had bit his lip so hard it bled on the way back to their hotel, unable to keep the image of Harry jumping back from the pyrotechnics on stage out of his head. If Harry had leaned in a second earlier, or leaned back a second later, Louis might have been on his way to a Canadian hospital instead.

It stung a little that he hadn’t had a chance to pull Harry into his arms when it had happened, had only been able to stare at him helplessly, overwhelmingly grateful even so that Harry hadn’t actually been hurt. Then once offstage, they’d been whisked away to their respective cars, unable to say more than a word or two in parting.

The effort being put into their separation was becoming ridiculous. Louis knew that it was only temporary, a result of the additional scrutiny they’d been subject to with the film and the tour, but he was sick of it. It was amazing how much it felt like they were in a long-distance relationship despite being together (physically, at least) nearly every night.

Louis was already planning on kicking Liam out of Harry’s room as soon as they got to the hotel. Liam could spend the night with Zayn in his room instead.

Harry was visibly surprised when Louis finally showed up. He opened his mouth to speak as he wiped at his face with a towel from the sink, only to have Louis cut him off by pressing their lips together hard.

“Hey,” Harry breathed. His breath was minty. He’d been chewing gum a lot lately, Louis had noticed. The habit was unpleasant, but the smell wasn’t, so Louis chose not to complain.

“Hey yourself,” Louis replied. He leaned back out the doorway, far enough to catch Liam’s eye.
from the bed he was sat on. “Liam, you mind making yourself scarce?”

Liam looked up from his phone with a sceptical expression. “And what am I meant to tell Zayn?”

“That I want to talk to Harold about girls or something, and you’d rather sleep. I dunno.”

Liam snorted. “Yeah. He’ll believe that.”

“Well, then make something up,” Louis replied with a roll of his eyes. “I don’t really give a damn, Liam. Just get out before you see something you’ll wish you hadn’t.”

Louis was fairly certain that Zayn already knew what was going on between him and Harry, but he was trying to minimise the damage as much as possible. If he acknowledged the fact that both Liam and Zayn were in the know, he was positive Harry would push to tell Niall, too, and Louis did not even want to remotely entertain that possibility.

Liam finally stood up with a long-suffering sigh. “Fine,” he said as he collected his things and made to exit the room. “But if he starts asking about it tomorrow, you’re on your own.”

Louis just waved a hand dismissively and waited until the door was shut again before grabbing Harry and steering him toward the bed Liam hadn’t just been occupying.

“Was that really the best idea?” Harry asked as Louis began pulling at his clothes, doing nothing himself to speed along the process.

“Zayn knows how to mind his own business,” Louis replied.

Getting Harry naked was easier than getting out of his own clothes somehow. Louis paused with one arm half out of his shirt, the other tangled up in a mess of fabric, while Harry stared up at him serenely.

“What?” he asked, confused by the look on Harry’s face.

“Just wondering what’s gotten into you,” Harry replied.

“Nothing’s gotten into me,” Louis retorted indignantly as he struggled to get his shirt the rest of the way off. “What?” he asked again when he was finally free of the damn shirt, but Harry’s face hadn’t changed.

“Is this because of the fire thing?”

“What fire thing?”

Harry’s expression hardened. “Don’t play dumb.”

Louis sighed and sat back on his heels. “Can’t I just want to spend the night with you without it being a whole…thing?”

“That excuse might have worked if we hadn’t agreed to not do this while we’re still on tour,” Harry reminded him.

Louis leaned back and let himself regret his decision to come visit Harry at all for just a moment. “Fine. Maybe it’s about the fire thing. But you could have really gotten hurt.”

“I know, Louis.”
“You should be more careful.”

Harry’s nostrils flared out angrily. “It was an accident,” he snapped. “I didn’t know they’d put the towels that close to the pyrotechnics.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. I’m just—”

Harry sat up far enough to get his arms around Louis’s neck and pulled him down so they were lying horizontal with Louis’s face pressed against Harry’s chest. The mood was a little serious for it, but Louis was bad at resisting temptation, so he stuck out his tongue to lick at the black ink covering Harry’s belly.

Harry shivered. “Is fucking me really going to make you feel better about what happened?”

Louis tipped his head up to give Harry an innocent smile. “It might?” Really, it wasn’t about sex, at all. Louis just needed to be close to him, to reassure himself fully that Harry was alive and well and definitely not hurt in any way but the fun kind.

“Lucky for you I’m in the mood,” Harry remarked as he stretched away from Louis for a moment to snatch his rucksack from the floor next to the bed. He tossed it to Louis as the older boy sat up, and then laid down again, pulling his knees up pointedly.

“Pillow,” Louis reminded him. They were both still new enough to this that they hadn’t gotten a routine down. Hadn’t had a chance to.

Harry nodded and reached behind himself to grab one of the hotel pillows. Housekeeping was going to have a field day with their room in the morning. Louis reminded himself to leave a tip before they left.

“You like it like this, right?” Harry questioned after Louis was already two fingers deep inside Harry’s body.

Louis paused. “Yeah, of course. Do you not like it?”

Harry shook his head fervently. “Sorry,” he muttered. “Keep going.”

“Are you sure?” Louis asked. He pulled out his fingers, lightly cupping his cock instead. “We can try something else if you want,” Louis assured him, even though he was apprehensive about the thought of their positions, reversed. “I dunno if tour’s the best time for experimentation though.”

Harry shook his head again and pulled Louis down into him once the condom was on, letting the older boy line himself up and gasping quietly when he pushed in. “Like it like this,” Harry said, bucking up a little once Louis’s hips were pressed up against his, a cue for him to move. “Just wanna make you happy.”

“You do make me happy,” Louis told him. He capped off the statement with a deep kiss, his movements inside Harry slow and steady.

Louis came first again, which bruised his ego a little, but the feeling was forgotten as soon as he had Harry’s dick in his mouth and Harry’s come on his tongue, sweeter than the last time he’d tasted it. “You change your diet or summat?” he asked with a grin.

Harry went beet-red. “Nick said it might help,” he confessed.

Louis arched an eyebrow. “You’ve been talking to Nick about us?”
“Not about us, just—I asked for advice. You always get this face, you know.” He imitated someone sucking on a sour lemon, and Louis laughed. He hadn’t realised it was quite that bad.

“Well, I didn’t mind that much before,” Louis reassured him, “face or not. But I appreciate the thought.”

“Kiss me?” Harry asked hopefully.

Louis obliged before scooting down to use Harry’s chest as a pillow once again. “Need to keep you safe,” Louis mumbled into Harry’s skin.

“How? By following me around all the time to make sure a piano doesn’t fall on my head?”

“If I have to.”

Harry snorted, combing his fingers through Louis’s hair. “That’s stupid, you know.”

“Don’t care.” Louis nipped at Harry’s collarbone, eliciting a startled gasp. “Couldn’t bear it if anything happened to you, I swear. If I don’t die before you, I’ll probably have to kill myself.”

Harry’s hand stilled, his whole body tensing up in a way that Louis really, really didn’t like. Louis felt sick, wished he could take the words back, but it was too late.

“Don’t joke about shit like that,” Harry said in a harsh voice. “It’s not funny, Louis.”

Louis didn’t have the heart to tell Harry that he hadn’t been joking, or at least that he didn’t feel like he was when he’d said it.

“Sorry,” he murmured, slowly exhaling in relief once Harry’s hand resumed its ministrations against his scalp. A tangible token of forgiveness. “I just don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t,” Harry promised. “You won’t ever lose me.”
Chapter 42

Sam was waiting for them in the sitting room with a cup of coffee clutched in her hands when they arrived back at the condo. “How was he?” she asked eagerly. She’d always been a little bit fascinated by Harry. It was something that had made Louis apprehensive when he’d first hired her, but now he couldn’t help but sympathise. Harry just had that effect on people.

When no one answered, Niall rushed to fill the silence. “Good,” he said quickly—but not quickly enough, judging by Sam’s frown. “Good, yeah. It seems like he’s doing really well already.”

Louis frowned in turn from behind him. That was bullshit. Harry didn’t seem all right in the slightest.

Liam spouted off only a few seconds later, chiming in to add to Niall’s story of Harry’s miraculous recovery with his own nonsense about how good it was to speak to Harry again after so long. He was chatty in the way that he got specifically when he was feeling anxious, but that didn’t excuse what he was saying, nor did it mean Louis could stand to listen to a word of it.

Louis stalked past them into the bedroom and flopped down onto the bed, lying face-down with his shoes still on. He stayed there for nearly a minute until the door opened again behind him.

“No in the mood, Liam,” Louis said, the words garbled by the press of his face into the duvet.

“I’m not Liam,” Niall replied. Louis heard him walk over, felt the dip in the mattress as Niall sat down next to his head.

Louis grunted.

“You don’t have to take out your anger at Liam on me, you know.”

“I’m mad at both of you,” Louis replied.

“Why?”

“I just am.”

Niall sighed, apparently dissatisfied with Louis’s juvenile response. Not that Louis could blame him.

“I came in here to talk to you about something,” Niall tried again after a few seconds.
“No one’s stopping you,” Louis pointed out.

“Yeah, but I’d appreciate it if you’d actually look at me during our conversation, maybe.”

Louis didn’t budge a millimetre.

Niall sighed. “All right, then. I expect Liam’s going to want you to go back to visit Harry later, but I thought you should know I’m planning to head out in just a bit.”

That got Louis’s attention. His head shot up so he could stare quizzically at Niall, conscious of the way his hair flopped down awkwardly over his eyes before he could shake it out of the way.

“What? Why?”

Niall frowned as he sat back with his hands braced against the bed, leaning away from Louis as he spoke. “Need to get back to the studio,” he replied, as if it were that simple.

Louis gaped at him. “You’re kidding, right? Harry wakes up and you walk straight back out again?”

“What would you rather me do, Louis? Genuinely.” Niall waited for an answer that never came, and then swiped a hand over his face as he sighed. “Look, I know Liam’s been pushing for you to make up with Harry so you can have a fairy tale ending and he can finally get that reunion tour he’s always wanted, but I don’t think having us hanging all over him is going to help Harry get better at all.”

Louis stared at Niall, feeling his face flush with a nauseating combination of hurt and embarrassment. “You think Liam wants me to fix things with Harry for the sake of the tour?”

“I didn’t say that,” Niall replied quickly.

He may as well have, but Louis wasn’t going to waste his time trying to force him to admit it. “Just what the hell did you and Harry talk about?” Louis demanded, sitting up so they were eye level with each other.

Niall sighed again. “Why does that matter?”

“Because clearly whatever happened in there is the reason you’re acting like this now,” Louis retorted. “Is that what you were arguing about with Liam at the hospital earlier? Me and Harry?”

The constipated look on Niall’s face was answer enough. “It’s complicated,” he said.

“Welcome to the club,” Louis replied coolly.

They stared each other down like opponents stood on opposite sides of the ring, but Louis refused to back down from this. Niall’s resolve wasn’t quite so strong. Or maybe he was just too tired to fight it out.

“You and Liam act like me and Harry have been best friends for years,” Niall said at last, finally turning his head away to stare at the door instead of continuing to maintain eye contact with Louis. “But the truth is we’ve hardly spoken at all since things got really bad between you and him, and I hadn’t seen him in almost a year before this happened. He’s not the same person anymore, Louis.”

“So you just want to give up on him, then?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Niall shot back, frustration lacing his tone as he turned again to glare
at Louis.

“Then what are you saying?”

“We can’t force Harry to be who he used to be,” Niall replied. “That’s all.”

Privately, Louis thought all of that sounded like utter bullshit, but he simply wasn’t willing to argue with someone who clearly couldn’t be convinced that he was in the wrong. If Niall thought abandoning Harry was really the best option, then good riddance.

It seemed as though Niall could see Louis’s thoughts written on his face though he hadn’t voiced them, because the younger man continued unprompted. “I’ve already talked to Harry about getting him in the studio with me once he’s better,” he told Louis, and he then hurried to add: “Just for fun, yeah? Nothing serious about it.”

“Yeah, all right,” Louis agreed, though he still felt reluctant about endorsing Niall’s perspective on everything. “I’m sure he’d like that.”

Before either one of them could say anything else, the door opened again, and Liam poked his head in. “Everything all right in here?” he asked with a tangible measure of apprehension wrinkling his brow.

“Peachy,” Louis replied. He made no attempt to disguise the sarcasm in his voice.

“Ah.” Liam glanced between Louis and Niall and took a step inside the room. “I’m guessing he’s told you, then,” he said as he softly closed the door behind him.

“Yeah,” Louis said curtly. He didn’t look up when Niall stood.

“I’m off, then,” Niall said a bit stiffly. “Got the afternoon blocked out at the studio, so. Feel free to stop by if you have the chance.”

Louis was positive that all three of them knew that wasn’t going to happen.

“Good luck, mate,” Liam told Niall, clapping him on the back on his way out. He sounded sincere.

Louis barely managed a civil goodbye while dutifully joining Liam on the doorstep to watch the other man leave before he headed back inside the condo and made a beeline for his bedroom. He shut the door in Liam’s face.

“Oh, fuck off,” Liam hissed after he opened it again to find Louis on the other side, stripping out of his clothes. “What’s this about?”

“Listen, I don’t agree with Niall in the slightest, but you can’t get angry with him because he’s making a different decision than you.”

Louis paused with his thumbs still tucked into the waistband of his trousers. “I hope you’ll excuse me for saying this, Liam,” he responded with sickeningly sweet faux-politeness, “but I have absolutely no interest in having this fucking conversation with you right now. Cheers.”

Louis stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him with a pointed slam. Someday when this was all over, Louis knew he would hate himself for how poorly he was handling things, but right now, he didn’t have the capacity to act any better.
Louis checked the playlist as soon as he’d turned the water on in the shower. The next song was a long one. He wondered if that meant there was more to it, or if Harry had just indulged himself a little, pulled a bit of Pink Floyd as he was sometimes wont to do.

It ended up being the latter.

There was a lazy intro that played out as Louis stepped under the spray and tried to collect himself again. He’d thought a hot shower would help him collect himself, but being alone with his thoughts for even a short period of time had just put him more on edge than before.

Despite his reliance on Harry’s playlist to keep him sane, Louis hadn’t even entertained the idea of bringing it up to Harry. He was still hoping Harry might do so himself just so Louis wouldn’t have to put himself in the position of asking Harry what he’d meant by leaving Louis something like that.

But there was no use in worrying about that now. Louis put those thoughts out of his mind for the moment and focused on the song instead.

July 29, 2013
Portland, Oregon

Louis was nearly asleep in his bunk when a body suddenly pressed in against him, trapping him inside the coffin-esque sleeping enclosure. Still in his half-conscious state, Louis started to freak out, only calming down when a familiar hand, clammy with nerves, pressed over his mouth to keep him quiet.

“Harry?” Louis whispered when the other boy’s hand disappeared, giving him space to breathe again. Now that he was more awake, he could smell the familiar tang of Harry’s shampoo permeating the tiny space. “What are you doing?”

“Wanted a cuddle.”

Louis squinted into the darkness as Harry slotted himself into the grooves of Louis’s body, fitting in so perfectly it was like he’d been made for it. “What are you so nervous about?” Louis asked after a moment, because he knew Harry almost better than he knew himself by now.

It was a few seconds before Harry replied. “How can you tell I’m nervous?”

“You get sweaty palms.”

Harry started to laugh before clapping a palm over his own face to cover it. They waited, listening for any sign that one of the other boys had heard and woken up.

“Sorry,” Harry whispered, when they were certain they hadn’t been caught. “I’m not nervous,” he murmured directly into Louis’s ear, making the older boy shiver. “I’m just—” He scooted even closer, shifting his hips so Louis could feel him already hard against Louis’s side.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” Harry went silent, clearly waiting for Louis to say something—do something.
Louis froze up, not sure what Harry wanted from him, and not sure he could give it to him even if he did. The other boys were all asleep in their bunks, and they may not have been the lightest sleepers, but Louis was still terrified of what might happen if they woke up and caught him and Harry fooling around on the bus.

 Those worries were all but erased with the soft press of Harry’s lips against his.

 Louis was so easy for it, so gone for Harry that it was like all his worries vanished with just that one touch.

 “Wanna—” Harry breathed out as he tried to shimmy his pants down around his knees despite the tiny space the two boys had crammed themselves into.

 “Yeah,” Louis replied, reaching out automatically to wrap a hand around Harry’s cock, but Harry drew away automatically at the touch.

 He shook his head, something Louis only knew he’d done because Harry’s curls suddenly went up Louis’s nose, and then Harry’s hand was pressing something into the centre of Louis’s palm.

 It took Louis a second to figure out what it was. “Harry, we can’t…. There’s not enough room.” He was truly regretful as he squeezed the condom packet Harry had slipped into his hand. He would have never thought that anything could be better than having Harry’s mouth on him, but after their first time, and the time after, Louis couldn’t imagine a world in which being inside Harry wasn’t the best feeling he could ever hope to have.

 Better than a number one single, better than a sold-out arena, and wasn’t it fucked up that those were more common in his life than being able to give himself fully to the boy he loved?

 “Want your fingers,” Harry insisted, taking Louis by surprise.

 “Like this?” Louis asked.

 Harry hummed a quiet sound of approval into the skin near his collarbone and looped his arms around Louis’s neck. He was so easy, so trusting when they did this. It made Louis ache for him.

 Harry waited patiently while Louis struggled to get the condom wrapper off—if patient was the right word to describe the way he teasingly kitten-licked at Louis’s throat and shoulder. It was the closest they could get to the marks they both wished they could leave on each other. It only made Louis want more.

 The condom was pre-lubed, thankfully, but that only made getting it around his fingers even trickier. Louis was grateful Harry couldn’t see him in the darkness; he knew his face would have shone like a beacon with even the slightest bit of light.

 Harry, to his credit, didn’t seem to be in a hurry at all as he waited for Louis to sort himself out. When Louis finally pressed into him, he let out an airy sigh of contentment that was completely at odds with the way Louis’s hand was cramping up and the claustrophobic atmosphere of the tiny bunk.

 “Like this?” Louis asked as he moved his fingers inside of Harry. He wasn’t really sure what he was doing, but if the noises coming out of Harry’s mouth were to be trusted, he was doing something right. “Love, you have to be quiet,” he urged when the sounds started to pick up in volume. He pressed his free hand to the back of Harry’s head, tucking the younger boy’s face into his neck to try to smother the noises falling from his lips.
It worked well enough that Louis felt comfortable moving his fingers again, and this time Harry moved with him, rubbing his exposed cock against Louis’s clothed erection in search of relief.

Louis could tell Harry was about to come perhaps before he even knew it himself, from the way Harry twitched around his fingers to the sloppy breaths huffed out against his skin. The sharp pain in Louis’s back was unexpected; Harry had dug his fingernails in at the exact moment that Louis wrapped a hand around Harry’s cock and pulled, trying to bring him off even faster.

Louis squeezed his eyes shut against the heat of Harry’s fingers etching grooves down his back all the way from shoulder to waist, and pumped harder, savouring the feeling of Harry coming undone in his hands instead.

Louis wrapped his now come-slick hand around his own cock as Harry panted into his neck. He came within seconds, quietly, with fireworks blooming behind his eyelids, and it was minutes before he floated back down.

Louis forgot how to breathe again when Harry suddenly reached down to pick up Louis’s hand after he’d finished. Harry lifted it to his mouth, delicately tonguing at Louis’s palm and between his fingers, and if Louis could have come again, he would have, just from that.

“Fucking hell, Harry,” Louis hissed as he rolled onto his back and felt the sheets rub against the raw welts covering his back.

“Sorry. Got a bit carried away.”

“Yeah, I’ll say.” Louis reached back behind himself to try and get a sense of just how much damage Harry had managed to inflict. So much for not leaving any marks. “God, I’m not gonna be able to go shirtless for a month now, am I?”

He reached past Harry to toss the used condom on his fingers into the rubbish sack hanging outside his bunk and heard a sound that made his blood run cold.

“Lou? That you?” It was Niall, his sleep-gruff voice emanating from the bunk right above theirs. “You awake?”

Louis said nothing, hoping Niall would think whatever he’d heard was just a dream and go back to sleep. Neither he nor Harry dared to even breathe until a loud snore finally emanated from above.

Louis relaxed, and Harry immediately sank into him again, clinging to Louis’s side with his whole body like a monkey. Harry had managed to pull his pants back up at some point, at least.

Louis wanted nothing more than for the two of them to stay like that until morning, never letting go of each other even when the other lads inevitably found them. It wasn’t fair. It just wasn’t fair.

Harry didn’t seem at all worried by the prospect of being caught now that Niall had fallen asleep. He rubbed his face against Louis’s naked chest like a cat. Louis was half-expecting him to start purring.

“You can’t sleep here,” Louis reminded Harry quietly, even though he desperately wished they could spend not just this night together, but all of them.

“I know,” Harry said through a yawn. “Just want to stay with you for a bit.”

In the end, Harry did fall asleep, and Louis let him, listening to the quiet rhythm of his breathing in the darkness for nearly an hour before he woke Harry again to kick him out of his bunk. When
Louis fell asleep again, it was one of the worst sleeps of his entire life, hours spent tossing and turning in his blankets and reaching out in vain for something that was no longer there.

February 10, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis towelled off and got dressed as he listened to the last bit of the song.

Suddenly, he was struck by just how badly he missed being intimate with someone—not even the sex but just the security of being that close to someone, the feeling of sharing someone else’s skin the way he had once upon a time with Harry.

Louis wasn’t sure now that he’d ever have that same feeling again.

But there was one thing he was sure of: Niall was wrong. Louis wasn’t going to give up on Harry, now or ever again.
Louis’s phone started buzzing in his hand almost as soon as he crossed the threshold between the bathroom and bedroom. It was Jaime, he noted with a disappointed sigh. He’d been hoping he could hold her off just a little bit longer, not looking forward to talking shop in the midst of all the other chaos he was still dealing with. But Louis supposed he’d never been that lucky.

Louis answered immediately, thankful that Liam had left the room in the time it had taken him to shower. He didn’t need the distraction of having Liam hovering nearby while he tried to talk to Jaime.

“I was going to call you,” Louis began apologetically as he sat down on the edge of the bed, doing his best to be sincere even though he knew Jaime wouldn’t buy it. She might appreciate the effort though, at least. Or not.

“Right, and I just got hired by Brad Pitt. Cut the shit, Louis.”

“Sorry,” he told her emphatically. “Sorry, I’m just. Tired. You know.”

“Well, unfortunately, I’ve got things you need to deal with right now, so if you’re hoping for a nap, it’ll have to wait.”

Louis sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose tight between two fingers. He drew in a deep breath and steeled himself for whatever Jaime was going to say. “What is it, then?”

“Harry’s team is making a press release about his condition in about an hour,” Jaime informed him, her tone cool and professional in sharp contrast to her sardonic greeting. “It’s just the basics, nothing detailed about why he was in the hospital. They’re keeping it vague; he had an accident and was comatose for a brief period of time but is expected to make a full recovery. It’s being forwarded to pretty much every major news outlet.” She paused, giving Louis the opportunity to respond.

“Okay,” Louis said, because he wasn’t sure what else to say.

“They wanted to address the publicity surrounding you, Niall, and Liam being spotted in LA so close to the news breaking about Harry,” Jaime continued, though she sounded a bit more guarded as she spoke. “I think it’s a good idea. Prevents you from having to make your own statements on social media if we include something in the official release.”
“Yeah. That makes sense. What are they going to say?” Louis was trying to keep himself from obsessing over the potential fallout of being mentioned in an article alongside Harry, particularly one so controversial already, but it was tough after years of conditioning in which his stress-levels immediately rose in response to even just their names appearing in the same sentence.

“I helped draft that portion of the press release,” Jaime reassured him, and it did help knowing that, somehow. “It states that Harry’s former bandmates have rallied to support him while he recovers. None of you are mentioned specifically by name, but we have to assume that the fans will latch onto that part of the statement and run with it, so I need to know now if you’d rather have it omitted.”

Louis considered the variable possibilities for a moment. He was surprised to find that he was more okay with the idea of the fans jumping back on board with their theories than he would have expected. All the social media discussion of his and Harry’s relationship seemed more insignificant than ever.

And even if they didn’t call attention to Louis’s presence in LA, people would still draw their own conclusions. Louis had learned a long time ago that he couldn’t control that, no matter how hard he tried.

“It’s fine,” Louis decided. “Leave it in.” He could hear Jaime typing something in the background in the few seconds after he’d spoken.

“I should warn you that people are already connecting the dots and positing that you’ve cancelled the remainder of the European leg to be with Harry,” she said once she’d finished.

Louis sighed. “Well, this time they’re not exactly wrong, are they?”

“No, I suppose not,” Jaime replied, “but it does make announcing the new dates a little more complex. We don’t want to give the impression that you’re using Harry’s hospitalisation to boost publicity for yourself or that you care more about your career than him.”

Louis was tempted to tell her to cancel the entire rest of the tour if that was the problem. See what the fans thought about how much he cared then. But that was impulsivity talking, and Louis wasn’t young or foolish enough to entertain the fantasy for more than a millisecond.

“You can make the announcements whenever you feel it’ll be in our best interest,” Louis said instead. “I trust you to figure it out.”

“Thanks,” Jaime replied with a wry laugh. “It’s a shame your faith in me just means added stress on my part.”

“I’ll give you a raise,” Louis told her.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Louis’s thoughts lingered even after he’d hung up with Jaime on the fact that in just a few weeks he’d be forced to leave Harry again and go back to his normal life. Or what passed as normal for him, anyway.

Right now, Louis wasn’t ready to leave. He wasn’t sure if that would change in time.

Louis noticed the unread text in his inbox as he was clearing the rest of the notifications from his screen. It was from Lottie, he realised with a guilty pang in the pit of his stomach, pleading with him to call her again. Louis’s finger hovered over her name for a few seconds before he dropped
his mobile onto the bedcovers with a sigh. One phone call was enough for today.

Liam was sitting in the kitchen staring hawkishly at the bedroom door when Louis finally emerged. Louis barely made it five steps before he opened his mouth to speak.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” Liam blurted out, catching Sam’s attention from the sofa.

Her eyes flicked over to them for a moment before she turned back to the iPad in her lap, clearly deciding their conversation wasn’t any of her concern.

“It’s fine,” Louis assured him.

But Liam wasn’t having it. “No, it’s not,” he insisted, brows drawn together in a hard line that meant he’d been obsessing over things the whole time Louis had been in the shower. “I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s fine,” Louis said quietly, cutting him off. “Really. And I’d rather just forget about it for now. We should go back to the hospital, yeah?” He waited just long enough for Liam to nod in agreement before turning his attention to Sam. “Sam?”

She looked up wildly. “Hmm?” she asked, seeming genuinely confused. She tended to tune out most everything else while she was working on something.

“Liam and I are headed back to the hospital to see Harry. You want to tag along this time? He won’t mind, I promise.”

Sam’s face went through an assortment of different expressions as she struggled to make a decision. Finally her face went slack in resignation. “Yeah,” she said quietly. “Yeah, I’ll come along. Just let me get dressed.”

Louis and Liam sat on opposite sides of the kitchen in silence while they waited for Sam to make herself presentable. Louis’s eyes widened a little in surprise when she walked out of the guest bedroom with her hair done up in a neat ponytail and makeup reapplied, like she was genuinely nervous that Harry might judge her for not looking her best. She’d be in for a shock once she saw what Harry looked like.

“Ready?” Louis asked as he stood. He could see Liam in the corner of his eye following suit.

Sam nodded, her nervousness practically palpable as she vibrated all the way from the front door to the car. Liam let her have the front seat, but he leaned forward to fiddle with the stereo as soon as he climbed in, his elbow bumping against Louis, who was still trying to buckle himself in.

“Can I have your phone?” Liam asked innocently as he sat back in his own seat.

“Why?” Louis asked. He glanced up in the rear-view mirror as he started the car to find Liam staring meaningfully back at him.

“Want to put on some music,” Liam answered vaguely.

“Ah,” Louis replied as the puzzle pieces coalesced in his mind. “Sure. Forty-three,” he told Liam as he handed over his phone.

Sam looked on curiously all the while but didn’t ask any questions. Louis was grateful Liam had decided to take a subtler approach this time. Louis hadn’t explained the playlist to Sam yet and he still wasn’t sure he was ever going to.
Before Harry had woken up, the decision to talk about it had lain in Louis’s hands alone, but now…. Talking about it without Harry’s knowledge almost felt like betraying a secret.

August 12, 2013
Los Angeles, California

Louis wanted to sleep forever. Or drop dead. They felt like the same thing after four consecutive shows with little time to recharge between, and now they were expected to put on yet another performance at an awards show no one gave two shits about less than twenty-four hours after their North American leg had officially come to an end.

Louis was ready to cry when he heard the knock at his hotel room door. He laid there for a minute, sheets pulled up over his head with his eyes closed, only for the knock to sound again.

“Louis?” The muffled voice on the other side of the door belonged unmistakably to Harry.

Louis heaved a sigh and got up to let him in.

Harry was already dressed and styled for the show when Louis opened the door. Sex was off the table, then. Even a handjob would leave Harry an obvious wreck, and Louis was far too tired to mess around, besides.

“Niall’s not in, is he?” Harry asked hopefully as he followed Louis into the room.

Louis shook his head and headed straight towards his bed again. “Went to talk to some girl, I think. I dunno.” He faceplanted onto the mattress with a sigh, breathing in deeply and willing his body to register his lack of movement as some kind of tangible rest.

But no sooner had Louis closed his eyes did Harry sit down next to him, leaning down only a second later to press a soft kiss against the nape of his neck.

“Tired,” Louis groaned as he shied away from the touch, even as goose bumps travelled down his spine, making him want more.

“We only have fifteen minutes before Lou comes looking for you,” Harry told him. He scratched lightly at Louis’s hip, making him squirm. “Would you rather spend that fifteen minutes trying to sleep or snogging me?”

“Sleep,” Louis replied firmly, but he flipped over onto his back as soon as Harry laughed in response. “Aren’t you exhausted?”

“Course I am,” Harry replied, though he didn’t look it. At least, not like Louis did. “But it feels like I haven’t properly seen you in days.”

“You saw me last night,” Louis pointed out.

Harry pouted. “You know what I mean.”

Louis did know what he meant. He sighed. “Better come down here, then.”

Harry obliged by crawling over Louis so that he was straddling him, taking care to keep himself as
unrumpled as possible when he leaned in again to connect their lips.

Louis liked it better like this sometimes, when they kissed without intention, with no destination in mind. Kissing just for the sake of kissing, for closeness. Louis only wished they could have it more often. He didn’t begrudge Harry’s teenage hormones—he wasn’t much better himself, in all honesty—but the infrequency of their time together meant that they didn’t often get the chance to just relax and enjoy being intimate without the need for orgasms taking over.

“I love you, you know?” Louis said as he took Harry’s face in his hands to pull him back.

Harry made a desperate little whine in the back of his throat and pressed his mouth against Louis’s without replying. Louis let him. He’d take this for now, and when they were inevitably separated again, he’d replay it in his mind again and again like a song he couldn’t get out of his head.

Neither one of them heard the door open.

“Louis? Lou’s ready for you—”

Harry and Louis flew apart seconds too late. Niall was already standing in the entryway to the room, gaping at them with his eyes wide, like he wasn’t sure what he’d just seen had really just taken place.

Louis was frozen to the spot. It was Harry who reacted first.

“Uh, you should probably sit down,” he told Niall, compulsively fidgeting at his shirt and hair as he rolled off Louis completely.

Niall slowly lowered himself until he was sat at the edge of the bed, still looking panicked.

Louis wasn’t sure what could have possibly been running through Niall’s mind right then, but it didn’t really matter. There was nothing he or Harry could say to erase what Niall had seen.

Niall spoke first, before either of them had a chance to formulate an explanation. “So are you gay?” he asked bluntly, directing the question more toward Harry than Louis. They were closer friends than Louis and Niall, so it wasn’t unexpected that Niall would feel more betrayed by Harry not telling him something that big.

“Um, well, no,” Harry replied awkwardly. “Not exactly.” He was clearly out of his depth, and Louis couldn’t blame him. They hadn’t put any parameters on themselves or what they were doing with each other, and now that Niall was demanding an explanation, they couldn’t give him one. Not an easy one, at any rate.

“We were just messing about,” Louis chimed in smoothly. Harry’s head whipped around to stare at him in disbelief, but Louis just ignored him, kept going. “What, like you’ve never had a wank with your mates back in school?”

Niall’s face went distinctly red, answering Louis’s question in the affirmative without him having to say a word. “Well, I didn’t gob any of them while I was doing it,” Niall pointed out defensively.

“Harry’s practically a girl anyway,” Louis replied, the lies rolling off his tongue even easier now. He didn’t need to look at Harry to know that his expression was somewhere between shock and anger, that Louis would pay for the things he was saying later, but right now getting Niall off their case was his number one priority. “It’s like kissing El.”

Niall’s frown deepened, but he didn’t try to argue back, so Louis considered the matter taken care
of. For now, at least.

“As long as neither of you try to involve me,” Niall finally replied, feigning a smile, “I suppose it’s not a big deal, yeah?”

Louis forced one back, and leaned back against the headboard, wishing he could just skip the damn awards show and sleep for a week instead. He would have never let Harry in if he’d known the encounter would just lead to even more stress.

“Do the other boys know?” Niall asked curiously.

Louis shook his head. Another lie. “Rather keep it that way,” he added, “if you don’t mind. I’m not sure they’d understand, you know?” He could feel the anger radiating off Harry in waves, but it was like his mouth was acting independently of his brain as the falsehoods poured out. He couldn’t stop.

“Yeah,” Niall said, scratching at the back of his head and looking anywhere now but at Louis and Harry. “Sure.”

“Listen,” Harry said to Niall after a few more tense seconds had passed. “Do you mind telling Lou that we’re on our way?” He smiled sweetly in the way he’d perfected to get exactly what he wanted from anyone at any time.

Niall was just as vulnerable to the look as everyone else and nodded weakly. “Sure,” he agreed, making his exit with one last hesitant glance over his shoulder as he left.

Once he was gone, the smile dropped off Harry’s face, and he turned to Louis with a more serious expression.

“We need to talk about this,” Harry said firmly.

“What is there to talk about?” Louis was pointedly avoiding his gaze, picking at a stray thread hanging off the hotel sheets instead. They didn’t have time for this right now. Harry knew that. “Niall won’t bother us anymore about it. Problem solved.”

Harry’s expression clearly communicated that he thought otherwise. “We need to come clean to the band,” he insisted. “Properly, so we can get everything out in the open. Zayn’s going to have a strop once he finds out we’ve been keeping things from him, and now Niall too since you felt the need to just flat out lie about us, but—”

“You tell them,” Louis cut in.

Harry stopped, his mouth still hanging open. “What?”

“If you want to come clean with the lads,” Louis said slowly, “then fine. You tell them.” He stood up without waiting for a response from Harry, ignoring the way his hands were shaking as he wiped them on his sweats, and marched straight out the door. Unlike Niall, he didn’t look back.

February 10, 2021

Los Angeles, California
“That was pretty,” Sam remarked when the song finished. “Did you write it?” she asked, looking to
Louis first before turning her gaze to Liam. “No offense,” she told him, “it just didn’t really seem
like your style.”

“None taken,” Liam replied, sounding a bit caught off-guard by Sam’s sudden boldness.

She was warming to him quickly, her shy façade finally falling away. Louis thought it was a shame
that she had never had the chance to be friends with Harry; they were very similar in that way.

“Harry wrote it,” Louis told her. He kept his eyes on the road even though he desperately wanted to
gauge her reaction to the news. “He wrote a lot of stuff he never released.”

“Oh,” Sam said quietly. “It’s really sad.”

“Yeah,” Louis replied, “it is.”
The unexpected benefit of having Sam tag along with them to Cedars-Sinai was that her overpowering nervousness at the prospect of meeting Harry was so distracting that neither Liam nor Louis had the opportunity to feel anxious themselves. She was practically vibrating with stress by the time they ended up outside Harry’s room.

Louis took one good look at her, and then ordered Liam to go in and let Harry know what was happening. He turned to Sam after to give her a very brief and unrehearsed pep talk.

“You’ve met a thousand celebrities,” Louis reminded her. “You worked for Nick bloody Grimshaw, remember?”

“I know, I know,” Sam said softly as she twisted and wrinkled the hem of her blouse between her fingers. “But it’s just—it’s Harry, you know? It’s different.”

Louis did know.

He sighed and pulled her hands away, taking them in his own instead so that she was forced to stop fidgeting. “Take a deep breath, all right? He’s still just a human being. He stares a lot, but he’s not that intimidating, I promise.”

“Okay.”

Louis watched her carefully as she took a few breaths to calm herself before deeming her ready. “Let’s not keep him waiting, yeah?”

Harry was all smiles from his bed when Sam finally walked in with Louis at her back. He was just as charming as ever even swaddled in his blankets with bandages still obscuring a good portion of his neck.

Anne and Gemma were both sat close to his bedside holding a bag of crisps between them, in which Liam was already elbow-deep. Louis had to curb the urge to roll his eyes at the sight.

“Harry, Sam; Sam, Harry,” Louis said quickly before getting out of the way to let Sam meet Harry on her own terms.

“Nick mentioned you,” Harry said before she could get a word out. It was strange seeing him so animated now when he’d seemed so subdued before.
Louis was a little bit jealous of Sam, of the fact that she could pull this side of Harry out without even trying. Louis had known Harry for years, but being in the same room as him, trying to have a conversation—it was like pulling teeth.

Sam went bright red. “Really?”

“Said he’d never been more gutted to lose an intern,” Harry told her. “Swear it on my life.”

Louis let out a half-chuckle without thinking, drawing Harry’s eyes to him for a split second before his attention returned to Sam once again.

They made small talk for a bit while Louis sat back and watched. He held his tongue even when the conversation drifted to what Harry was going to do once he was discharged from the hospital, if he was planning on writing with Niall when he got into the studio again, when he was going to get back to work, how long before he thought he’d be ready for a new album, a new tour.

Work, work, work.

Harry needed a rest, and Louis couldn’t believe the others couldn’t see that. Or maybe they were afraid of what would happen if Harry wasn’t working. He’d been on a break when he’d ended up in hospital, after all.

And Louis knew better than most that Harry almost forgot how to function when he wasn’t working round the clock, whether recording, promoting, or performing. Harry just didn’t know how to stop.

The conversation was cut short before Louis could open his mouth and embarrass himself by Gemma, who suddenly stood with her mobile in hand to announce that Harry’s press release had just been published.

Louis watched as everyone with the exception of Harry, who was still trapped in bed thanks to some unseen tether beneath the mounds of blankets, quickly huddled around Gemma to read the statement. Louis stayed back, having already gotten the gist of it from Jaime, and waited for the inevitable fallout.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“Oh god,” Gemma groaned a few minutes later. “Twitter’s already a fucking mess.”

“Did you expect anything else?” Liam replied. He glanced once at Louis, looking a bit uncomfortable.

Louis did his best to keep his expression neutral. “What are they saying?” he asked, striving for innocent curiosity, nothing else.

Gemma made a face. She looked up at him, too, for just a second, and then at her brother, casting a furtive look between them before she buried her face in her mobile again. “Just a lot of the usual faff,” she said tentatively, “you know, about you and Harry. The same old shit.”

Louis could guess what she meant, and he felt his face twitch a little. He’d thought he’d kept his cool, all things considered, but when he turned his head ever so slightly to gauge Harry’s response, he was met with an icy glare in return.

“Guess nothing’s changed, then, has it?” Harry said, and the words were like white-hot pinpricks digging into Louis’s skin.
“The fuck’s that supposed to mean?” Louis shot back. He hadn’t meant it to sound as hostile as it had come out, but that was always the way, wasn’t it?

“Boys—” Anne cut in, trying to put a stop to the argument before it could reach full bore, but neither were listening.

“You’re such a coward,” Harry said with such a disgusted expression that it made Louis see red.

“Big words coming from you,” Louis retorted.

The entire room went dead-silent. Louis swallowed, afraid to look at anyone but Harry, whose face had gone bone-white. Louis wanted to apologise, but it was like nothing would come out.

“Louis, I think you should probably leave.” It was Anne who spoke, the softness of her tone belying the unforgiving expression on her face when Louis turned to look at her.

He just nodded and walked straight out of the room without saying another word. Louis waited with his back against the wall for Liam and Sam to follow him out, knowing they were probably making excuses for his behaviour. Apologising for him, because he was incapable of doing it himself.

Louis clenched and unclenched his fists at his sides as he waited. His fingers itched for a cigarette for the first time in years. Maybe it was something to do with Harry himself. It would be ironic, if that were the case; Harry would hate knowing that he was the trigger for Louis’s addiction.

It was a few minutes at least before the door opened again and Liam stepped out, Sam trailing just behind him. She didn’t look up to meet Louis’s eyes as they walked over, and Louis turned to Liam instead, fully expecting a lecture.

Liam just looked tired, not angry like Louis had anticipated. “Let’s go grab a bite to eat,” he suggested in a low tone.

Louis paused, and then nodded. It was best to just go along with Liam’s plans, since clearly he was that much better than Louis at not turning everything into a fucking disaster. Even if Liam was a hypocrite, his advice still tended to work.

The walk back to the lifts and the ride down were completely silent, allowing Louis to dwell uninterrupted on his own misery. “I’ve really bollocksed it all up, haven’t I?” he questioned morosely as he stood squashed up against one wall with a family of six crammed into the elevator alongside them.

The other occupants just gave him curious looks that they didn’t even bother to try and hide—bloody Americans—while Liam said nothing.

It wasn’t any better when Louis got behind the wheel. This time, Liam sat up front, already extending a hand out to Louis in expectation.

“Where to?” Louis asked as he handed over his phone.

“Soho House,” Liam replied without looking up. “What number are you on now? Forty-four?”

“Yeah.” He was surprised Liam remembered.

They sat for a minute, waiting for the song to play. When the music finally started, Louis put the car into drive.
October 17, 2013

Melbourne, Australia

Harry had chickened out of his plan to come clean to the boys after Louis had made it clear he wouldn’t have any part in it. But that didn’t mean anything between him and Louis was resolved.

Far from it, in fact. Once again, they found themselves barely speaking even while still on tour, only interacting civilly when necessary and then going out of their way to avoid each other the rest of the time.

Louis spent the break at his mum’s, using the welcome distraction of a full house to keep him occupied while he pushed thoughts of Harry to the back of his mind. He was tempted, more than once, to tell his mother what had happened, to come clean with her about Harry and everything that had happened since they’d been on the X Factor. He was sick of lying to everyone, even though he couldn’t seem to make himself stop. They were in too deep already.

He was torn, too, by the desire to call up Harry to apologise and the urge to just fucking quit the band entirely so he’d never have to see Harry again. It wasn’t like he’d be missed, anyway.

Louis had all but made up his mind by the time they landed in Australia, and from there, it was just a matter of getting Harry alone—and simultaneously working up the nerve—to tell him what Louis had decided.

Harry’s blank-faced expression as Louis explained to him in as few words as possible that he’d decided if it was best that he left the band wasn’t exactly the reaction he’d anticipated.

“Is that….” Louis wasn’t sure what he was even trying to ask. “Are you all right?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Harry snapped, and that was equally unexpected after the complete non-reaction he’d just had. “It’s not like it’d be any different without you.”

It was the sort of thing that Louis told himself privately during his worst hours, but never thought he would hear coming out of someone else’s mouth—especially not Harry’s. Louis didn’t know how to react. It hurt, hurt worse than almost anything, and Harry was just staring at him angrily as if he didn’t even care.

That was hours before their show in Melbourne. Not one of Louis’s best ideas, in hindsight.

For the most part, the show proceeded as normal. The presence of the other boys tempered things between Louis and Harry, thankfully. Louis was confident that the fans had no idea what was broiling behind the scenes. To a degree, the lads didn’t either. Only Liam, who sometimes cast Louis furtive looks when they were all together waiting to go onstage, seemed to notice that something was amiss.

Then things took a turn during their performance of “Over Again”.

Louis did his best to avoid looking at the overhead screens during their shows. Especially when Harry was singing. But for some inexplicable reason—maybe he’d heard something he wasn’t consciously aware of in Harry’s voice—he found his head turning round during Harry’s solo to take in the sight of his face projected on the screen.
The image of Harry with tears in his eyes broke Louis’s heart.

Louis didn’t spare a single moment to meet up with the others after the show, opting instead to take a car straight to the hotel. He hopped in the shower almost as soon as he was through the door, grateful that he’d lucked out on having a room to himself for the first time in a while.

The hot water helped a little until the memories of Harry’s eyes filled with tears came flooding back in and Louis realised he couldn’t escape his own thoughts without being unconscious first.

There was a pounding at the door to Louis’s room that only became audible once he’d turned off the shower. He contemplated ignoring it at first, and then decided against that when he realised that whoever was trying to get his attention had probably been there for some time, by the sound of it.

Louis wrapped a towel around his waist and pulled open the door, not expecting to find both Liam and Harry—whose eyes were puffy and pink from tears—waiting on the other side. Liam shoved Harry in first, guiding him past Louis who stared at the other two, dumbfounded, before realising he was still stood there with the door open wearing nothing but a towel.

“You should get dressed,” Liam said curtly as he pushed Harry down at the foot of the bed. His tone made it clear that Louis shouldn’t argue.

Louis pulled on his clothes quickly, barely pausing to make sure he was even putting them on the right way before he stepped back out into the hotel room to find Liam staring at him from behind Harry, his arms crossed over his chest. He wore a resolute stare, while Harry looked down at his own feet, not even glancing up to acknowledge Louis walking back in.

“What’s this about, then?” Louis asked, striving for nonchalance even though he knew it was futile.

Liam’s gaze hardened. “For being the oldest one out of all of us, you sure do act like a fucking infant sometimes,” he replied in lieu of a straight answer.

Louis tightened his jaw. He didn’t know what the fuck he was supposed to say to that. “This isn’t any of your business,” he finally settled for.

It was the wrong thing to say.

Liam stepped around Harry without warning, heading straight for Louis, who was still taken completely by surprise when Liam grabbed him by the jaw and shoved him hard into the wall. “When Harry comes to me,” he growled, “crying that you’ve said you want to quit the band, that makes it my business.”

Louis hissed out a breath around Liam’s hand but didn’t try to break free. He held the other boy’s gaze, willing Liam to understand that he was just trying to do the right thing for all of them. The band wasn’t going to last much longer with how poorly Harry and Louis were getting on.

Liam’s expression softened after a few seconds, and he let go of Louis with a quiet sigh. “I’m telling the lads about you and Harry,” Liam said firmly. He took a step back as Louis stared at him in disbelief.

“You can’t do that,” Louis replied in a hushed tone, as if Harry weren’t the only other person there to overhear.

“You’re not giving me much of a choice,” Liam told him, which Louis thought was unfair. What
did he know, anyway? “I’m not going to sit here and watch you ruin your own life as well as Harry’s.”

Louis was frozen to the spot as he stared at Liam, completely paralyzed by the thought of losing control over this lie that he’d been clinging to for years, now. And Liam just wanted to tell the others. Just like that.

It was Harry’s voice that brought him back to reality. “Liam, can you just give us a moment alone, please?”

Liam turned to face Harry, his tone uncertain. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” he said.

Harry shook his head. “It’s fine,” he replied, and then amended: “I’ll be fine.”

Liam gave Louis one last warning glance before stalking out of the hotel room, slamming the door shut so loudly it was as if the sound itself was meant to be a threat.

Louis slowly lifted his eyes to meet Harry’s once Liam was gone.

“Oh,” Harry said softly.

“Oops?” Louis replied with a smile, in a futile attempt at levity.

It made Harry burst into tears.

Louis rushed over to scoop Harry up into his arms, cradling the taller boy against his chest as if he were half the size. Sometimes he forgot that Harry was still the same tender-hearted Cheshire boy he’d met on the X Factor, that just because he looked all grown up didn’t mean he didn’t feel things just as deeply.

“I’m sorry,” Louis said into Harry’s hair, and he meant it. He really did. “I’m so fucking sorry. I wish I knew how to stop fucking this up.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” Harry said through the sobs.

Louis clung to him even tighter. “I don’t want to leave.”

“Then don’t,” Harry begged. He pulled away just far enough that he could meet Louis’s gaze. “If Liam tells Zayn and Niall about us, then we can be ourselves around them. I don’t understand what you’re so scared of.”

Maybe Louis didn’t fully understand either. All he knew is that there was a sharp stabbing pain in his stomach sometimes when his childhood friends joked about boys who like other boys, a pain that he felt echoed tenfold every time he forced himself to laugh along with them.

Sometimes Zayn and Niall joked about the same sort of things, though with noticeably less venom behind it, and Louis was terrified that maybe deep down they felt the same way as the blokes from his hometown, the ones who had teased him all throughout school for his voice, his stature, his music, until finally he’d learned to adapt himself to become just like them.

“I don’t want them to look at me different,” Louis finally told him. He buried his face in Harry’s hair again and willed himself not to cry.

“They’re our friends, Lou. They’ll understand.”

Louis desperately wished he could have the same blind faith in humanity that Harry seemed to
possess, an unprecedented willingness to see the best in people no matter what. But maybe if Louis couldn’t trust Zayn and Niall the way Harry did, he could put his faith in Harry himself instead.

“All right,” Louis said. “We’ll tell them.”

Harry jerked almost out of Louis’s hold in his excitement. “You’re not leaving the band?” he said hopefully. He meant: *You’re not leaving me?*

Louis shook his head. “Never.”
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

I literally just finished writing the last chapter of this. Whew. That was a journey. Updates for AO3 will proceed as normal on Mon & Thurs now that it's complete, and I will be working on Requests and other long fics behind the scenes while this gets wrapped up. :) Thank you to everyone who has left comments and kudos encouraging me over the last 10 months!

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February 10, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Soho House was a place of refuge Louis rarely indulged in. That had always been more of Harry’s thing. The idea of hanging out somewhere reserved for the celebrity elite had just never quite sat right with Louis. But he maintained a membership, as did Liam apparently, and they both vouched for Sam as their guest.

Despite his distaste for the general atmosphere, it was like a weight was lifted off Louis’s shoulders as soon as they stepped foot inside the establishment. No one batted an eye at them as they walked through reception and were led to a table in the back. It was a nice change, even if Louis would have preferred going out to eat somewhere a little less high-brow.

“It’s weird,” Louis remarked as he scanned his menu, “how easy it is to get used to the feeling that everyone’s always watching you.”

Liam lifted his eyebrows. “Not here, though.”

“No, not here.”

But the relief faded fast. It wasn’t much longer after a waiter came to take their orders that Louis began to feel a prickle of something at the top of his spine, a tingling sense that someone’s eyes had lingered for far too long.

Louis tried in vain to ignore it for a while, before finally giving up and putting his head on a swivel while Liam looked on in confusion. It took Louis a few seconds before he spotted the phone a few tables away, surreptitiously pointed in their direction. Louis turned back around again with an exaggerated sigh.

“How long d’you think before staff notices?” Louis asked absently as he picked at his salad.

It was another long moment before Liam caught on to what he’d seen. He stared back at the perpetrator, frowning until something must have changed. “We can tell someone,” Liam suggested. “Have them delete the photos.”
“There’s probably no point,” Sam pointed out before Louis had a chance to answer. “It would just make a scene. Whatever they took is probably posted already. I’ll text Jaime and have her keep an eye out for it just in case.”

“It’s not like we’re doing anything,” Louis grumbled to himself.

Still, he felt horribly irritated at the invasion of privacy. They’d gone to Soho House specifically to avoid having to worry about being seen. Sometimes Louis just wanted to be able to exist without the omnipresent fear that his every move was being scrutinised by the world. It was the part of fame that even Harry, who loved being the centre of attention, had quickly grown tired of. It was hard to enjoy knowing you had no control over your own life, your own story.

“We could leave,” Liam suggested instead. “I don’t mind grabbing take-out and heading back.”

But Louis could tell that he did mind, and he wasn’t the only one. “It’s fine,” Louis insisted. “Let’s just eat and not worry about it.”

Liam looked confused by Louis’s stubbornness, but when Louis looked up at Sam again a few seconds later, he found only an expression of grim understanding on her face. It was like she knew Louis was trying to prove something. Not just to himself, but to Harry.

Not that Harry would ever even know about this encounter, but there was something about the principle of it, in being able to openly demonstrate that the rumours about them didn’t bother him anymore. Louis wanted that, desperately, even if the thought of people knowing about them still scared him.

Once their main courses arrived, the three of them ate in relative silence. There wasn’t much to talk about, not with Liam and Louis practically living inside each other’s arseholes for the past few days, isolated from all the world except for Harry and his family and each other.

There was still plenty to be said about Harry himself, of course, but Louis didn’t quite feel comfortable addressing any of it out in the open like this, particularly with Sam right there. It wasn’t so much that he didn’t trust her, but rather that there were certain boundaries he felt compelled to cling to, certain wires he didn’t want crossed. It was difficult to manage when most of his life was freely available for public consumption; Louis treasured his few secrets.

Despite Louis’s insistence that they stay through their meal, once finished, the trio made a quick exit, all of them pointedly ignoring the table they passed on the way out where the girl who had been filming them was still sat.

It was a bit of a drive back, thanks to daytime traffic. Louis allowed Liam to put on another song, glancing long enough at the date to know that he would have to take care not to get distracted in remembering.

Louis could see Sam in the backseat, her brows furrowed in blatant curiosity as the song started to play. She was clearly wondering why Louis was in possession of this treasure-trove of unreleased music Harry had written, but Louis still wasn’t ready to explain it to her.

October 31, 2013

Melbourne, Australia
“I can’t believe you,” Louis gasped out between heavy panting breaths as he leaned against the door, trying desperately to keep his balance as a combination of alcohol and too much nicotine started to make his vision swim.

The main source of his exertion, however, wasn’t the rum or the fags Louis had imbibed in copious amounts all through the night. It was Harry, dressed in nothing but a pair of tiny skin-tight shorts, with tape plastered over his nipples—well, the two obvious ones, anyway.

Louis had been breathing hard all night because of it, the combination of his intoxication and vain attempts to keep from staring too hard at Harry resulting in something close to a fugue state. It was like fate had it in for him; somehow, they’d both ended up at the same Halloween extravaganza in Melbourne after parting ways at their hotel early in the morning, though it wasn’t the party either had started at.

It was a while before Louis had been able to pull Harry aside and upstairs to somewhere relatively secluded. They could still hear the partygoers outside from the open doors to the balcony from the room they’d found themselves in, though, and that gave Louis an idea.

He pushed Harry away, darting over to the nightstand next to the bed. He rummaged around in the top drawer fruitlessly for a moment before opening the bottom and letting out an exclamation of triumph. Harry was peering down curiously at him when Louis turned back around, one arm crossed over his chest as if to hide his already-covered nipples.

“What’s that?” Harry asked, nodding toward the items clutched in Louis’s hands.

He uncurled his fingers enough for Harry to catch a glimpse of the lube and condoms he’d found conveniently stashed in the nightstand, and smirked when Harry’s face went red in response.

“Go out to the balcony,” Louis told him.

Harry cocked his head to the side in confusion but obeyed without otherwise questioning the order. When Louis followed him out, Harry was already slumped over with his elbows resting on the railing, just watching as the people below danced and partied, oblivious to the eyes above them.

Louis stepped up behind him and yanked Harry’s shorts down to just below the curve of his arse. Harry yelped, loud enough that Louis could see a few people down below looking around in puzzled surprise.

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Louis finally pushed in before starting up a harsh, punishing rhythm almost immediately.

Louis might have been worried Harry wasn’t enjoying himself if it weren’t for the tell-tale signs of his stuttered breathing, the flush spreading across his shoulders and back, and the still prominent hardness Louis’s fingers grazed against as he clutched at Harry’s hips.

“Can’t believe you like this so much,” Louis breathed, panting out the words against the sweaty skin between Harry’s shoulder blades as the boy underneath him grunted quietly with every slap of Louis’s hips against his arse.

“Am I not supposed to?” Harry gasped.

Louis couldn’t even answer, so overcome by the feeling of the orgasm he could feel himself hurtling towards, made better somehow by the knowledge that anyone below could look up and see them like this, even though the possibility scared him more than anything else in the world.

Louis wasn’t going to last much longer and he knew it, so he quickly slid his right hand into the front of Harry’s shorts only to have Harry bat it away.

“Can’t,” Harry said. “Later.”

Belatedly, Louis remembered that Harry didn’t have any other clothes to walk out of the party with, and it probably wasn’t the best idea to chance staining the shiny nude shorts he had on with jizz just so they could get off at the same time.

Louis made it up to him after, sucking Harry off through a condom after he’d reached his own orgasm and then wanking Harry with two fingers up his arse to wring another out of him just before they made their exit.

They weren’t careful about any of it, not like they should have been, and when they finally stumbled into bed together in Louis’s hotel room at the end of the night, Louis realised suddenly that he still had paint covering his face. The fact Harry kept nuzzling his head into like a cat as he slowly drifted off to sleep was now an issue they needed to deal with.

“Love, I need to wash my face if we don’t want a repeat of last year,” Louis told him, giving the other boy a little shake in effort to get him to move.

Harry didn’t. “Don’t wanna,” he mumbled.

Harry hadn’t cared last year when fans had connected the dots between Louis’s face paint and the white streaks in Harry’s hair. If anything, he’d worn it like a badge of honour, and while Louis had silently angsted over the discovery, Harry had revelled in it, on Cloud Nine just knowing that someone out there knew the truth about them, even if they didn’t really know everything.

Louis sighed into Harry’s curls. “Okay,” he acquiesced, not wanting to take that simple happiness away from Harry even if it came at his own expense. “Let’s sleep, then.”

And so they did.

February 10, 2021

Los Angeles, California
The song wasn’t melancholy, like many of the others had been, so Louis was surprised when Liam seemed uncharacteristically subdued back at the condo.

Sam begged off immediately, citing a need to work before disappearing into the guest bedroom. Louis wasn’t sure if that was the real reason she’d made herself scarce, or if she could sense the tension in the air, but either way, he was a confusing mix of grateful and apprehensive over her absence.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” Louis decided after they’d both had a drink sat on the sectional. The telly was on, playing some show Louis had already forgotten the name of. He hadn’t been paying it any attention.

Liam, in sharp contrast, was hyper-focused on the screen, refusing to look at anything else at all. He tore his eyes away with a reluctant frown to meet Louis’s resolute stare. “I booked a flight out for tomorrow afternoon,” he admitted, sounding a bit miserable about it.

From a logical standpoint, Louis knew there wasn’t any reason for him to feel angry. And there wasn’t any reason for Liam to feel guilty. Liam had already done more than his fair share for both Louis and Harry in terms of support. He had a family to get back to. It was that, more than anything else, that forced Louis to realise there was no sense in having a strop over Liam leaving.

“Um.” Liam looked confused and a little helpless. “You’re not saying anything.”

“What do you want me to say?” Louis asked evenly.

Liam’s face scrunched up even more. “You’re not upset?”

Louis shrugged. He leaned back against the sofa cushion and sighed. “You need to go back and see your kids. I get it.” He could feel Liam’s eyes on him, but it was more than a full minute later before the other man replied.

“You know,” Liam said slowly, “speaking of, you should probably spend some time with yours, too. How long’s it been since you’ve seen him?”

“Right before you got here,” Louis reminded him. “It’s only been a few days.”

“Well, if Briana’s okay with it, I’d quite like to see the lad myself before I leave,” Liam said.

Louis suspected the suggestion was also intended to keep him distracted from thoughts about Harry, because Liam couldn’t stand it when Louis moped, but it would be good for him to spend some more time with Freddie while he was still in town.

“All right,” Louis replied, agreeing more readily than Liam had anticipated, if his startled expression was anything to go by. “Briana should be pleased I’m giving her more than a few hours heads up this time,” Louis remarked, mostly to himself, as he pulled out his phone to call her.

Briana answered after a few rings, sounding a bit breathless on the other end when she finally picked up. “Please tell me this is you actually sticking to the agreement we made,” she said by way of greeting. She didn’t sound like she thought that was going to be the case, which made Louis smile a bit in anticipation.

“Liam’s leaving tomorrow afternoon,” he told her. “He wants to come by, see Freddie for a bit before he leaves.”
“Oh!” There was a clatter from Briana’s end. Louis wondered what the hell she was doing, and then decided he didn’t really care to ask. “Yeah, sure, that’s fine. What time do you want to come get him?”

“The earlier, the better, I suppose,” Louis told her.

They settled on a suitable hour, agreed to eat breakfast together at the house, and decided that Freddie’s nanny—who Louis quite liked after their day at the beach together—would get the day off, with pay.

Louis was just about to wrap up the conversation and hang up when Briana suddenly made a cut-off sound into his ear. “What was that?” he asked, frowning.

“I, um—I saw the news,” Briana said over the course of nearly thirty seconds, pausing between every syllable as she struggled to get the words out. It took Louis a few more seconds to realise what she meant, and then she came out and said it anyway, sending his heart plummeting into his gut. “About Harry.”

“Yeah,” Louis replied roughly. He wasn’t sure what else to say. He and Briana had never been close, had never really been friends, even now.

“Is he…okay?” she asked in a quiet voice.

Louis took a little while to answer. “I don’t know.” he finally said, deciding to be honest about it. “I don’t think so.” He could feel Liam’s eyes tracking him, but he refused to look over to meet them. “If I’m honest, I don’t really feel up to talking about it right now.”

“Oh. Okay, sorry.”

Louis sighed. He could practically feel the hurt radiating through the phone. Briana was always so quick to take offense to everything, even when no one was in the wrong. “I’m just tired right now,” he told her, even though it wasn’t like he was obligated to give her an excuse for why he didn’t feel like discussing Harry’s suicide attempt over the phone. “We can talk tomorrow, if you want.”

“Yeah, okay. Um, feel better, then, I guess.”

“Thanks.”

Louis stared at the phone in muted disbelief after ending the call. It was bizarre to think that that conversation was probably the closest they had ever come to being friendly in all the time they’d known each other, with maybe the exception of the brief period of time they’d interacted before hooking up, but even then, Louis had mostly ignored her.

“You all right?” Liam asked out of nowhere, abruptly pulling Louis out of his thoughts.

Louis glanced up again, taking into account Liam’s concerned expression before turning back to the telly. “Yeah, I’m fine,” he replied. He leaned forward to take the remote from off the table and pointedly boosted the volume, willing it to drown out everything else. Hopefully Liam would take the hint. “I’m just tired, like I said on the phone.”

It wasn’t a lie. Louis did feel exhausted suddenly, like just being around Harry was enough to both physically and mentally drain him. He briefly contemplated excusing himself to take a nap, knowing he could use it, but then decided it wasn’t worth dealing with Liam’s concern about his health and wellbeing as an inevitable consequence.
Louis settled back against the sofa, pointedly ignoring Liam’s almost tangible worry from the opposite side of the sectional, and tried futilely to lose himself in the overblown car chase scene playing onscreen.
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

Now that I'm finished writing this monstrosity, I'm working on Requests while I edit the damn thing for readability. Editing a 250k word fic in a week is not very fun. I'll be starting my next longer fic soon, but it will probably be in the 50k range.

Sidenote, but right before I was going to post this, my power got knocked out by a windstorm. I don't know what that means exactly, but it's fixed now, so here you go!

Twitter: @vondrotes & @vondrotesupd8s
Tumblr: @vondrotes

February 10, 2021
Los Angeles, California

It was near the end of the film—the name of which Louis had never managed to figure out—that he started to drift off, only to be startled awake by the loud buzz of his phone vibrating against the coffee table. Louis grunted in exasperation and pulled himself off the cushions with a put-upon sigh.

“Who’s it?” Liam inquired lazily.

Louis picked up his mobile and tilted it toward Liam. Gemma’s name was displayed onscreen, large enough that Liam could see it from the other side of the sofa. He lifted in eyebrow in undisguised curiosity as Louis answered.

“Hello?” Louis said cautiously. He felt justified in his reluctance even though Gemma didn’t really have anything to do with Harry’s outburst.

His greeting was met with a gentle sigh. “I’m really sorry to ask this after what happened with Harry earlier,” Gemma said in quiet tone, making it obvious that she was still at Cedars-Sinai, and clearly didn’t want Harry to overhear her side of the conversation. “But he needs some things from the house, and I don’t want to leave him here alone with Mum. He’s been—” She stopped, pausing for a few seconds before continuing in an even lower voice. “It’s just not a great time right now.”

Louis was burning to ask what was wrong with Harry, to find out why she seemed so worried all of a sudden, but he managed to keep the question to himself. “What kinds of things?” he asked instead, making an effort to keep his voice neutral.

“Clothes, toiletries, some things from the kitchen. Organic nonsense we could probably just buy, but it seems like a waste since he needs the other stuff anyway.”

“All right,” Louis said, already in the process of standing up from the sofa while Liam looked on in confusion. “Send me the list. And the gate code.”
“Thank you so much,” Gemma said through an exhaled sigh of relief. “I really wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t—well, yeah. Thanks for doing this. I’m sorry again about earlier.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Louis replied, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other as he waited for her to finish speaking so he could hang up. “It’s fine, really.”

“Well…thanks anyway. Um, I guess just call me if you need any help.”

“Right. I’ll see you later, then.”

“Bye.” She hung up before he could return the farewell, but Louis didn’t exactly mind. He stretched his arms up over his head and looked over at Liam, who was still squinting up at Louis as if trying to puzzle together what was happening from what he could hear of their conversation. “Gemma needs someone to grab some things from Harry’s place,” Louis informed him.

Liam nodded in acknowledgment. “I suppose I’m invited, then?”

“If you want.” Louis wrinkled his nose. “Give me a minute to let Sam know we’re heading out.”

Part of Louis felt defensive about Liam’s willingness to tag along, even though he knew it was absurd to think that Liam didn’t trust him to go to Harry’s alone when even Gemma didn’t have those same qualms. It was just his paranoia talking, and Louis was finished with letting that part of him rule his life.

Easier said than done, though. Louis couldn’t help the furtive glances he cast in Liam’s direction all the way from the condo to the car. Liam noticed at some point and finally commented on them once they climbed inside and got buckled in.

“You know I’m coming with you because I’m trying to be supportive, right?” Liam said carefully, catching on to the source of Louis’s anxiety immediately.

“Yeah,” Louis said, mostly to himself. “Yeah, I know.”

“Good.”

Louis expected Liam to put on another song as soon as they got in the car, but he said nothing and didn’t reach for Louis’s phone at all as they drove, instead scrolling casually on his own as they plodded along with the rest of the afternoon traffic.

“You can play it if you want,” Louis finally said as they neared Harry’s neighbourhood in West Hollywood.

“What?” Liam was playing dumb.

“The next song on the playlist,” Louis said, striving for nonchalance and failing miserably. “I don’t mind.”

“Oh.” Liam leaned over to pluck Louis’s phone out of the cupholder. “Well, all right, then.”

Louis didn’t think he was imagining the smug note in Liam’s voice. He clenched his hands tighter on the steering wheel, waiting for Liam to follow through.
November 25, 2013
Los Angeles, California

“We should do this more often.”

Louis rolled over to face Harry, bleary-eyed and still half-asleep. “What, have a kip? Don’t have to convince me.”

Harry rolled his eyes and turned his head to stare back out through the French doors, down the path that led directly to the beach. “I meant relax,” he said, squeezing his knees even tighter to his chest.

“You? Relax? As if.” Louis snorted. “We both know you’d go mental if we had to spend more than a week here.”

Harry had the audacity to look affronted by the comment, pretending like they didn’t both know it was one-hundred percent true. Harry didn’t know how to sit still, how to function when they weren’t busy, busy, busy.

Louis, on the other hand, was quite enjoying their time off, made even better by the fact that they had managed to rent their own beach house for the duration of the break in a relatively private spot along the coast where they had much less chance of being recognised.

They’d spent every day so far frolicking in the sand, getting rubbed raw by the saltwater and burned by the sun, and Louis couldn’t be happier, honestly. Harry felt the same. At night, they’d gathered all the bedding from throughout the house and constructed a giant fluffy nest in the centre of the sitting room, so they could fall asleep together while looking out at the waves and the moon.

Louis never wanted to leave.

Louis rolled over to bury his face again Harry’s thigh, bare and smooth and still salty from their earlier swim. He poked his tongue out to give it a lick, grinning when Harry jumped away with a yelp.

“You checked the charts recently?” Louis asked as he flopped over onto his back again, throwing an arm over his eyes with a melodramatic sigh.

“No. Have you?”

Louis shook his head.

It was a few seconds before Harry spoke again. “Do you want to?” he asked, his words even slower than usual.

Louis pulled his arm away to peer up at Harry’s face, find him looking pensive and a little hesitant.

“You’re worried too, then?” Louis said, feigning a laugh as he sat up. He couldn’t blame Harry for the nerves; he was suffering from them just as bad, if not more. It was one thing to anticipate the reaction to their debut album, or even the follow-up. Now Louis felt like he was just waiting for a flop.

And it would hurt more with Midnight Memories than the first two. They’d all had significant input on the album, but Louis even more so than the others. If it did poorly, he knew he wouldn’t
be able to keep himself from taking it as a personal blow.

“A little,” Harry admitted. “But wouldn’t you rather know?”

Louis supposed nothing could be worse than the dread of living in perpetual uncertainty, but he still wasn’t brave enough to look on his own. “You do it,” he cajoled, headbutting Harry in the leg again. “I don’t want to get up.” His phone was safely located in the kitchen with Harry’s, where they wouldn’t be tempted to check social media every five minutes.

Harry sighed and leaned over to drag his laptop over to them. “What should I say if it’s bad?” Harry asked as he waited for the computer to boot up. “Should we have a code word?”

Louis groaned. “Might as well just smother me with a pillow if it comes to that.”

Harry snorted quietly, but otherwise ignored the comment as he tapped away at the keyboard, pulling something up onscreen that Louis couldn’t quite make out from where he was lying against Harry’s thigh. Louis watched Harry’s face instead, waiting nervously for a reaction.

“Oh my god,” Harry finally said a few seconds later with a loud exhale. He closed his eyes and sucked all the air back in before opening them again.

“What?” Louis asked, already starting to panic. “What is it?” His fingers tightened around Harry’s calf, hard enough that the younger boy flinched.

“One Direction’s third album is expected to debut at number one in multiple countries, following in the same tradition as their previous releases. Maybe the fans are right. Maybe One Direction really is unstoppable.”

Louis could hear the smile, even through Harry’s overexaggerated American accent, and he pressed his own answering grin into the soft give of Harry’s flank, breathing in the smell of him and imprinting it on his mind. He wanted to remember Harry in this moment exactly, while the high of knowing they’d succeeded was still flooding his brain.

“You know what this means for us, right?”

Louis glanced up to find Harry looking almost manic in the light coming off of the laptop screen. “What?” he asked, dumbfounded by Harry’s reaction.

“We can ask for more,” Harry said in a hushed voice, and Louis didn’t need an explanation anymore to know what he was talking about.

Louis groaned and rolled off Harry again. “It’s not that simple,” he argued, hoping Harry would drop the subject before it turned into another fight.

Harry wasn’t willing to give up so easy this time. “Why not?” he shot back. “They tried to keep us from writing our own stuff and you told them to go fuck themselves, and it worked, Lou. Why can’t we ask for what we want now that we’ve proved we don’t need them to get by?”

The thing was: Harry was right. Or half-right, at least. They could at least push for what they wanted, even if there was no chance in hell they would ever get it.

They might have been able to convince management to at least soften the restrictions on their hotel rooms and public outings now that they were done with the film and the tour, but Louis was still worried that given an inch, Harry would take every bit of mileage he could possibly get.
There were a thousand excuses Louis could have given Harry instead of the simple truth, but Louis was tired of lying. “Because I don’t want to ask them, Harry,” he said sadly. “I love you, and I don’t want to lose you, but being out to the whole world isn’t something I can give you right now. And I’m sorry.”

February 10, 2021
Los Angeles, California

“Oh not a good memory, then, I’m guessing?”

Louis didn’t look at Liam as he leaned out the window to put in the code for Harry’s gate, or even after, while they were just sat there waiting for it to open. It was disconcerting to realise just how few good memories there actually were, in the grand scheme of things.

“It’s complicated,” Louis finally settled on.

The song itself had been just as complicated, changing keys and tempo three different times before finishing with a sombre outro. Louis couldn’t deny that Harry had a special way of capturing the spirit of a certain moment or idea, bottling it up and preserving it in song. He’d only gotten better at it through the years. Louis could practically smell the salt on Harry’s skin even now.

Louis and Liam didn’t exchange words until after they’d parked the car in Harry’s drive and walked up the steps to his front door. Louis was thankful his hands were relatively steady as he punched in the extraordinarily long code from Gemma’s text to unlock the door. He still felt like he had something to prove with Liam there.

The interior of the house looked the same as Louis remembered from when he’d visited with Gemma the first time. Louis took a few steps inside, and then stopped, realising suddenly that Liam hadn’t followed. When he turned, he found Liam still standing in the doorway, staring apprehensively into the house.

“What?” Louis demanded, forcing Liam to jerk his head up to meet Louis’s eyes.

“Well,” Liam said in a near-whisper, looking a bit helpless, “I don’t really know what to expect.” His eyes darted around the foyer, taking in what little he could see from the foyer. “Did they have someone come clean up after…you know? Is there going to be blood?”

Louis sighed. “Just don’t go into the back garden and you’ll be fine,” he reassured him. He waited impatiently for Liam to cross the threshold and then led him into the kitchen. “Upstairs or downstairs?” Louis asked, leaving it up to Liam to decide who should take Harry’s bedroom, as if that would absolve him of any suspicion of snooping where he shouldn’t.

“Um…downstairs,” Liam replied. “It’s just the stuff from in here, right?”

“I think so.” Louis quickly forwarded him the list Gemma had sent. “Grab anything else you think he might need,” Louis added as an afterthought. He was already halfway out of the room. “I don’t really fancy making a second trip.”

He headed upstairs without waiting for a response from Liam. If Liam truly couldn’t handle collecting a few things from Harry’s pantry and fridge, they’d have to deal with it later.
For the moment, Louis was solely focused on the fact that he was heading up to Harry’s bedroom in the house he spent most of his time in. Harry’s most intimate space. To say that Louis was nervous would be an understatement. He was shitting it by the third stair.

The list Gemma had provided him wasn’t long, but it was specific. There was a candle sitting on Harry’s nightstand, a driftwood piece that had probably been specifically carved for Harry himself. He preferred to surround himself with unique items, things that had a particular energy—to Harry, anyway. Louis had always thought it was a load of nonsense.

He picked up the candle, took a cursory sniff to find it was cinnamon-scented, and then carefully packed it into one of the bags they’d brought specifically for this venture.

Next was one of Harry’s pillows, the corn snake one Harry had grown unreasonably attached to after Louis had bought him the collection during a drunken online shopping binge. He’d dragged it around with him on his first solo tour, Louis remembered. He was surprised Harry had held onto it after that, much less wanted it brought to the hospital so he could have it with him now.

Louis packed it, ignoring the throbbing pain that had sprouted suddenly in his chest as he placed it next to the candle.

After that, was Harry’s toiletries from the bathroom. Louis was surprised and a little disappointed to find that in this regard, at least, Harry had changed a lot in the last three years. Practically every brand he’d associated with Harry was gone, replaced by entirely new things Louis didn’t recognise. The realisation made Louis feel embarrassed about the products he’d purchased for Harry while he’d still been unconscious.

The remaining items were fairly mundane as well: some books to read since Harry was under strict orders not to have his phone, as well as some comfortable clothes for him to wear since he was no longer confined to the indignity of wearing a hospital gown in his private suite.

The books were standard fare for Harry. He was still reading an inexplicable combination of pretentious poetry and pulpy heterosexual romances. The former was unpalatable to Louis, but he could understand it. The latter was utterly beyond him.

Louis threw in Siddartha with the lot, too. Harry would appreciate it.

Exploring Harry’s closet was an adventure all its own. Harry had an odd tendency to keep almost anything he’d actually worn, even if he never so much as touched it more than once, so the closet itself—bigger than most bedrooms on its own—was overflowing with clothes.

Some of those clothes sparked a haze of distant memories, both pleasant and otherwise, as Louis passed. He couldn’t help but bury his nose in one of the soft suede coats hanging from the rack to his right, breathing in deep in hope of catching some of Harry’s scent still lingering there, but there was no telling how long it had been since Harry had last worn the article. It was still a bit more dignified than smelling his sheets, at least.

Harry’s casual clothing took a bit of work to find. Louis stared down at the drawer of soft shirts and pastel trackies, remembering lazy days where Harry lounged in them with bedhead and sweat stains under his arms, still the most beautiful thing Louis had ever seen despite it, still the best thing Louis had ever had. And lost.

Louis stood over them, paralysed now by the reality of being in Harry’s home, in his bedroom, without him. Not because Louis belonged there, but because he was doing Gemma a favour.
Louis counted up to ten and then back down again before grabbing everything in sight that he thought Harry might need. It was with an oddly heavy heart that he found himself placing it in the bag along with the rest. Louis double-checked the list Gemma had given him, making sure he hadn’t missed anything vital. Like he’d told Liam, he wasn’t planning on making a second trip.

Satisfied that he’d gotten everything Gemma wanted, and then some, Louis zipped up the bag, walked to the door, and turned to take one last look at Harry’s room. He knew deep down he wasn’t ever going to see it again.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

I just went through and edited the entirety of this fic for readability, so subsequent chapters should hopefully not have any typos. Or at least, less than they had before.

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February 10, 2021
Los Angeles, California

When Louis finally descended the stairs to the ground floor and re-entered the kitchen, it was to find Liam standing there, arms braced against the counter with his head bowed, face as pale as if he’d seen a ghost.

Louis let out a heavy sigh and crossed his arms over his chest. “You went outside, didn’t you?”

Liam lifted only his eyes to meet Louis’s. He looked ill. “Curiosity got the better of me,” he admitted. “I just couldn’t stop thinking about it.”

Louis’s frown turned sad. “Did you find everything?” he asked, desperate to change the subject. It had only been about a week since he’d seen the spot where Harry had almost died with his own eyes. He knew very well the toll it took.

Liam leaned down to pick up his visibly full bag. “Everything on the list and then some,” he replied weakly. “You?”

“Yeah,” Louis said, trying not to think of the mental anguish involved in his trip upstairs. “Yeah, I got it all.”

“Car, then?”

Louis couldn’t leave fast enough. He buckled himself in, fingers clumsy in their haste. Liam, who had gotten into the passenger side several seconds after Louis, was already buckled up and ready to go by the time Louis finally sorted himself out.

“Are you okay?” Liam asked, his brows drawn together in obvious concern. “Did something happen?”

Louis shrugged and let out a quiet little hiss of triumph when the metal tab on his seatbelt finally clicked into place. “I’d just rather not be here,” he replied as he put the car into reverse, satisfied that his statement summed up the bulk of his feelings rather neatly.

Liam didn’t challenge him on it, but Louis’s hopes of having a peaceful drive back to Cedars-Sinai were dashed as soon as they’d made the turn out of Harry’s neighbourhood and onto a main road.
“Did Niall talk to you before he left?” Liam asked unexpectedly. “About Harry?”

Louis shrugged without looking at the other man. “Sort of.”

“I mean, about what Harry said to him.”

That got Louis’s attention. He bit down hard into the meat of his lower lip, forcing himself to keep his eyes on the road. “No, we didn’t really discuss that.” He left it purposefully vague, not wanting to influence Liam one way or the other in his decision to tell Louis about what had occurred between Harry and Niall. Or not.

Liam seemed to be having trouble with the decision himself. It was another long moment before he continued. “Harry upset him,” he said finally. “I guess…I guess Niall thought he was helping, but whatever Harry said to him, it made him feel like he hadn’t done enough.”

“What did Harry say to him?” Louis asked, breaking his self-imposed rules for the sake of clarity. Not doing enough…. That could mean anything, really.

“I dunno exactly,” Liam replied unhelpfully. “I just know that it made Niall feel guilty about things, whatever it was.”

Louis wasn’t quite sure how to feel about that revelation. Part of him wanted to feel vindicated, but the other, more rational part knew that they were probably all at fault in some way or another for not doing enough, including Harry himself.

“What did Harry say to you?” Louis wondered.

He could feel Liam tensing up next to him without even looking to gauge the other man’s reaction. He could only imagine that if Harry had seen fit to place blame on Niall, who had been his only real friend out of the three of them, by the end at least, that whatever he’d said to Liam must have been even more vicious.

“He asked about my kids,” Liam answered atonally.

“What?” Louis whipped his head around for a second to make sure Liam wasn’t fucking with him, but the expression on his face seemed sincere.

Liam just shrugged. “He wanted to see photos of them. Asked how they were. Made small talk, really.”

“And that’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Harry had been so uncharacteristically confrontational since he’d woken up that Louis had almost forgotten Harry’s usual tactic was avoidance. He was good at reading people, too, could probably sense Liam’s guilt and discomfort from a mile away. Maybe he’d decided to take pity on him after ripping into Niall.

It didn’t seem quite fair; after all, Niall had made more of an effort to be Harry’s friend than Liam, but then again, most of that had been Harry’s decision. Maybe Harry had realised he couldn’t blame someone he’d pushed away himself for not being around when he’d needed them.

Before Louis could formulate a response, his phone started to buzz from within its semi-permanent home in the cupholder. “You mind?” he asked, looking to Liam, who scrambled to answer it.
Liam had a bit of trouble connecting it to the in-car speakers, but finally managed after a few seconds, soon filling the car’s interior with Jaime’s booming voice.

“What happened to keeping a low profile?” she demanded, though there wasn’t the heat in her voice that meant Louis had actually fucked something up.

It took Louis a minute to register what she was referring to. “We were at Soho House,” he explained. “It wasn’t like we were being careless.”

Liam remained silent, keeping his presence unknown. Louis wasn’t sure yet if that was a good thing.

“You could have asked someone on the staff to make sure the pictures were deleted,” Jaime pointed out.

Louis gave a verbal approximation of a shrug. “Didn’t seem worth the trouble,” he replied. “She would have just tweeted about it anyway. And it doesn’t really matter anymore if people know I’m here to see Harry, now, does it?”

Louis couldn’t deny that underneath the suave façade, he was panicking at the thought of all the rumours that must be flying around, but his rational side was winning out for the moment. He wanted to keep it that way.

“No, I suppose not,” Jaime replied easily. “Well, as long as you don’t get caught doing something stupid.” There was an implied ‘again’ that didn’t feel quite fair, especially since it had been five years since Louis’s last major slip-up (at least one that had made the news) and Jaime hadn’t even been responsible for him at the time. Surely, he was due a little more slack than that.

“Thanks for your concern,” Louis said curtly, annoyed now by the implication she’d made. “I’ll call you if I need anything.”

He ended the call before she had a chance to respond, and then sighed, reaching down to pick the phone up and shoving it toward Liam.

“Forty-seven,” he said meaningfully.

Liam accepted the mobile with reluctant fingers. “What was that about?” he asked quietly, even though Louis knew damn well he’d be able to piece things together if he gave it more than a few seconds of thought. It wasn’t like Louis and Jaime’s conversation had been subtle.

“Not really in the mood to talk about it,” Louis answered, hoping Liam would drop the subject and just play the damn song.

He did.

December 13, 2013
Cannes, France

Louis felt like a proper idiot as he stood outside on the pavement waiting for Harry to text or call to let him know that he’d shown up. He was dressed warm, his cold intolerance hitting him hard even
though the weather had been tolerable enough earlier that day.

This was such a stupid idea, Louis thought to himself. They’d just gotten back after their performance at the NRJ awards and still had the ceremony to attend tomorrow, but Louis hadn’t been able to say no when Harry had suggested they go out later that night.

Only Harry had subsequently disappeared, claiming it was part of the surprise, and now Louis was starting to get legitimately worried.

The sound of an engine rumbling startled Louis into moving away from the kerb. He retreated into the bushes nearby, shielding himself as a motorcyclist came speeding down the asphalt toward him before braking suddenly right in front of the hotel, just metres away from where Louis was standing.

Louis watched apprehensively as the rider climbed off the bike before taking off their helmet, revealing a familiar head of tousled brown curls.

“What the hell?” Louis hissed as he emerged from the bushes, approaching Harry at a near sprint. “Bound to wake the whole block, aren’t you?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “It’s just gone midnight, Lou. It’s not that late.”

“Late enough,” Louis muttered as he took an appraising look at Harry’s bike. “Where did you get this bloody thing?” he wondered.

“Rented it,” Harry replied, beaming proudly. “Thinking of getting one myself, to be honest. Wanted to try it out.”

Louis frowned. “What the hell are you going to do with a motorbike in the middle of London?” he questioned.

There was a shadow of something on Harry’s face that Louis couldn’t interpret, but it quickly disappeared. He shrugged. “I’ll figure something out,” he replied cryptically. “Come on,” he said then, patting the seat with a pointed look at Louis. “I want to go for a ride.”

Louis couldn’t suppress his smirk, even though on the inside he was practically shitting himself over the thought of getting on the back of Harry’s bike. “Oh, yeah?” he asked, hoping to distract Harry enough that he’d be swayed into forgetting this whole scheme in favour of having a nice shag instead.

But Harry, not one to be deterred from his more hare-brained ideas, just rolled his eyes. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Lou. You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

Louis sighed. It was worth a shot, at least. “Shame,” he replied morosely. “I was looking forward to getting a proper shag in on that queen-size bed in my room.”

If Harry was even remotely tempted by the prospect, he didn’t show it. “We can do that after,” he said with a deadpan expression. “Now get on the bike, Louis.”

Louis made a great show of looking put-upon as he climbed on the bike, only allowing Harry to fasten his helmet for him after realising he couldn’t quite figure it out by touch alone.

“All set?” Harry double-checked.

Louis gave him a thumbs-up in response. Harry laughed and pulled his own helmet back on before
climbing onto the seat in front of him, taking care to push his bum directly into Louis’s crotch as he did so.

Louis gasped into his helmet, grateful Harry couldn’t see his reaction. He dug his fingers tightly into Harry’s hips as he revved the engine, admittedly a little unsure of what to expect. Harry wasn’t the best driver, after all. This was a terrible, terrible idea.

It was a short ride from their hotel to the Riviera, but Harry’s route made it take at least three times as long, looping through narrow alleys just because he could. Harry was clearly very much enjoying himself.

Louis, who still wasn’t sold on the whole motorbike thing, wasn’t nearly as enthusiastic about taking the scenic route.

They weren’t driving very fast at all, and on some level, Louis knew that, but he clung tightly to Harry anyway, hardly able to take in any of the sights with his face mashed between the other boy’s shoulder blades.

By the time their midnight joyride finally came to an end, Louis was caught between the urge to throw up or pass out. He climbed off the back of the bike on unsteady legs, somehow managing to get his helmet off before Harry could help him.

They were parked in a secluded area just off the Riverwalk, the streetlamps far enough away that even if someone walked straight up to them, they might have had a hard time recognising either boy. Louis waited until Harry’s helmet was off before taking his hand and leading him over to the edge of the nearby terrace, so they could look out at the water.

It was a while before either said a word.

“I might have had an ulterior motive for bringing you here.” It was Harry who broke the silence first.

Louis looked over at him curiously, waiting for Harry to elaborate.

Harry sucked in a deep breath, suddenly looking nervous. “I haven’t really been honest with you,” he confessed.

It was Harry who broke the silence. “I had a boyfriend, in secondary, but only for a bit.” He sounded like he was trying to reassure Louis so he wouldn’t be jealous of this mysterious boy who had gotten to Harry before he had, but Louis was
too overwhelmed by what Harry was saying to feel anything but bewilderment.

“I don’t—”

Harry made a frustrated little noise in the back of his throat. “Just shut up for a minute, will you? Sorry. Fuck.” He covered his face with his hands. “I’m sorry, I’m just. I had a blog with pictures of me and him on it,” he said out of nowhere, and now Louis was even more confused. “Like, where I called him my boyfriend,” he explained, finally pulling his fingers away to reveal an even more distressed expression. “And some fans found it. I forgot.” The last statement was uttered in a whisper, so quiet that Louis could barely make it out.

“There aren’t…” Louis stopped, not wanting to give voice to the possibility, even.

Harry was already shaking his head. “I’d forgotten about it before I even went to auditions,” he said. “But I thought you should know.” He licked his lips. He seemed near tears. “I don’t think I can hide things much longer,” he admitted. “And I know how you feel already, but you can’t stop me from being honest about myself.”

Louis didn’t answer.

Harry grabbed him by the wrist, forcing Louis to look at him. “You don’t get it,” he said desperately, and there were tears now, spilling heavily from the corners of his eyes. “I never had to pretend to be something I wasn’t until I met you.”

Louis knew he didn’t mean it to come out like that, but it hurt hearing it all the same.

February 10, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis was surprised to find Gemma waiting just outside the lifts for them on the eighth floor when they arrived. She looked stressed, even more so than usual, her face almost as drawn as it had been before Harry had woken up.

Louis immediately started to panic, thinking something must have happened. Gemma, perhaps seeing the distress clouding his face, just shook her head as she reached out to take the bags they were holding. She grunted quietly under the weight as she slung the smaller of the two over her shoulder, letting the other hang from her right arm, nearly dragging on the floor.

“Harry’s fine,” she reassured them in a low tone. “He’s just—he doesn’t want to see anyone right now.”

Louis stared at her, dumbfounded. “Liam’s leaving tomorrow,” he argued. “He won’t have a chance to see Harry again for a while.”

Liam made a muted sound of protest, perhaps at being used as an unwilling pawn in Louis’s argument, from beside him, but Louis ignored it.

Gemma sighed, glancing between the two of them. “Look,” she finally replied, “I’ll have a talk with him, but no promises, all right? He’s not doing well.” The way she pointedly avoided looking at Louis as she responded told him everything he needed to know about why Harry wasn’t feeling
“Right,” Louis said weakly. “Well, good luck, then.” He fled to the lifts without a second look back, hiding in the corner with the doors open until Liam finally re-joined him.

Louis was half-expecting Liam to chew him out for speaking about him like he wasn’t even there, but the younger man just sighed and pressed the button for the ground floor without saying a word.

Louis was in a mood by the time they made it back to the condo, upset over the fact that Harry wouldn’t even give him the chance to set things right. He flopped down face-first onto the sectional, not moving even when Liam tried to coax him out of the depressed stupor he’d sunk into as soon as he’d stepped through the door.

“He’s hopeless,” Louis heard Liam telling Sam. “You do something about him. I give up.”

Louis shut his eyes even tighter and pretended not to notice when Sam came and sat down on the edge of the cushion near his elbow. She didn’t touch him, but she was close enough that he could smell her perfume, and even that was enough to calm him down just a tad.

“It’s going to take some time,” she said quietly, which wasn’t reassuring in the slightest.

“I know that,” Louis muttered in response anyway, just because he felt too bad about the prospect of ignoring Sam the way he had with Liam.

“You’ll get your chance,” Sam told him. “Just try to be patient.” She left it at that and got up from her perch, apparently of the opinion that there was only so much one could do to try and reason with Louis while he was in such a state.
Eventually Louis gave up on his moping and slid off the couch to join the others in the kitchen, realising there was nothing he could do about Harry’s decision. It wasn’t like dwelling on it was making him feel any better.

“Should we order something?” Louis proposed as he plopped down on one of the stools next to Liam.

“Pizza?” the other man suggested hopefully.

Louis arched an eyebrow. “Guess that diet of yours didn’t last long,” he commented.

“It’s not a diet,” Liam said hotly, and to be fair, he had a point. It wasn’t like he was foregoing any actual food. “I like the smoothies.”

Louis just laughed at him before turning to Sam to figure out what they should get.

They ended up with two large pizzas, one half-pineapple and half-cheese, the other a supreme. Sam grazed on samples from all three while Louis battled his way through his first slice. He’d just barely reached the crust when there was another knock at the door.

The three of them glanced between each other for a moment, uncertain, and then Louis got up to see who it was. If it was the delivery bloke, back for an autograph or something, Louis was prepared to give him a piece of his mind. Louis had tipped him well enough to be spared the annoyance.

It wasn’t the pizza guy. It was Gemma, shivering on Louis’s front steps in nothing but a thin airy blouse and boot-cut jeans, looking like she’d just run there from the hospital even though Louis could see her car, with all the lights still on, parked next to the pavement in front of the condo.

“You need to come with me to see Harry,” she said firmly with no prelude or explanation.

Louis just stared at her, dumbfounded. “What?”

“It’s freezing out here, Louis. Will you please just come with me?”

Louis pulled her inside instead and closed the door. “What are you on about?” he demanded.

Gemma was still shivering slightly even though the inside of the condo was much warmer, her
arms wrapped around her torso protectively. “I need you to go back to the hospital with me,” she repeated.

“I heard you the first time,” Louis snapped. “But you still haven’t said why.”

A bit of the blind determination in her face disappeared, replaced instead by uncertainty. Gemma glanced nervously over Louis’s shoulder at Sam and Liam, who were looking on from the kitchen with plates of pizza still in their hands.

“Please,” Gemma begged in a softer tone, staring pleadingly up at Louis once again.

He sighed. “Fine. Let me get dressed first.”

Gemma waited by the door without saying a word to either Sam or Liam as Louis scoured the condo for his jacket and shoes. He finally re-joined her a few minutes later and waved apologetically to the others as they walked out the front door.

They proceeded to Gemma’s car in silence, Louis following two steps behind and shivering just as hard as she had been, though he wasn’t entirely sure it was due to the cold. Gemma keyed into his anxiety almost as soon as they’d climbed into the car.

She glanced over at Louis curiously as she shifted gears, giving him an appraising glance. “Are you nervous?” she asked.

Louis sighed and slouched down in his seat, closing his eyes. “What do you think?” The sound of the engine was a pleasant hum in his ears. If the journey had been longer, he might have allowed himself to fall asleep to it.

Gemma wasn’t as keen on Louis’s meditation. “He’s not mad at you.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Louis replied, opening his eyes to squint at her sceptically.

“He’s not!” she retorted, taking her eyes off the road again for a second to meet his gaze. “He’s just…confused. Upset. You two need to sort each other out, that’s all.”

When put like that, it sounded far too easy. And Louis had done this dance a million times already. He knew that wasn’t all there was to it. It only got harder over time. “I don’t really think it’s quite that simple,” he said quietly, and this time, Gemma didn’t argue.

They reached Cedars-Sinai in record time. It was late enough that most of the traffic had dispersed already, leaving nothing but green lights between the condo and the hospital. The speed with which they reached their destination did nothing to calm Louis’s nerves, which had only gotten exponentially worse during the short drive.

Louis trudged miserably into Cedars-Sinai after Gemma when they exited the car, both of them with their arms wrapped tight around themselves as they walked through reception to the lifts—albeit for different reasons.

Gemma finally came clean after hitting the button for the eighth floor. “So,” she started in a quiet voice, “the truth is that I need you to talk some sense into Harry.”

“What?”

“He’s been acting off, I dunno,” she replied with a frown. “You wouldn’t know it from how he was with you lot, but whenever it’s just us and Mum, he shuts down, barely even speaks to us.”
Louis’s eyebrows shot to his hairline. “And you expect me to do something about that?”

“I don’t expect anything,” Gemma replied with a frustrated little huff. The doors opened, and Louis followed her out into the corridor. “But someone needs to do something,” she added, quieter now that they were walking toward Harry’s room. “If Harry doesn’t start showing improvements, they aren’t even going to consider discharging him.”

Louis stopped dead in his tracks. “Wait, what?” he blurted out, grabbing at Gemma’s arm and whirling her around to face him. “What do you mean, they won’t discharge him? I thought he was still recovering or something, cause of the stitches.”

Gemma shook her head with a deep frown marring her face. “I mean, he’d probably be here another day or two regardless, but it’s more complicated than that,” she explained. “He’s not even allowed to shower on his own because they still consider him a suicide risk.”

Gemma’s words were like ice-cold water being injected directly into Louis’s bloodstream. He stared at her wordlessly, not sure how to process the fact that Harry’s doctors were still afraid he might try to kill himself if left to his own devices.

“Won’t me being there just make things worse?” Louis asked in a small voice.

Gemma’s expression softened. She shook her head. “Honestly, I think he needs you more than ever.”

Louis let himself into Harry’s room a minute or two later, followed close behind by Gemma. The lights were all off when he stepped inside, but Harry quickly turned on the lamp next to his bed, casting his worn expression in a warm orange glow.

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked suspiciously, his eyes flitting between Louis and his sister as if not quite certain who was to blame.

It became apparent as soon as Gemma stepped forward. “I asked him to come,” she told him.

Harry’s nostrils flared, and for a second, it looked like he might argue, but then he just rolled over in bed, pointedly turning his back on them both.

Gemma sighed and spun around to face Louis. “I’ll leave you to it,” she said as she retreated out of the room. “Good luck.”

The door closed behind her with a soft thud that was at odds with the heavy sense of finality that came over Louis as soon as she was gone. He glanced over at Harry, hesitating a moment before walking over to sit in one of the chairs by his bed.

“You don’t have to talk to me if you don’t want to, I suppose,” Louis finally told him, his voice sounding strange to his own ears as it cut through the silence. “But I don’t think your sister will be very happy.”

“Good job I don’t give a damn what my sister thinks,” Harry mumbled from the other side of the bed.

Louis decided to consider it progress. He hadn’t actually expected Harry to say a word to him at all, so it was something. “What about what I think?” Louis wondered.

He wasn’t even quite sure if he’d meant to say it out loud, but it got Harry’s attention; he rolled back over to face Louis, his eyes narrowed and filled with all the wariness of a wild animal trapped
in a cage. This Harry was different to the one Louis had seen before, he realised. Whatever façade Harry had put up around Louis and Liam had been a convincing one, but he couldn’t maintain it all the time.

But if this was the real Harry, Louis wasn’t sure how to feel.

“What do you think?” Harry asked, taking the bait.

“I think you want to get out of here,” Louis replied easily. “And your sister says they aren’t going to let that happen if things don’t change.”

Harry rolled away from him again without responding but didn’t face the wall this time. Instead he stayed flat on his back, staring wordlessly up at the ceiling.

“Haz, she’s just trying to help you,” Louis tried, but it was the wrong thing to say.

“Don’t call me that,” Harry snapped.

Louis lifted his hands in surrender. “Force of habit,” he explained, though it wasn’t like he’d had the occasion to use the nickname in years. “Look, we don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to,” he offered instead.

“I don’t want to talk at all,” Harry replied, sounding more petulant than ever.

Louis knew this was his opportunity to lay everything out on the table for Harry, but he also knew that sometimes the direct approach wasn’t the best one to take, especially when Harry was already in a mood. After years of trusting too easily, he’d learned to take everything with a grain of salt: apologies most of all.

“Did Gemma tell you your assistant found the playlist you made?” Louis finally asked.

Harry turned his head to stare at him calculatingly. “No,” he replied slowly, “she didn’t mention it.” Harry’s eyes flicked over to glance at the bulge of Louis’s phone in his pocket before alighting on his face again. “Have—” He stopped short of asking the question that must have been burning a hole inside him.

Louis answered it anyway. “I haven’t listened to all of them yet,” he told Harry.

“But you’ve listened to some of them.”

Louis nodded and reached into his pocket to pull out his phone. He scrolled down to number forty-eight, the next one on the list. “January 31st, 2014,” he recited after checking the date. There was a brief flicker of recognition in Harry’s eyes, but he didn’t say a word. “It was your birthday trip in Jamaica,” Louis continued.


“Ask what?”

“Why I haven’t listened to them all, yet.”

Harry wrinkled his nose and gazed back at Louis with a cool expression. “I assumed you’d just tell
“Fair enough,” Louis replied. “I wanted something of you I could still look forward to,” he confessed, examining Harry’s face for a reaction. But Harry kept his expression neutral all the way through. “Especially before, when we didn’t know whether you’d wake up.”

“I’m awake now,” Harry pointed out. “You still haven’t finished it.”

“No,” Louis said without explaining himself, “I haven’t.” They stared at each other another moment more, the silence stretching out into something more comfortable than when Louis had first walked into Harry’s room earlier that evening. “Do you want to listen to the next song with me?” Louis asked, deciding to take a chance on it even though every instinct was telling him not to.

Harry looked mildly surprised by the question but didn’t seem unduly bothered. “The Jamaica song?” he confirmed.


Harry licked his lips before replying in a quiet voice. “Okay.”

January 31, 2014

Negril, Jamaica

Louis landed later than he’d intended, feeling jet-lagged, irritable, and in need of a good long shower, but that would all have to wait. His entourage had all been left behind for this particular trip and Louis was panicking slightly. He wasn’t used to traveling alone, especially not to a foreign country where he wasn’t even sure if he’d be recognised or not.

It would have been easier if he’d coordinated things with Harry beforehand, but he’d wanted it to be a surprise. It had been hard enough for Gemma to make an excuse to disappear for a few hours so she could come and pick Louis up from the airport.

He hadn’t been sure what to say to her. As far as Louis was aware, everyone in Harry’s family was still in the dark about the nature of their relationship, except Anne, who had become noticeably distant since Harry had talked to her. Which is exactly what Louis had been afraid of.

Anne didn’t know Louis was coming, but now that he was here, there wasn’t much she could do to stop him, so Louis wasn’t too worried. Harry had assured him that his mum knew to keep quiet about things, even around the rest of their family.

Gemma was still under the impression that Louis and Harry were just very close friends, and that Louis had decided to surprise Harry on his birthday vacation as a gesture of that friendship. It might have seemed extreme under other circumstances, Louis supposed, but it wasn’t like he didn’t have the money to spend.

“He’ll be over the moon to see you,” she said as she drove them back to the beach house where the Styles-Twist clan was staying for Harry’s birthday celebrations. “You’ll have to bunk together, but I don’t think Harry will mind.”

Louis had to suppress a grin. No, Harry really wouldn’t mind at all.
Louis was hoping to surprise Harry as soon as they walked in the door, but unfortunately, Harry was nowhere to be found when they finally arrived at their destination. Gemma scoured the house for him while Louis dumped his stuff in Harry’s room, acquainting himself with the slightly too-small bed that meant they would have to squeeze in close during the night.

“I think everyone must’ve gone down to the beach,” Gemma told Louis as she walked in a few minutes later, frowning. “D’you want to get changed now, or—?”

“Sure,” Louis replied as he stood up. “Guess I’ll meet you outside in a minute.”

He pulled on a pair of swim trunks and a white t-shirt, deciding at the last minute to add a baseball cap and sunglasses. Couldn’t hurt, even if the chances of him being recognised in Jamaica were relatively slim.

Gemma was waiting by the door for him when he walked out, dressed now in a sundress, underneath which he could see the straps of her swimsuit showing.

“Lottie’s gonna be minged off I didn’t bring her with,” Louis commented with a smile as Gemma held the door open for him to go through.

“Well, you can always bring her next time,” Gemma replied cheerily.

He could. Provided there was a next time, of course.

It was a short walk from the house to the beach, and Louis could make out Harry’s familiar head of floppy curls before they even reached the makeshift footie pitch just beyond the shoreline, where Harry was dashing about trying futilely to get his feet on the ball as it whizzed past him again and again.

By some stroke of luck, the ball came shooting toward Louis just as he approached the pitch. He kicked it back on reflex, only for Harry to spin around and catch it right in the face.

Harry landed flat on his back in the sand, and Louis sprinted over to make sure he was all right.

“Oh god,” Harry groaned, clutching his face as he blinked up at Louis over his fingers, “am I dead?”

“No,” Louis replied as he tried to suppress a smile, “but your nose is bleeding.”

“Oh.”

Louis helped Harry up and then walked him back to the house after assuring Gemma that he had things well in hand. She looked on worriedly for a moment but let them leave together alone. Louis slipped his fingers into Harry’s once he was sure they were out of sight of the rest of Harry’s family, glancing at his face every few seconds to make sure he wasn’t about to pass out.

Harry still didn’t say anything when they finally made it to the kitchen. He hopped up on the counter at Louis’s insistence and sat there holding his nose while Louis fiddled around in the freezer and put together a makeshift icepack.

“Here,” Louis said as he offered Harry the bag of ice, now wrapped in a flannel to protect Harry’s face when he applied it. “Sorry about that. Some birthday surprise, eh?”

Harry just lifted his eyebrows and pressed the icepack against his face.
“You’re not mad, are you?” Louis continued, suddenly worried by Harry’s lack of reaction.

Harry shook his head. “Does my mum know?” he asked, voice muffled by the flannel.


Harry sighed. “Well, Mum’s gonna have a fit when she finds out,” he warned Louis. “But I appreciate the thought.” He blinked a couple times, and Louis could see a hint of a smile poking from beneath his icepack. “And the birthday sex?” he said hopefully.

Louis rolled his eyes and settled in next to him against the counter. “It might have to wait,” he replied, crossing his arms over his chest. “I need my beauty sleep.”

“For what?” Harry crowed, incredulous.

“Gotta watch the match against Middlesbrough tomorrow, haven’t I?”

Harry looked borderline outraged at Louis’s response. “You’re going to spend my birthday watching footie?”

“No,” Louis replied, laughing, “I’m going to watch footie while you sleep in, and then I’m going to wake you up with a blowjob. So stop your whinging, yeah?”

Harry lowered the icepack then and leaned in to very delicately place his lips against Louis’s. Louis could taste a hint of copper, but he wasn’t about to complain. It was his fault Harry was bleeding in the first place.

“I’m really glad you came,” Harry told him as he pulled away.

Louis smirked. “I haven’t come yet, don’t get ahead of yourself now, Styles.”

“Don’t be rude, Lou. I’m trying to have a moment.”

Louis kissed him again before he could re-apply the icepack, trying to appease him a little. “There isn’t anywhere else I’d rather be, love.”
February 10, 2021
Los Angeles, California

There was a loaded silence that followed the end of the song that Louis didn’t know how to break. Listening to music with the person who had created it was always an intimate experience; even more so now, given the context. And Louis and Harry no longer had the easy communication style of two people who spent all their waking moments together. Neither of them knew how to speak to each other at all anymore.

But one of them had to say something.

“I feel like we should talk about what happened,” Louis said slowly, trying to ease out of the oppressive quiet that enshrouded them. He felt like if he pushed too hard it would snap back on him, and he’d lose this tenuous connection to Harry he’d managed to forge by listening to one of his songs with him.

But apparently Louis hadn’t been gentle enough.

Harry’s face took on a pinched expression as he stared at Louis for a long while before replying. “Is my sister bribing you into playing the role of my therapist now?” he asked sharply.

“You sister didn’t have to bribe me into anything,” Louis told him. He did his best to keep his voice level, with only a modicum of success. “I wanted to s—to come. Didn’t she tell you what happened?” He felt as if he were straddling a thin line between admitting how much he’d missed Harry—thereby risking rejection—and playing it so nonchalant that Harry didn’t think Louis wanted to be there at all.

“She said Liam was leaving tomorrow,” Harry said in a slow voice. He looked unsure of what to think about Louis’s response. “I said to tell him to stop by tomorrow before he leaves and instead she brought you along.”

“Would you rather she brought Liam instead?”

Harry’s face didn’t change, but his silence was answer enough. Louis sighed.

“Look, if you don’t want me around, that’s your call, I suppose, but you do get that I’m not here because I have to be, right?”
Harry maintained his silence even as he finally broke eye contact, staring down at the linens draped over his torso instead.

Louis noticed now that he hadn’t come out from under them, staying bundled up all the way to his neck as he’d been when Louis had first come in. He wondered if Harry was self-conscious about the bandages, trying to hide the worst of them even though the ones around his face and neck were still plainly visible.

There was also the fact that out of everything Louis had fetched for Harry from his bedroom, only the pillow was nowhere to be seen, the rest of it surrounding his hospital bed like a shrine. Maybe the pillow had been Gemma’s idea, one Harry hadn’t wanted anything to do with thanks to its association with Louis. The idea of it hurt, even though Louis didn’t know if it was even close to the truth.

“All right, well. I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow, then.” Louis stood up without looking at Harry, though he tensed up as he made his way toward the door, waiting for a reply he knew would never come.

Louis felt abruptly drained of all his energy when the door finally shut behind him. He met Gemma’s eyes from where she was stood against the wall, waiting. Anne was stood next to her now, looking just as haggard as Louis felt. There was a thermos in her hands that she sipped at briskly, nervously, as Louis walked over to them.

“How was he?” Gemma inquired quietly.

Louis shrugged. He wasn’t sure really on what level he was meant to be evaluating Harry’s status. “We talked a bit, but I don’t know that it really helped anything. He seemed about the same after—but he didn’t say we couldn’t come see him tomorrow.”

Louis flushed a little at his slip-up, not wanting to reveal to Harry’s mum and sister that he’d brought up Harry’s suicide playlist while Harry himself was still apparently under suicide watch.

“Oh.” Gemma seemed genuinely disappointed, and Louis was flabbergasted that she thought his presence would actually fix anything. “All right, then.” She turned to Anne next. “You should keep him company while I drive Louis back,” she said.

Anne nodded and gave Louis a furtive glance as she passed. Louis felt guiltier than ever, convinced now that his presence was only making Harry worse, and that Gemma and Anne were the ones who had to deal with it.

Louis voiced those concerns out loud to Gemma in the car, on the way back to the condo.

“Well, I can’t say it’s not partially your fault,” she replied hesitantly, and it didn’t hurt any less for Louis already knowing it was true. “But I think the real problem is Harry doesn’t want to get better.”

“Why?” Louis asked, desperately wondering what Harry could have possibly done to deserve the unending self-flagellation.

“I don’t know,” Gemma replied simply. It was worse than any other answer she could have possibly given.

When Louis walked through the front door to the condo, Gemma no longer in tow, he was met with twin stares of tentative uncertainty from both Liam and Sam, who had hardly moved in the forty-five minutes or so that he’d been gone.
“What?” Louis asked dumbly before walking over to heat up the pizza he’d abandoned in favour of seeing Harry. Some choice that had been.

“Well…” Liam replied in a slow voice, exchanging a furtive glance with Sam that made it clear they’d been thoroughly discussing Louis in his absence. “How was he?”

Louis shrugged. He watched his pizza revolve in the microwave a few times before answering. “About the same, really. Didn’t seem too keen on seeing me, but that’s not exactly a surprise.”

Liam didn’t seem reassured. “He was all right, though?” he pressed. “Like, physically?”

Louis turned away from the microwave to squint at him suspiciously. “Of course,” he replied. “Why wouldn’t he be?”

Liam just shrugged and didn’t answer.

Louis thought about Gemma telling him that Harry was still considered a suicide risk and wondered if Liam had somehow known that was the case before he had. Louis turned again, this time to pull his pizza out of the oven, and then shoved it into his mouth without even thinking.

“Ah!” He let the pizza fall from his now-burnt tongue back onto the plate and glared at Liam, who barked out a laugh at Louis’s misfortune. Louis grabbed for Liam’s water glass out of spite and took a few gulps in a futile effort to undo his mistake.

“I’m going to go put on a film,” Liam said, standing up with a fond smile that somehow felt even more patronising than being laughed at.

Louis glared at his back as he exited the kitchen and then spun around to find Sam staring at him in concern. “What?” he demanded.

She didn’t even blink. “Do you want another glass of water?” she asked him.

Louis deflated. “Yes, please.”

The three of them ended up sat all along the sectional together in front of the telly, Liam and Louis on either end while Sam curled up right in the centre between them. Louis didn’t pay much attention to the film, some action flick he’d caught when it had premiered in theatres and then instantly forgotten as soon as he’d walked out.

Louis ate slowly while the other two watched, just to kill some time. He excused himself once he was through with his pizza, unable to pay attention to explosions for more than a few seconds at a time without itching to reach for his phone. Liam had the worst taste in films, really.

Louis was fully intending to drop into bed and pass out as soon as he hit the sheets, but once his head was buried in a pillow, he suddenly couldn’t stop thinking. And unfortunately, the only cure for that Louis knew of was substance abuse, which he knew he wouldn’t get away with now that Sam was around. Not that he really wanted to drink again. Or smoke. He didn’t like feeling dependent on anything anymore.

Except for Harry’s bleeding playlist, apparently.

Louis lasted all of five minutes before pulling out his phone and scrolling down to the forty-ninth track. There was a feeling of nervous dread brewing in the pit of his stomach when he realised he was well over halfway through. He couldn’t decide whether he wanted it over with now or to drag it out even longer.
Louis groaned into his pillow when he saw the date. He honestly hadn’t thought Harry would include it. The songs seemed mostly punishment-oriented, with a few bright spots here and there as if to give Louis a blossom of hope that Harry could then crush from—as he’d intended—beyond the grave. And then of course, there was the fact that Harry had already written a bloody song about that day already.

But maybe remembering the good days was its own form of punishment, one that would have been made all the worse if Harry were really gone. Perhaps that had been reason enough to put it in, or maybe Louis was just overthinking things like always. Maybe there was no ulterior motive and Louis had read more than he was meant to into Harry’s parting message.

Louis could always ask Harry himself now, but after their prior meetings, all somewhere on the spectrum of ‘disastrous’ to say the least, Louis wasn’t really inclined to stick his neck out so that Harry could bite off his head.

Louis hit play without allowing himself to dwell on it any longer and braced himself for—something, he didn’t know what. The familiar opening chords to ‘Stockholm Syndrome’ weren’t anywhere on his mental list of expectations, but that’s what greeted his ears as soon as the song started.

It wasn’t the same though; that became quickly apparent. Louis remembered hearing Harry’s version of the song before it ever made it to the studio, before it was warped and changed by the combined efforts of their song-writing team and producers to make it more palatable for their teen audiences, who wouldn’t ever know that the end result was nothing like the song Harry had originally envisioned.

This was different even than that first song, though, rawer somehow. Deeper. Louis lost himself quickly to the sound, lulled into some fugue-type state by the combination of the music and his own exhaustion.

March 15, 2014

London, England

Louis loved the fact that he needed far less sleep than Harry. It gave way to moments like this, where he could watch the sunlight filtering through the shutters onto Harry’s face, illuminating him in little slivers of glowing white.

He looked ethereal, like an angel, even despite the dried streaks of come marring his tattoos, the bruises on his hips, the stubble burn marking his throat and face. Louis thought that only made him look even more heavenly, but he knew he was a little biased.

They’d rolled around in the sheets for hours last night before finally falling asleep. Harry had been too worn out for a proper shower and had fussed when Louis had tried to give him a sponge bath instead. He’d said he wanted to leave it till the morning, which Louis didn’t think sounded comfortable at all, but it wasn’t his skin, so he’d shrugged and settled for quickly changing the linens so they didn’t both have to sleep in their own mess.

With how debauched Harry looked now, Louis summarily decided that Harry’s idea had been a good one. His dick, if the way he was chubbing up under the sheets around his waist was any
indication, was clearly in agreement as well.

He was fully hard by the time Harry blinked himself awake, groggy and disoriented right up until the second Louis pressed his lips to Harry’s to wake him up.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” Louis told him. “You ready to go again?” He shifted his hips into Harry’s, pleased when Harry rocked back against him with a quiet groan.

“What about breakfast?” Harry asked between breathless kisses.

“What about it?” Louis pulled back to gauge Harry’s reaction, not wanting to push him into anything if he wasn’t feeling up to it. “You still sore from last night?”

Harry shook his head. “I mean, yes,” he corrected, “but the good kind.” He kissed Louis enthusiastically and rolled the older boy on top of him, linking their fingers together on either side of the pillow. “I would like to eat at some point, though,” he joked.

“Don’t think you’ll ever be leaving this bed if I have something to say about it,” Louis replied in kind.

“You can’t keep me here,” Harry said seriously, though the smile playing at the corners of his lips made it clear he didn’t really mean it. “I could run.”

“Not if I tie you down.”

Louis wasn’t expecting the full-bodied shudder that coursed through Harry at those words, but he was intrigued. He tightened his grasp on Harry’s hands and rolled his hips down, finding an answering hardness there.

“You like that? You want me to tie you up?” He sunk his teeth into Harry’s throat as the younger boy choked out an affirmative. “Stay here,” Louis ordered as he let go of Harry’s hands and finally pulled away. He didn’t have to look back as he wandered into his closet, still completely starkers, to know that Harry wouldn’t even dream of disobeying.

Louis didn’t really have anything proper he could use on Harry, having not known until this very moment that Harry was into anything remotely resembling bondage, but he did have a treasure trove of designer neckties that he didn’t give two shits about. Louis grabbed a handful of the ones with patterns he knew Harry hated before going back into the bedroom.

Sure enough, Harry hadn’t moved, and he grimaced as soon as he caught sight of the ties in Louis’s hand. “Do you have to use the striped ones?”

“It’s that or ruin one of the ones you actually like,” Louis pointed out, which caused Harry to concede his point. Now that he was faced with the reality of tying Harry up, however, Louis wasn’t quite sure how to proceed. “Do you have a preference for how we should do this?” he asked, hoping for some guidance.

“Um, you could—to the headboard, maybe?”

Harry looked just as uncertain, but he didn’t voice a single word of complaint as Louis struggled to fasten the ties around his hands and then to the bedposts, which was harder than it sounded. Harry seemed satisfied at the end of it, however, when he tugged at the ties to find them holding firm. His breath caught in his throat.

Louis smoothed his hands down Harry’s sides, relishing the fact that Harry couldn’t roll away now,
no matter how much he squirmed.

“Are you really going to waste the opportunity to have me totally at your mercy by tickling me?” Harry demanded.

“No,” Louis replied. “I’m going to do this.”

He took Harry into his mouth, pinning his hips down and sucking hard, trying to make Harry come as fast as possible. He pulled off just a few minutes later, staring up at Harry who was flushed and panting, but apparently still had enough energy for snarking off.

“You could have done that without tying me up, you know,” Harry remarked judgmentally, voice steady despite how wrecked he looked.

“Couldn’t do this though,” Louis replied as he reached down to stroke Harry to full hardness again only seconds after he’d already come, making him thrash frantically against the ties securing him to the bed. “Tell me if you want me to stop,” Louis told him, still wanking Harry off through the mess of his own come and Louis’s saliva.

“Don’t stop,” Harry gasped out, shaking his head. “Don’t stop.”

February 10, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis justified the lazy rhythm of his hand down his pants as the song ended by reassuring himself that there was nothing wrong with savouring the good memories amidst all the bad ones. If Harry had intended this as a punishment, well, then he’d just have to be disappointed. Not that Louis was ever planning to tell him about this, of course.

The thought of Harry in the present was enough to shatter Louis’s half-asleep daydream. Now that the song was over, Louis couldn’t hold the image of Harry the way he’d been when he was twenty in his mind any longer, finding it replaced by the shadow he’d become instead, wrapped in bandages and hospital linens.

Louis flopped over onto his other side to grab for his mobile, intending to put the song on again—a first for him at this point—only to have the screen light up as soon as his fingers touched the device. He stared at it in confusion for a moment before realising Lottie was calling him.

Louis groaned as he lifted it to his ear. “Hey,” he said at the trail end of a sigh.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

So it was to be like that, then. “It’s not really a good time, Lots,” he said tiredly. “I’m just about to go to bed.”

“Bollocks,” she snapped. “It’s not even gone midnight there. I woke up early just so I could call you, so don’t you dare hang up on me.”

“I really was going to go to bed,” Louis muttered, but there was no heat in it. He’d already resigned himself to this conversation, knowing that if he tried to avoid it any longer, there’d be hell to pay.
“You’re old, of course you were.”

Louis rolled his eyes even though his sister couldn’t see it. “Right, so, what did you want?”

“I want to talk about Harry, obviously.”

Louis stayed silent, hoping Lottie would take the hint.

“You can’t just not talk to me about this,” Lottie replied after a few seconds had gone by. “I’m your sister.”

“Well, out with it then.”

There was another long pause before Louis responded. “I don’t even know where to start,” he confessed.

Lottie sighed. “The beginning usually works best.”
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostesupd8s
Tumblr: @vondrostes

End notes added to address reader concerns.

February 10, 2021
Los Angeles, California

“Well, you already know Harry’s awake,” Louis pointed out.

“Yes,” Lottie said through a sigh. “Obviously.”
Louis wasn’t quite sure what else there was to say. “We haven’t kissed and made up,” he blurted out. “Literally or figuratively.”

That got a bit of a laugh out of Lottie, though it was clearly half-hearted. “Didn’t really expect you to,” she confessed. “You have talked to him, though, haven’t you?”

“A bit.” Louis allowed his eyes to drift closed. “It’s complicated.”

“So uncomplicate it,” Lottie replied impatiently. “I don’t know why boys act like they’d rather die than talk about their feelings.”

Harry had no problem talking about his feelings. He loved to talk about his feelings—but only with the people he trusted to listen to them. Louis wasn’t one of those people anymore.

And Lottie was half-right, anyway. Louis would rather die sometimes than talk about his own feelings, especially when it came to Harry. ‘An allergic response to perceived vulnerability,’ his therapist had once called it. It was a term she’d attributed to the way Louis often lashed out without thinking in situations where he felt he’d lost control over the way others saw him.

Telling Harry how he really felt would mean giving up more of that control than ever before.

“I wish I could, Lots,” Louis told her, “but he’s just not in a good place right now. I don’t want to upset him.”

“Do you know why…?”
Louis’s throat tightened up. “We haven’t exactly talked about it.”
Lottie was silent for a moment. “Well, maybe it would do him some good,” she replied firmly.

“If he wants someone to talk to, he has Anne and Gemma,” Louis argued. “He doesn’t need me.”
“Right, like you would rather discuss all your problems with me or Fizzy than your friends.”

*We aren’t friends anymore,* Louis wanted to say, but it felt like if he let the words actually slip out, if he made them real, then the whole world would collapse down around him. “I really am tired, Lottie,” he said instead, and it wasn’t a lie, though he knew he’d have more trouble falling asleep after their conversation than he would have if he hadn’t answered his mobile in the first place.

“Right, well. Try not to shut me out anymore, all right? If something happens, pick up the phone, okay?”

Louis nodded along sleepily. “Yeah, I will do, then. Goodnight, Lottie.”

“Night, Lou.”

Louis set his phone down on the nightstand to charge after hanging up and then rolled back into place with his face buried in the pillows, willing himself to fall back into the same state of dreamy half-consciousness he’d occupied before Lottie had called. It was a while before he finally found his way back.

February 11, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis woke up alone in his bed, disoriented and unsure of what day or time it was until he managed to get a hold of his mobile to check. He was lucky to find it was still early despite having forgotten to set an alarm the night before. It was just after dawn, and the light streaming in through the curtains was tinged a dark, dusky blue that made Louis want to roll over and go right back to sleep.

But he was seeing his son again today. That was reason enough to get his arse out of bed despite the early hour.

Louis decided to shower first before looking for Liam. He wanked off methodically under the warm spray, intentionally blanking out his mind and focusing solely on the physical sensations. The resulting orgasm wasn’t anything special, but Louis still felt a little bit better after he’d rinsed off and stepped out of the shower.

He found Liam out in the sitting room, flat on his back in the middle of the sectional and snoring loudly. Louis sat on him as a wake-up call, not feeling particularly charitable with the hour of Liam’s departure looming ever closer.

Liam let out a pained grunt and opened his eyes to glare blearily up at Louis, who stared down at him with an innocent expression. “You’re crushing me,” Liam groaned.

“It’s what you deserve after abandoning me on your last night in the good old US of A,” Louis teased as he rolled off Liam to give him some air.

“I fell asleep during the film,” he admitted somewhat begrudgingly. He removed the arm obscuring his face and glanced down at the blanket covering the majority of his body. “I’m pretty sure Sam must’ve tucked me in,” he continued, sounding so confused by the prospect of it that Louis couldn’t help but laugh at him.
“Now who’s the old fart?” Louis mocked.

Liam tossed a pillow into his face. “Fuck off. What time’s it, anyway?”

“Half-six,” Louis replied, only to be met with another overexaggerated groan. “We’ve got breakfast at Briana’s, and she’ll have my bollocks on a plate if we’re late, so best get your arse up and ready now.”

“How’s traffic?” Liam asked as he rolled off the sectional and onto the floor.

Louis quickly checked his phone. “Medium.”

“I still don’t understand why she has to live so far out of the way.”

Louis shrugged. “They’re near a good school,” he replied easily. The house he’d bought offered a lot more natural privacy than anything he might’ve been able to find closer to downtown, so he wasn’t complaining much. Offering Freddie a taste of a semi-normal life outside the spotlight was well worth the inconvenience—and the price.

Louis wandered into Sam’s room to let her know their plans for the day while Liam got ready. She was awake when he walked in, sat upright in bed with her computer in her lap, her hair pulled up into a messy bun on top of her head to keep it out of her eyes as she continued typing furiously without looking up.

Louis knocked on the wall to get her attention.

“Hmm?” she murmured, finally pausing.

“Liam and I are heading to Briana’s,” Louis told her. “I’ll probably be out all day; Liam’s due at the airport this afternoon.”

Now that Sam was staring up at him, Louis could see dark circles under her eyes. He supposed she must not have slept at all, and that was why she was up so early.

“You can come if you want,” Louis told her. “Or you can stay here, if you’d rather. I’m not sure how much work you have to do, but I don’t want to pull you away if you’re busy.”

Or if she wanted to take a nap, Louis thought, though he wasn’t dumb enough to suggest it. She’d just be embarrassed at being caught out. If Sam was tired enough, she’d sleep.

Sam rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Some boss you are,” she joked. “I’m still reworking your itinerary and booking for the rest of the European dates,” she informed him. “So it’s probably best if I stay and get what I can done. We don’t have a whole lot of time left,” she reminded him, and Louis realised with a sickening lurch in his gut that she was right. “Besides, I don’t want to be a bother.”

“You wouldn’t be,” Louis assured her, though he knew things would probably be easier without her there, around Briana at least.

“Thanks,” Sam replied with a soft smile. “But yeah, I think I’ll stay here.”

“Remind me to give you a raise when we get back to London.” Louis had already promised Jaime one. He might as well start handing them out to all his employees.

Sam scoffed and glanced back down at her laptop again. “Sure,” she said, already typing away
before she’d even opened her mouth to reply. “Give Freddie my love.”

“Of course. See you tonight.”

Somehow, Liam still wasn’t finished getting ready when Louis walked back into the sitting room, so he sat himself down on the sectional and flipped on the telly to wait. It was a mistake. Either Liam had lied about falling asleep during the film, or Sam had switched it to the news channel after Liam had passed out on the sectional, because when the screen blinked on, Louis was face to face with a picture of Harry—before his accident—framed in the corner as some bland American news anchor droned on about a possible drug overdose.

Louis slammed his thumb down on the power button and sat on the edge of the sectional breathing hard as he waited for Liam to emerge. He’d just managed to collect himself by the time Liam finally stumbled out of the master bedroom, dressed and with his luggage in tow.

Louis looked Liam up and down, assessing his readiness before standing up from the sofa and grabbing his keys from the coffee table. He waited for Liam to join him at the door before shouldering one of his bags without saying a word.

It was raining again when they stepped outside.

“I thought California was supposed to be sunny,” Liam complained, squinting up at the sky as they walked down the front steps with all his things.

“Not so much in the winter,” Louis replied automatically. Sometimes he forgot that aside from Harry, who actually lived in LA, he’d always been the one who’d spent the most time on the West Coast.

It had only been sprinkling when they’d first gone down to the car, but within what seemed like mere seconds, it started pouring, drenching them both as they got Liam’s bags loaded in.

Louis started the heater while they both got buckled in, and then found Liam staring at him expectantly when he looked up again. “What?” he asked dumbly.

“You’re not going to play another song?”

Louis frowned. “Oh, we’re doing it at your pace now, are we?”

Liam held up his hands in surrender. “We don’t have to if you’re not in the mood for it. I just thought—”

“Shut up.” Louis interjected, rolling his eyes as he pulled out his phone to bring up the next track on the playlist. He stopped short when he got to fifty. Louis felt sick when he realised what the date was.

“Louis?” Liam asked tentatively. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost, mate.”

In a way, he had. “What’s the date on the song after that?” Louis asked, his fingers already slick with nervous sweat against the steering wheel.

“Erm….” Louis waited while Liam glanced back down at the screen. “May 19, 2014?”

“And after that?” Louis’s breath quickened. He knew there was no way Harry had omitted it if he’d included the day of the Lima show.
“Twenty-seventh of May,” Liam replied. “Same year, obviously.”

Louis was pretty sure his heart had literally stopped, though it wasn’t as if he hadn’t known the answer was coming. He wondered if the twenty-seventh was a reprise of the next track on the playlist, if Harry had seen fit to tie the two together the same way they were connected in Louis’s mind.

Liam continued speaking, oblivious as to the nature of Louis’s racing thoughts. “Isn’t that the, you know,” he said vaguely. “When the video came out?”

Louis nodded. “The next song—fifty—that was the date it was filmed.”

“Why the hell would Harry care so much about that? Apart from the obvious, but it’s been nearly six years. It’s not like it affects him anymore.”

It was the logical way of looking at things if you were on the outside. But Louis had been right at the centre of it. He knew exactly why Harry was upset enough to want to throw those days right back into Louis’s face.

“Just play it,” Louis spat out. He clenched his fingers against the steering wheel. He knew he wouldn’t be able to focus on driving while listening, and he just wanted it over with. “I’ll explain after.”

April 27, 2014

Lima, Peru

Drugs weren’t a new thing to any of the members of One Direction, no matter what their management and fanbase liked to think. They had all had short-lived affairs with cocaine—some more-so than others—including even Niall, who had tried it once and then sworn it off thereafter.

Louis wasn’t a fan of the harder stuff except on special occasions. Zayn was more or less in agreement, and both of them preferred weed for the relaxation properties anyway. Pretty much the last thing either of them wanted with their high-stress schedules was any kind of amphetamine.

They had rules about it, though. Rules that Zayn and Louis had been breaking since the end of their last tour when the insanity of their schedule had finally started to catch up with them. Nothing the day of the show, no drugs in front of anyone on the tour crew, and absolutely no videos.

Louis had decided to break all of those that day.

He wasn’t even sure why, after the fact, but it didn’t matter because he’d done it, and now they were almost at Estadio Nacional, and Harry was going to smell the weed on them, and Louis was fucking screwed.

Luckily for Louis, by the time they got to the venue, Harry was too distracted by other things to pay any attention to what Louis had been doing in the car.

“They want to set me up with some girl while we’re on tour in the States,” Harry hissed furiously as they waited backstage, already surrounded by a large number of crew members bustling about to get soundcheck ready.
“You’ve never had a problem with that before,” Louis pointed out.

The glare Harry sent him was nothing short of murderous. “I’ve always had a problem with it,” he retorted. “I don’t mind if I know it’s someone I’ll get on with, but that is definitely not the case with this one.”

“Not blonde enough for you?”

Harry took a step back. “What the hell is your problem?” he demanded before leaning forward again to take a cursory sniff. “Lou—”

“Look, I’m just as wound up as you are,” Louis argued before Harry could lay into him. “We all are, all right? Maybe if you smoked every now and then like the rest of us you wouldn’t be stroppy every time management calls you in for a meeting.”

Harry looked appropriately furious at hearing that, and Louis knew already he would be regretting their conversation later. “I’m trying to do what’s best for the band,” Harry said quietly.

“So am I,” Louis replied, and it was clear that he was no longer talking about the drugs. He reached out and carefully placed his hands on Harry’s shoulders, assessing the younger boy’s expression to make sure it was all right before pulling him in for a hug. “If you don’t want to go out with the girl, then don’t,” Louis told him, though it was hardly his place to give that kind of advice. “Me and the other lads will stand by your decision if it comes to that.”

Harry drew in a deep shuddering breath. “Okay,” he said. “Okay, I’ll tell them. Thanks.” He drew back a little, enough to give him space to kiss Louis on the cheek, startling him. “Please stop smoking before shows,” he pleaded. “It only makes me nervous.”

Louis squeezed him tighter, nodding. With Harry this close to him, he thought he could be convinced to agree to anything. “Just for you, then,” he replied, pleased that for once their row had ended in smiles rather than tears.

February 11, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Liam gave it a solid minute after the song’s end before piping up. “All right, out with it, then.”

“I’m not sure where to start,” Louis said, echoing the words he’d spoken to Lottie over the phone the previous night. “You know Harry and I weren’t exactly…exclusive, right?”

Liam arched an eyebrow. “You complained enough to me about it, yeah. I still don’t know why you didn’t just tell him that’s what you wanted.”

Because Louis knew that giving Harry an ultimatum was unfair, especially given Louis’s own stipulations regarding their relationship. If Louis had to blame Harry for anything, it wouldn’t have been seeing other people.

“Right, well. Kind of moot at this point.” Louis sniffed loudly as he unclenched his hands from where he’d kept his fingers furled into claws around the steering wheel. They hurt. He stretched them out against his thighs as he continued, keeping his gaze focused on his hands in his lap
instead of Liam. “Someone Harry slept with filmed him,” he said quietly.

“What?”

It wasn’t something Louis had ever breathed a word of to anyone. He’d tried to forget about it as much as he possibly could, but it was a dark cloud that loomed ever present in the back of his mind. And Harry still had no idea.

“Harry doesn’t know about it,” Louis told Liam. He looked up to find the other man staring at him in confusion.

“How could he not know? If you know, I mean.”

“I intercepted a call from Griffiths on his phone,” Louis confessed. “Managed to talk him into keeping it from Harry. It was a threesome with a girl and another guy; the bloke had already made offers to a tabloid for the footage.”

Liam’s face creased even further. “So what, Modest paid them the hush money?”

“And then some,” Louis replied with a bitter laugh. “I agreed to turn over the video of Zayn and me from Peru in exchange for the sex tape. They got the money and a story out of it, so I guess they figured that was better than an exclusive Harry could potentially sue them over.”

The pity in Liam’s face was almost overwhelming. Louis could feel moisture pricking at his eyes. He had to turn away.

“Anyway,” Louis said. “We should get going.”

This time Liam didn’t argue.

Chapter End Notes

A few people have expressed concerns that Harry is cheating or that the non-exclusive relationship came out of nowhere.

1. Harry isn’t cheating on Louis by sleeping with other people.
2. In Ch34 (during the flashback that takes place in Dec 2012), there’s this: “Never mind,” Louis replied quickly. He felt sick to his stomach at the thought that Harry might feel the same way about someone else that he did about Louis, never mind the fact that they had never even agreed to make this thing about them exclusive, but he wasn’t willing to compromise the rest of his holiday just to fight about it. “I should probably go, as well. Don’t want the littles finding out about you, yeah? Lottie’d take the piss, for sure.”

This happens 3 months after they have sex for the first time, and at no point do they have a DTR (determining the relationship) talk, because of how convoluted the circumstances surrounding their relationship are.

3. I initially didn’t tag because there’s barely any mention of Harry’s other partners within the context of the greater fic. But since it seems to be a bigger deal to people than I thought, I’ll add additional tags.

Thanks for understanding!
The rain picked up even more as they drove, rapidly turning from a drizzle to a downpour. As the traffic slowed, Louis’s anxiety only ratcheted up even higher. He was worried that they’d end up being late to Briana’s even though they’d left with plenty of buffer time to accommodate for the inevitable delays. Liam didn’t seem similarly troubled by the issue of punctuality, but then again, it wasn’t his kid.

“I think you should listen to the other song before I leave,” Liam said without warning right in the middle of Louis swearing under his breath at another driver who had suddenly swerved into the left lane to make a last-minute turn.

“What?”

“I don’t want you to get all mopey about it on your own,” Liam continued. “We should listen to another one so you can get it out of your system. The nineteenth of May? Which one’s that, then?”

Louis gritted his teeth. “Look, I can’t focus on driving if I’m thinking about—that. What happened.” It was a valid argument, but in reality, he just wanted to postpone listening to the next two songs for as long as possible.

“But—”

“No, Liam.” Louis could practically hear Liam pouting over his idea being rejected.

“We could just wait till we get to Briana’s,” Liam suggested after a few more minutes had gone by, blessed minutes during which Louis had foolishly thought the argument had reached its end.

Louis sighed. “You say that like we won’t already be late for breakfast by the time we get there.”

Liam leaned over to peer at the clock on the dash display. “Nah, we’ve got plenty of time still,” he protested. “Tell you what: if we get there with more than five minutes to spare,” he proposed, “then you have to let me play the next song.”

“If I say yes, will you finally shut up about it?”

“Yes.”

“Then fine.”
Liam slumped back into his seat, apparently satisfied with the deal they’d made. Louis just rolled his eyes. He was confident that with the current snail’s pace at which they were moving, they’d be lucky to make it to the house before noon.

Despite Louis’s best efforts to slow them down at the very end of their journey, they pulled up in front of Briana’s house with exactly fifteen minutes to spare. The smug look on Liam’s face made Louis want to scream, but he held it in, knowing he needed to save his mental energy for Harry’s next song.

“Ready?” Liam asked, already staring down at Louis’s phone in his hands while he queued the song up. The rain was still battering the windows of the car, adding an eerie percussive to whatever tone the song might have.

“Not really,” Louis replied honestly.

Liam just shook his head and pressed play anyway.

May 19, 2014
London, England

It was blessedly warm in Harry’s new house. So much so that after only a couple hours of unpacking, Louis was ready to shed his clothes and lay naked on the kitchen floor for some relief. Harry—who was poorly adapted to any temperature extreme—wasn’t faring much better. Louis could see the sweat soaking into Harry’s hair as he carefully unwrapped a nice set of dishware to put in the cupboards. It was one Louis remembered his own mother picking out when they’d gone shopping for their first flat together. Louis hadn’t realised until now that Harry had kept it.

“I think we should take a break,” Louis suggested, already flopping down onto the tile next to the box of cookware he’d been working on.

“To do what?” Harry replied without pausing. “There’s no internet or telly set up yet.”

“And whose fault is that?”

Harry finally looked up to glare at Louis. “I haven’t had much free time,” he replied snippily.

Louis still wasn’t sure why Harry insisted on doing things proper—unpacking his own stuff, micro-managing every part of the move—Harry was probably the least shy of any of them about taking advantage of their newfound fame and fortune, but for some reason, this was where he’d drawn the line.

Louis sighed and sat up. Clearly this was an argument that wouldn’t be won with words.

He pulled off his shirt first, drawing a curious stare, but it wasn’t until he stood up and started to unzip his jeans that Harry opened his mouth. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” Louis replied unhelpfully as he shucked his trousers and pants before wandering out of the kitchen entirely, acting unrealistically nonchalant for someone who had just gotten naked in front of Harry Styles.
They hadn’t been optimistic about making it far enough to put together Harry’s bedroom before nightfall, so the mattress was sitting on its own in the middle of an empty sitting room, covered in a sheet and a couple of pillows. It should have been a sad sight, but Louis was grateful as he flopped down onto it, waiting patiently for Harry to arrive in the entryway.

He did so only a minute or so later, peering down suspiciously at Louis, who was lying flat on his back with his hands tucked under his head.

Louis was half-hard already from anticipation, and he could see Harry’s eyes trailing down to his groin without any prompting at all, as if drawn there by a magnet. And then Harry was stepping away from the wall, throwing his clothes off with no regard for how silly he looked doing it, practically leaping into Louis’s lap as soon as he was completely starkers.

“I didn’t unpack the lube yet,” Harry told him, already rubbing himself raw in the groove of Louis’s hip.

“Like this, then,” Louis replied. He offered his palm for Harry to lick, his other hand gripping Harry’s waist hard enough to leave marks. When his palm was wet enough, he took them both in hand, using every ounce of his power to keep Harry from bucking off him at the very first touch. “You’re acting like you haven’t wanked off in days.”

“I haven’t,” Harry replied, surprising Louis into stilling his hand with the confession. Harry whined, kissing him until he started up again.

“Waiting for me?” Louis asked hopefully.

Harry was beyond words now, only able to nod as his breathing came even faster.

They got off quickly and messily, sparing no time for teasing or theatrics. There would be time for that later, hopefully after they managed to put together Harry’s bed.

“I missed this,” Louis remarked afterward as he stared up at the ceiling, still riding high on the post-orgasm endorphins flooding his body.

“What? Sex?”

“No, just…this. Not being trapped in some hotel room waiting to be whisked away in a couple hours. Being at home.” With you. “Couldn’t stand it while you were living at Ben’s if I’m honest.”

Harry scoffed, huffing out a breath of warm air against Louis’s bare shoulder. “Why? What’s wrong with Ben?”

“Nothing, he just—talks a lot,” Louis finished lamely. He hadn’t even finished complaining and already felt pathetic for giving voice to his own insecurities. “He likes to talk about you a lot.”

They both knew what he really meant by that.

“You could have asked me to stay with you instead,” Harry told him, even though to make that happen, everything would have had to change.

Louis didn’t reply.

Harry waited a moment longer and then finally sat up with a sigh. “I’m gonna go see if the shower works,” he said tiredly before rolling off the mattress and padding out of the sitting room.

Louis laid there without moving for several minutes, trying to work up enough courage to go join
Harry and smooth things over again, but before he reached that point, he heard Harry’s ringtone sounding from the kitchen.

Louis leapt up automatically to answer it, only hesitating when he saw Griffiths’s name on the caller ID. After a few seconds of deliberation, he decided to pick up.

“Hello?”

“Isn’t this Harry’s mobile?”

“Yeah,” Louis replied, wincing when his voice cracked. “I was helping him move into his new house. He’s in the bath right now.” He hoped Griffiths wouldn’t read anything into that—namely, the truth. “What’s going on?”

“It’s a private matter.”

Louis saw red for a moment. There were no private matters anymore. Griffiths was the one who’d told him that to begin with. “He’s just going to tell me about it later,” Louis retorted.

Griffiths sighed. “I suppose it will affect the rest of you eventually if we can’t manage to bottle it up like we did with the Wellington incident.”

Already Louis was scanning through a mental list of potentially public encounters with Harry, places they might have been filmed without knowing. There weren’t any. They’d been more careful than ever before.

“But we haven’t done anything,” Louis protested, sure there had to be some mistake.

“You haven’t.”

February 11, 2021

Los Angeles, California

“It’s complicated,” Louis said without prompting after the song finished.

Liam looked at him in blatant confusion. “What is?”

“The—” Louis stopped short, not sure how to explain. “It’s a coincidence,” he added unhelpfully.

“What is?” Liam asked again.

“The date of the song,” Louis struggled to explain. “Harry didn’t know that was the day Griffiths tried to call him. The song wasn’t about that.”

For Harry, at least, but Harry’s songs had always carried a note of ambiguity, a willingness to bend themselves to interpretation. For Louis, the song meant something very different.

“Maybe this is some sort of cosmic punishment,” Louis mused. It was clear from one look at Liam’s face that he wasn’t following Louis’s train of thought in the slightest. “Never mind. We should go in.”
They sprinted up the front walk together in the pissing rain and huddled on the stoop, waiting to be let in. It was a few minutes before Briana answered the door. She was out of breath and her hair was still a disaster; Louis wondered if she’d been banking on them arriving late.

“Freddie’s in the living room,” Briana said without properly greeting either of them, even though she hadn’t seen Liam in close to a year. Maybe longer. “I’m still finishing breakfast, so you can just….”

She trailed off as she led them into the sitting room where Freddie was plopped down on the rug in front of the telly with an array of toys spread out all around him. His eyes brightened when he spotted Louis, and he jumped up, running over at a full-sprint for a hug.

“Freddie,” Briana started to say, “don’t—” but Louis waved her off.

“We can keep him occupied for a bit, it’s fine.” Louis picked Freddie up as she walked back to the kitchen and settled him on his hip, turning him around to face Liam, who stared down at the child with an optimistic smile.

“Remember me?” Liam asked.

Freddie shook his head and both Liam and Louis laughed.

“That’s your Uncle Liam,” Louis informed him. “It’s been a while since he’s been around. He mostly lives in England with me.”

“You live together?” Freddie asked, scrunching his brows together in confusion.

“No,” Louis replied hastily, not wanting Freddie to get the wrong idea. It would be just his luck if Freddie accidentally told Briana or Stace that he and Liam were cohabitating now. “We have separate houses, but we just live close by to each other.”

“Oh.” Louis couldn’t tell from Freddie’s face (which seemed to resemble his own more and more the older the boy got) whether he truly understood or not. “Do you want to watch Stampson with me?”

“Sure.”

The three of them ended up sat against the sofa on the floor in front of the telly with Freddie in the middle, entranced by some hyper-colorful clay-animated puppetry that Louis couldn’t make heads or tails of. All he knew is that the voices made his head hurt a little and that he was grateful for a reprieve when Briana finally came back in to fetch them for breakfast.

Briana had gone all out despite it only being the four of them: the dining room table was covered in an assortment of breakfast foods buffet style. Briana took Freddie from Louis with a little bit of effort and sat him down in a booster seat on one of the chairs before turning back to Louis and Liam, looking a little less frazzled now than she had when she’d let them in.

“Go ahead and help yourselves,” she said, pushing overly large ceramic plates into Louis and Liam’s hands. “We don’t really say grace or anything, so you can start eating whenever.”

Louis felt obligated to pile as much food as he could fit onto his plate, regardless of whether he had the ability to eat it all. Briana had clearly put a lot of work into everything and Louis wondered if it was out of some sort of misplaced guilt over Harry.

That would explain a lot, Louis realised as he stacked his plate high before sitting down across the
table from Freddie. They hadn’t ever really talked about it, but Louis wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that Briana knew more than she was letting on in how the pregnancy had disintegrated what was left of his and Harry’s relationship before the hiatus. Maybe she thought she was to blame in some small part for Harry’s hospitalisation, though she didn’t have all the details.

Louis ate silently while Liam engaged in small talk with Briana over the breakfast table, having missed the chance to exchange pleasantries when they’d first arrived. The two of them had been relatively friendly before Freddie; it was hard not to be, once Liam had removed the stick from his arse and learned to have a little fun—all thanks to Louis, of course.

Finally, Louis couldn’t stand the waiting anymore. “Harry’s not doing very well,” he blurted out, cutting Liam off midsentence. “I’m a little worried about him, honestly.”

Liam seemed surprised by the admission, but Louis only had eyes for Briana, who immediately glanced down at her plate to avoid meeting his gaze. Definitely guilty, then. Surprisingly guilty, actually, for someone who didn’t know all the details of why Harry was in hospital in the first place. Louis’s eyes narrowed.

“Who’s Harry?” Freddie asked bluntly, drawing all attention to his syrup-stained face.

Briana leaned over to fret at him with a napkin while Louis struggled to think of an answer. Briana beat him to it. “One of Daddy’s friends,” she said placatingly. “Like Uncle Liam.”

Freddie contemplated that for a few seconds, just long enough for Briana to finish wiping his face. “Does he live in England, too?”

Briana shot Louis a pleading glance. He did his best to take over the explanation. “Er, no,” Louis replied hesitantly, wishing he’d had the foresight to not bring up Harry at all—at least not while Freddie was still in the same room. “He lives here, actually.”

“Then why doesn’t he ever come visit?”

Louis didn’t have a good answer for that.

“Maybe you could come meet him,” Liam suggested out of nowhere. He looked to Louis first, then Briana for permission. “I mean, we were planning on stopping by anyway before I went to the airport,” he explained. “This way Louis could spend a bit more time with Freddie before I leave.”

Briana seemed apprehensive still, but she eventually nodded. Freddie agreed as well, seemingly content to go along with whatever the adults decided. He was an unusually agreeable child considering his parents’ temperaments.

“Finish up your breakfast, Freddie,” Briana cajoled, effectively silencing the child for the time being. “We need to get you ready still.” She turned back to Louis and Liam again. “Speaking of which, what are you planning on doing for the day?”

“The pier?” Louis suggested. It was one of the few things he could think of that he thought a five-year-old might enjoy.

“In this weather?”

“It’s just a bit of rain,” Louis replied defensively. “It’s not like it’s a hurricane out there.”

“Well, it’s kind of…public, isn’t it?” Briana pointed out, never one to let an argument go if there was more conflict that could be wrung out of it. “What if someone recognizes you?”
“So what if they do?” Louis replied with a shrug. “It’s not like my being in LA is a big secret anymore.” Which wasn’t to say that he wanted to be spotted, especially not with Freddie in tow, but it wasn’t fair to deprive the child of a day of fun outside just because there was the slight possibility someone might ask for a photo.

Briana still looked a bit uneasy, but Liam was quick to jump in, reassuring her with a mouth full of pancakes that everything would be fine and that Freddie would have loads of fun.

After they finished eating, Liam was the one to scoop Freddie up in his arms and dash upstairs to his room to get him ready to go, making plane noises the whole way up the stairs. Briana and Louis trailed a little bit behind, both of them hanging back near the open door while Liam coaxed Freddie into suitable clothes for the rainy weather.

Louis was surprised when Briana reached up to tug gently at his elbow, trying to get his attention. “What?” he asked, a bit rudely, but she didn’t seem to take offence.

“I think you should tell Harry how you feel about him.”

Louis went cold. “You don’t know anything about that,” he replied sharply on instinct.

Briana frowned but refused to let go of his arm. “I’m not stupid,” she replied, but the words lacked the heat behind them that Louis had grown accustomed to. This time, she just sounded sad.

“I will,” Louis promised her. “But it’s not…now isn’t the right time.” He knew he sounded more like he was trying to convince himself rather than her.

“When is the right time?” Briana challenged him.

Louis didn’t have an answer.
They were barely two steps out the door—Freddie riding piggyback on Louis as they traversed the front walk—when Liam suggested listening to another song.

Louis shot him a dirty look, thankful that Freddie was unable to see his face. “I’d rather not ruin the mood,” he said forbiddingly.

Liam made a face but backed off after that.

The weather tipped in their favour once they left Briana’s, transitioning to just a light sprinkling of rain when they reached the pier. Freddie seemed entranced by every puddle on the boardwalk, jumping merrily into each one they passed and giggling like he’d never had more fun in his life. Louis was tempted to forego the pier entirely and just keep Freddie entertained right there in the car park where a small lake had started to slowly form amidst the cars.

“Must be nice,” Liam remarked as he watched the boy splash around with an amused smile.

“What?” Louis replied.

“The rain,” Liam replied cryptically, before explaining further: “It’s such a novelty here. At home you’re lucky if you get to see the sun once a week.”

“At least we don’t take a bit of nice weather for granted,” Louis retorted, though with how much fun Freddie seemed to be having, he had to wonder if his son was the one who had the better deal between them.

When they reached the pier, Louis was extra grateful he’d taken Freddie to the beach when the weather had actually been pleasant. The sea was a steely-grey now, the horizon obscured by a thick layer of clouds. The lights of the carnival rides out at the end of the pier seemed all-the-brighter thanks to the cloud coverage, though, and Freddie was overjoyed when he caught sight of the Ferris wheel in the distance.

He tugged insistently at Louis’s hand. “Can we go?” he pleaded.

“Course,” Louis reassured him. “But let’s wait for a bit, all right?” Louis didn’t want to start the day off by waiting in line to ride the only attraction Freddie could actually go on.

Freddie, proving once again that he was an inhumanly docile child, nodded happily and tugged
Louis toward the aquarium instead. Apparently, he’d been there before with a few of his nannies. He liked the tropical fish well enough, but he loved the sea turtles, squealing excitedly every time one strayed close to the glass.

It made Louis think of Harry, and he wished it didn’t. Part of him wished Harry could have been there though, too, with Freddie and Liam. It was the kind of scene he’d fantasised about back when they were teenagers, and maybe if he’d made different choices, he could have had it.

Louis did his best to keep Harry far from his mind as they moved on from the aquarium to the carousel. They ended up riding it about a half a dozen times—split between Liam and himself—before taking Freddie to play some of the easier carnival games.

Liam somehow managed to win a massive stuffed turtle for Freddie on one of the more difficult ones and then volunteered to bring it back to the car while Louis and Freddie hopped into the queue for the Ferris wheel. Louis handed over his keys and told Liam to be quick about it. “I’m not waiting around for you if they let us on before you make it back.”

Liam rolled his eyes and jogged away.

They were almost to the front of the queue—with Liam having been gone a solid ten minutes—when Louis felt a light tap against his shoulder. He was already expecting the slightly starstruck expressions of the two teenagers standing behind him when he turned around. Nevertheless, it was still strange to be confronted with the fact that a number of his fans hadn’t even been pre-teens when One Direction had been formed on the X Factor.

“Um, could we have a picture?” the blonder of the two asked. She glanced nervously from Louis to Freddie, as if second-guessing her decision to confront Louis while he was out with his kid, but it was a bit late for that now.

“We’re really big fans,” the other girl cut in. She was practically vibrating as she stared up at Louis, waiting for an answer.

Louis knew he was well within his rights to refuse, but he didn’t really think it would hurt to appease the two of them with a quick photo. He knew all too well the fury of a teenage girl scorned.

“Sure,” he replied easily, clutching Freddie’s hand that much tighter as he leaned toward them. “Just a quick one, then.” Louis stood by patiently while they scrambled to get their phones out and then smiled for two pictures in quick succession.

He resumed his place in the queue once finished and pointedly ignored the curious stares from the other patrons around them, scanning the crowd for any sign of Liam. He wasn’t expecting one of the girls to pipe up again only a few seconds later, her shrill voice carrying through the crowd.

“You’re here because of Harry, right?”

Louis turned slowly to look at her, his expression restrained but just barely on the right side of polite. “Yeah,” he replied. “I am.”

The bleach blonde looked appropriately cowed by the response, but her dishwater friend wasn’t to be dissuaded. “Is he gonna be okay?” she demanded. “Is like, the stuff they said about him on the news—is that all true?”

Her friend elbowed her hard in the side with a glare, but the damage was already done.
Louis felt his expression contort into something a bit meaner, and his tone was icy as he replied. “It’s not really my place to talk about it, but he’s recovering. I’ll pass on the well wishes. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

The queue moved up again, saving Louis the trouble of further explanation. He was even more relieved when they got to the loading area at the very front to find Liam waiting there for them with a ride attendant.

“You all right?” Liam asked worriedly, catching on to Louis’s mood the second they stepped into the cabin together.

Louis just nodded and pulled Freddie up into his lap, where he curled up happily to stare out at the scenery outside.

“Really,” Liam pressed. “Did something happen?”

“Got recognised,” Louis told him. “They were asking about Harry. It was fine, just. You know.”

“Ah.”

There wasn’t much else they could say with Freddie sitting right there, so Louis turned to point out various landmarks from the cabin window instead. The weather had cleared up considerably over the course of the morning, making the pier and its surroundings a sight worthy of seeing. Freddie seemed to enjoy it at any rate, and that was the most important thing.

There wasn’t much else left to do at the pier after they disembarked the Ferris wheel, so they decided to drive to a place nearby for ice cream instead. The establishment in question was somewhere Louis knew Harry used to frequent, and he realised with a nostalgic pang that they still had the chocolate honeycomb ice cream on the menu.

Louis ordered it despite the fact that the look on Liam’s face had never made him feel more pathetic in his life. Freddie chose a hideous concoction of bubblegum and mango that didn’t sound appetising in the least to Louis, while Liam went for a much more conservative mint chocolate chip cone.

They ate in the back of the car, not wanting to run the risk of running into more fans. Louis stared down at his cup in defeat, only halfway through but already regretting his insane impulse decision to purchase Harry’s favourite flavour, because well—Harry’s favourite flavour was fucking disgusting.

Louis finished it anyway, mostly out of defiance. He knew he wouldn’t be able to stand the sight of Liam’s smug expression if he didn’t make it through.

Freddie, despite all odds, actually seemed to enjoy his odd combination of flavours quite a bit, but by the time he got close to finishing, the ice cream had almost entirely melted, and he was well on his way to nodding off. Only Liam’s quick reflexes saved them from having to clean a bright pink and orange soup from off the car’s upholstery.

Liam set the cup down on the centre console with a pointed look aimed at Louis.

“What?” Louis demanded, careful to keep his voice low so he wouldn’t startle Freddie.

“I think you should listen to the next song,” Liam insisted.

It took everything in Louis’s power not to roll his eyes. “I think you’re more obsessed with
“listening to them than me,” Louis grumbled, but he was already reaching into his pocket to pull his mobile out.

Liam smirked. “So you are admitting that you’re obsessed, then.”

“Not what I meant.”

“Sure.”

Louis glanced up at him with a glare. “Do you want to listen or not?”

Liam waved a hand. “Go right on ahead.”

May 27, 2014

London, England

They were lying in Harry’s bed together when they got the call.

“‘Lo?” Harry said through a yawn. His face changed from relaxed to wide-eyed in an instant.

“What?”

Louis rolled over to face the wall, already well aware of the news Harry was undoubtedly receiving about the video he’d leaked with Modest’s help.

“No,” Harry was saying. “No, I haven’t—yeah, he’s right here. Look, I’m gonna call you back, all right? Okay, yeah, thanks. Bye.”

Louis didn’t move a muscle.

“Lou?” Harry’s voice was shaky. He sounded near tears already and Louis couldn’t handle that.

“That was Liam. He said TMZ or someone got a hold of a video of you and Zayn smoking in Peru.” It would have been evident even if Louis hadn’t already known about the situation that Harry wasn’t referring to their usual steady diet of cigarettes before and after a show.

Louis was silent for too long before he realised it would only make things worse if he didn’t respond at all. “Have Modest called you yet?” he wondered.

Harry didn’t reply right away, but suddenly there were hands on Louis’s shoulder, pulling him round to face Harry again. “Are you even listening to me?” Harry asked.

“I heard you,” Louis replied calmly. “That’s why I asked if you’d heard from Modest.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Why aren’t you reacting? It’s like you don’t even care that this has happened!”

Louis shrugged morosely. “It is what it is.” He hadn’t meant it as a joke, but Harry suddenly looked furious.

“This isn’t a game, Louis. This affects all of us, not just you and Zayn! And I told you—”

“I gave them the video,” Louis blurted out without thinking. He was pretty sure he would have said
almost anything in that moment to stop Harry from yelling.

It worked. The words died on Harry’s lips, but now Harry was staring at him, confused and upset, and Louis didn’t have a good answer for why he’d done what he’d done because if he told Harry the truth—the real honest truth—it would destroy him.

“I had to,” Louis said before Harry could demand an explanation. “They were going to—they had something worse, so. I had to.”

“What do you mean worse?” Harry demanded. He’d scooted away from Louis over the course of their argument until he was nearly falling off the edge of the bed, but he didn’t seem to notice. When Louis didn’t answer, Harry’s expression hardened. “Oh, you’re unbelievable. What, were they going to print some nonsense about our secret ‘relationship’?”

Louis still didn’t say a word, but something must have changed in his face, because Harry suddenly looked crestfallen.

“Please tell me that’s not what this is about.” He was near tears. “Louis, please.”

Louis stared back at him, at a loss for words. He had to choose now whether to come clean or continue with the lie he’d concocted along with Griffiths to prevent Harry and the other lads from learning the truth behind the leak.

“Another video from Wellington surfaced.” Louis was both surprised and a little bit ashamed at how much easier it was now to lie directly to Harry’s face, even knowing that everything he was saying would only make Harry hate him that much more. “And the tabs wouldn’t let Modest buy them off this time, cause apparently we’re bigshots now and they can make more off selling us out than blackmailing us into buying the footage. So I offered a trade instead.”

“Would it really have been so bad?” Harry asked. He sounded genuinely distraught.

The irony was that if the scenario Louis had come up with had been true, he really might have caved and dealt with the consequences of their relationship being revealed to the world. But instead, he was sat in front of Harry making himself into a villain because he couldn’t bear to imagine what would result if Harry learned the truth: that one of his most private moments had been bargained away to the tabloids because some dickhead wanted to make easy money.

Louis couldn’t imagine telling Harry that to his face. And he couldn’t bring himself to regret his decision, even now that Harry was staring at him in abject misery, believing that Louis would rather sell himself out than show the world that he was in love with Harry.

Louis was sliding out of bed and back into his clothes before Harry could muster up enough energy to speak again.

“You need to stay the fuck away from me,” Harry said, stumbling over his words as he gathered up the sheets and wrapped them tightly around his shoulders. He looked shell-shocked, like he was afraid Louis might physically harm him, even though Louis knew that wasn’t the intent.

“Okay,” Louis replied. If Harry wanted a fight, he wouldn’t get one. Louis had already made peace with his decision.

February 11, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis was breathing a bit harder when it was over, and he didn’t want to look up to meet Liam’s eyes.

The music had been, as Louis had expected, an echo of sorts of the fiftieth track with a haunting overture and a lingering outro that made Louis want to cry. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

“You all right?” Liam asked.

“Peachy,” Louis replied automatically. His eyes opened to find Liam staring back at him in concern. “I don’t know,” he amended. “I don’t know how to feel about it. I still don’t feel like I did the wrong thing. Not entirely anyway.”

“You could have told him,” Liam insisted. “You still could.”

Louis frowned. “Harry doesn’t give a damn about some dumb mistake I made seven years ago.”

Liam put his face in his hands. “Clearly, Louis, he does—or else he wouldn’t have written a damn song about it.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Liam said pointedly. “‘Oh’.”

Louis’s frown deepened. “Well, what am I even meant to say? ‘Sorry I didn’t tell you about your sex tape, please forgive me’?”

Liam looked at Louis like he was an idiot. “Yeah, actually, I think that’d be a good start.” He glanced down at his watch and winced. “Look, we should probably talk about this on the way back to the hospital. My flight leaves in a few hours, so.”

“Right.”

They climbed out of the backseat and into the front after making sure Freddie was properly buckled in and still fast asleep. Liam started back in on his unwanted advice almost as soon as Louis started the engine.

“If Harry could really see things from your perspective, I think he’d understand why you did what you did. But he’s never going to know if you keep hiding everything from him.”

Louis sighed. “I’ll try to talk to him again, but it’s not like he makes it easy.”

“So don’t be such a push-over,” Liam replied. “He’s the one cuffed to a hospital bed. Just stand in front of him and say your piece.”

Louis almost slammed into a tree. “He’s what?” He glanced over at Liam to find the other man nervously scratching at his beard.

“I thought you knew about the whole you-know-what thing.”

“I didn’t know it was that serious,” Louis admitted. He’d convinced himself that Harry being put on suicide watch was par for the course for someone who’d made an attempt already; he wasn’t sure that applied to actually being restrained to a bed. “What does that even mean?” Louis asked
worriedly. “Did he—did he try to do something after he woke up?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Liam said. It wasn’t a definite no, and just that fact made Louis’s heart throb painfully in his chest. “I think it’s just a precaution, but I know they’re worried about him.”

“But he seemed fine,” Louis protested weakly.

“Yeah. But he seemed fine the first time around, too.”

It was quiet after that, Louis too caught up in his own thoughts to ask Liam any more questions. Freddie woke up while they were stuck at a traffic light, disoriented and teary for the first time that Louis had seen since he was a baby. Liam dug out some snacks to console him while reminding him that they were going to visit ‘Uncle Harry’. Louis winced at the term of endearment, but Liam didn’t seem to notice.

“Is Uncle Harry nice?” Freddie wondered as he chomped down on a graham cracker cookie.

“Yep,” Liam replied easily. “But he’s sick right now, so we have to be extra nice to him so he feels better.”

“Why did he get sick?”

“Um.” Liam looked at Louis for help, and finding none coming, turned back to face Freddie. “Sometimes when people get too sad, it can make them sick.”

“Oh.” Louis could practically hear the gears turning in Freddie’s head. “Can I give him a hug to feel better? Mommy always hugs me when I’m sick.”

“Yeah, Freddie, I think that’s a great idea.”
It had been less than a full day since Louis had last seen Harry, but when they walked into his room at Cedars-Sinai that afternoon, his first impression was that Harry somehow looked exponentially worse than he had the night before.

That worried Louis, though he tried to hide it behind a soft smile as he followed Liam inside with Freddie’s hand clutched tightly in his own. Louis maintained his carefully pleasant expression as he glanced down at the linens on Harry’s bed, under which Harry’s right arm was still carefully concealed. Now that he knew the reason for that, Louis couldn’t stop himself from staring at it, wondering what would have to change before Harry was allotted his own freedom once more.

“Hey,” Liam said cheerily as he sat himself at the side of the bed. “You might remember Freddie, but it’s been a while.”

Harry’s eyes brightened at the sight of the shy child clinging to Louis’s leg. “He looks just like you,” he observed, causing a pang in Louis’s chest that made it suddenly very difficult to breathe. “Hi, Freddie,” he said with a little wave.

“Hi,” Freddie said back in a quiet voice. “Are you Harry?”

“Yeah,” Harry replied, glancing up once at Louis in confusion before meeting Freddie’s eyes again. “I guess you wouldn’t remember me, but I met you a few times when you were just a baby.”

“Fred, why don’t you hop up on the bed with Harry,” Liam suggested. He looked at Louis momentarily and then at Harry. “That’s all right, isn’t it?” he asked.

Harry nodded, looking a bit wary as Liam helped Freddie up into the crook of his left arm, where he could be sat comfortably. He relaxed a bit once the boy leaned into him, trusting as ever. And Harry had always had a natural affinity for children.

“Comfortable?” he asked, smiling a bit when Freddie nodded. “Why don’t you tell me about your day, hmm?”

Freddie took a little bit of cajoling to get into it, but after a few rough starts he managed to unspool the tale of visiting the pier for Harry while Liam and Louis sat and listened, filling in the bits of the story Freddie had already forgotten when necessary.
Harry was animated all throughout, looking a sight better than the wan shadow of himself he’d resembled when they’d first come in. Louis almost didn’t want to take Freddie back, if this was the result of bringing him here to see Harry. Louis found himself wondering, a bit crazily, if the hospital would let them bring in a cat. Harry liked cats. Maybe having something to focus on other than himself would help.

Following Freddie’s story, Harry and Liam ended up discussing the latter’s return to the UK, and his plans for the future. It was surprisingly pleasant, doubly so now that Liam had told Louis about the tenuous relationship he’d had with Harry prior to his hospitalisation. Looking at them now as they talked about Liam’s children and his current break from music, Louis might never have guessed that they’d been anything less than good friends prior to all this.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t long before the conversation drifted to a less than safe subject: namely, Louis’s impending departure.

“It’s still being finalised, but I should be back on schedule for the next leg,” Louis informed them as he picked at a stray thread trailing down the leg of his trackies.

“That’s fairly soon, isn’t it?” There was an edge to Harry’s otherwise perfectly polite tone that made Louis’s head snap up in reflex.

“Yeah,” he replied cautiously. “A bit, yeah.” He’d been trying not to think about it, but his time in LA really was rapidly depleting. He’d be boarding a plane to South America before he even knew it, and the thought filled him with nothing but dread when there should have been only excitement.

“Well, that’ll be nice for you,” Harry said breezily, while Liam glanced between him and Louis with a vaguely panicked expression. “Getting away from LA again. You’ve never really liked it here.”

Louis stared at Harry hard, his brows creasing with the weight of all the things he wished he could say. Did Harry really think he wanted to leave? That he was running? They’d been over all this already; did Harry really not believe that Louis was there because he wanted to be?

“Why are you leaving?” a high-pitched voice suddenly interrupted from out of nowhere, and right. Freddie.

It was a consequence of not spending as much time with Freddie as Louis wished he could that he sometimes forgot how old Freddie really was. Louis hadn’t thought about the fact that the boy was old enough now that there were certain topics they couldn’t safely discuss around him anymore without having to explain so he didn’t get the wrong idea. Or the right one, in this case.

Apparently, Harry had forgotten about Freddie, too. His expression turned regretful. “Sorry,” he mumbled just as Freddie started to cry.

Louis quickly stood and scooped the boy up. “Excuse us,” he said, mostly to Liam, who had already started to get up himself to help.

Louis rushed the crying child out into the corridor and tucked Freddie’s face into his neck, gently rocking him from side to side as if he were still just a baby.

“You know I won’t be gone forever, right?” Louis reassured him. “It’ll be just like before. I’ll come back to visit whenever I can, and you’ll still see me on your mom’s phone, remember?”

“I don’t want you to leave,” Freddie said stubbornly, his fists curling into the fabric of Louis’s shirt and holding tight.
Louis sighed and carefully lowered them both until he was sat on the floor against the outer wall of
Harry’s suite.

“Freddo,” Louis tried, “you want to listen to a song with me?” It wouldn’t be a happy one, he was
certain of that, but it wasn’t like Freddie knew enough about the meanings behind them to care
about them.

“Yours?” Freddie asked, curious enough to let go of Louis so that he could pull back and examine
his father’s face for clues.

Louis shook his head. “Harry wrote it,” he explained. “So it’s very special. Would you like to hear
it?”

Freddie still looked a little sceptical as he nodded in assent, but he’d stopped crying for the
moment, and that was what counted.

“All right, just put one of these into your ear,” Louis said, carefully helping Freddie put in one of
the earbuds so he didn’t accidentally jam it in too hard or drop it onto the (no doubt) unsanitary
hospital tile. “Ready?”

Freddie nodded, his face eager and optimistic.

July 10, 2014

Madrid, Spain

Harry was tired. They were all tired. And this time, Louis was even more exhausted than the rest of
them. But that didn’t mean Harry gave Louis any slack when he finally arrived at the venue for
soundcheck after flying in from Manchester for Eleanor’s graduation.

Louis retreated to Liam’s side instead, choosing to stare pointedly at Harry from across the stage
while Harry ignored him just as blatantly in turn, neither of them willing to open their mouth for
fear of sparking yet another argument right before the show.

Harry, who usually stuck with Niall whenever he and Louis were fighting, chose this time to cling
to Zayn—literally. Harry was all over the darker-haired lad, sending pangs of jealousy coursing
through Louis’s chest as they got ready to perform.

They didn’t talk about Zayn, as an unspoken rule.

After Harry and he had come clean about being more than friends to the rest of the band, it hadn’t
escaped Louis’s notice that Zayn and Harry had gotten that much closer. And Louis had his
suspicions about what went on behind closed doors.

He knew if he asked Harry about it—or hell, even Zayn—that he would get an honest answer, but
Louis wasn’t sure he wanted to know the truth. The thought of Harry fooling around with someone
else halfway around the world didn’t hurt nearly as much as knowing that Harry might be sleeping
with Zayn just a hotel room away.
“You all right?” Liam asked quietly as they headed for the green room to get dressed.

Louis just nodded, unable to muster up enough energy for anything more.

The show made things easier at first. It was simple to let himself get carried away with the distraction of performing in front of a crowd of people until he’d nearly forgotten all about the tension between himself and Harry.

But the look Zayn gave Harry between songs didn’t escape Louis’s notice. Nor did the way Harry changed the words during Best Song Ever to ‘just like he already owned it’, complete with a provocative crotch-grab to boot.

Suddenly Louis was furious.

He managed to curb his rage until the five of them were in the dressing room together after the show, getting ready to leave, at which point it all came tumbling out in a rush.

“Are you bloody thick?” Louis demanded, whirling on Harry, who—judging by the expression on his face—hadn’t seen the outburst coming.

Harry stared at him in stunned silence for a few seconds before opening his mouth to answer, but Zayn cut in before he could get out a single syllable.

“Lay off, Louis,” Zayn said dully. “It’s not his fault you had to spend the day with Eleanor.”

“That has nothing to do with this,” Louis retorted, flustered now that Zayn had unexpectedly come to Harry’s defence. “And neither do you, so why don’t you stay out of shit that doesn’t concern you, yeah?”

Zayn didn’t seem fazed by Louis’s reply, but Harry pushed him toward the door with a worried expression before he could properly respond. “We’ll meet you out by the cars,” he said in a quiet voice, giving both Liam and Niall pleading glances in turn.

“You sure?” Niall asked, even though he was already halfway out the door, never the one to gawp at a bit of a row if he could help it.

“Yeah.” Harry stared down at the floor as he waited for the three of them to leave, his face slowly reddening with some unidentifiable emotion he was bottling up for the moment. The anger slipped out of him like steam escaping a kettle as soon as they were gone. “You don’t have any right to talk to me like that.” He lifted his eyes, meeting Louis’s gaze head-on with a stubborn glare of his own.

“You don’t have any right to flaunt our—whatever—in front of thousands of people!” Louis countered, feeling a bit off-balance both physically and emotionally as he flapped his arms in emphasis.

“What I did has absolutely nothing to do with us,” Harry snapped. “The whole world doesn’t revolve around you and whether you want to be honest about yourself,” he added.

Louis gaped at him, all his carefully organised arguments about it being unwise to antagonise Modest so publicly now completely vanished from his brain. “That’s—it’s not as if I don’t want to,” he replied, just a bit too late.

Harry had already half-turned, looking away. “I think it’s pretty clear now what your priorities are,” he said coldly.
It wasn’t hard to connect Harry’s statement to Louis’s appearance at Eleanor’s graduation. “It’s not like I wanted to go,” Louis said, striving for appeasement now. Arguing wasn’t getting them anywhere.

His attempt at peace only had the opposite effect. When Harry whirled around again to face him, he looked angrier than ever.

“How long are you planning on keeping this up, Louis? Am I going to have to play best man at your wedding after you’ve just blown me in the toilets? Are you planning on us still fooling around in ten years when you start popping out kids with Eleanor?”

“I’m not—we don’t even touch each other,” Louis spluttered, taken aback by Harry’s accusations.

Harry’s expression didn’t waver. “Well that doesn’t seem very fair to Eleanor, does it?” he replied in a flat tone.

“So what, you want me to sleep with her now?” Louis asked, incredulous.

Harry stared back at him coolly. “I don’t want anything from you,” he said definitively before turning on his heel and marching away.

February 11, 2021
Los Angeles, California

“What did you think?” Louis asked Freddie as he took the earphone out.

Freddie shrugged, but Louis could tell it was more out of shyness than actual uncertainty. “It was sad, I guess,” he said.

“Right. Did you like the song?”

“Yeah.”

“Sometimes it helps to write or draw or make music when you’re sad,” Louis told him. “You like drawing, right? That’s what your mom says. That you’ll make a proper artist someday.”

Freddie nodded uncertainly. “You write songs when you’re sad?” he asked tentatively.

“Sometimes,” Louis replied. “But writing songs when you’re happy can be good, too. It’s just another way for you to show people how you feel without words.”

“Harry wanted to show people he was sad?” Freddie questioned.

Louis forced a smile. “Yeah, I suppose so,” he said. “When people get hurt sometimes, they just need to tell someone. But it’s not always easy to talk about it.”

“Oh.”

Louis couldn’t really tell whether Freddie actually understood what he was trying to say, but he supposed it didn’t really matter. Freddie had stopped crying, and that was the important bit.
“Ready to go back in?”

Freddie nodded. Louis shifted him up a bit and carefully stood, afraid despite his better sense that if he put Freddie down for even a second that he’d immediately burst into tears.

Louis opened the door quietly, expecting to find Harry and Liam where he’d left them, perhaps in the middle of a stilted conversation or an awkward silence while they waited for him to come back in. What he wasn’t expecting was Liam perched on Harry’s bed with his mobile out, presumably showing him photos of his kids while Harry smiled and laughed along with each one.

They were the perfect picture of close friends. Brothers, even. Like they used to be.

There was a flash of heat deep in Louis’s gut, quickly rising as he looked on at the scene. They both looked up at him, almost expectant, but there was nothing Louis could think to say that wouldn’t come out more hostile than intended.

He just couldn’t understand why Liam was allowed to slip back into Harry’s life like this while Louis was barred from getting close at every turn, no matter how hard he tried to patch things up between them. Even Niall, who had been better friends with Harry than either Louis or Liam in recent years, had received little more than a promise that things would go back to the way they were eventually.

“We should probably get going,” Louis said stiffly, nodding in Liam’s direction. “Wouldn’t want you to miss your flight.”

“Yeah.” Liam stepped away from Harry with a bit of a guilty expression, one he wiped from his face before turning back toward Harry to lean down for a bit of an awkward one-armed hug. “It was good seeing you again,” Liam said genuinely, though it didn’t feel quite appropriate as a farewell for the situation. “I’ll ring you the next time I’m in the States, how about it?”

“Course,” Harry replied with a warm smile. “Have a safe flight.”

Louis almost felt like crying himself after all was said and done and they were packed into the car again, on their way to LAX with Freddie safely buckled into the backseat.

“When did you and Harry get so friendly?” Louis asked Liam in a mild tone. He was careful not to clue Freddie in on the tension between them to the extent that he could help it; kids were frustratingly perceptive that way.

Liam shifted uncomfortably in the passenger seat. “It’s complicated,” he said.

“Well, uncomplicate it, then,” Louis snapped, a little harsher than he’d meant to. He glanced back to check on Freddie, who was still occupied with one of his colouring books and hadn’t seemed to notice the argument quietly going on in the front seat.

Louis gave Liam another pressing glance before starting to drive, knowing that Liam wouldn’t let himself leave the car without giving Louis some kind of answer.

“You remember how I had issues with depression,” Liam said, spelling out the last word, much to Louis’s amusement.

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, Harry knows I get it.”
“Does that mean Harry’s depressed?” Louis asked. It was kinder than what he could’ve asked, which was if Liam had been suicidal at some point during their career. It wouldn’t have been unthinkable for Liam to say that he had, and that was half the reason Louis didn’t ask.

“I don’t really know that it’s the same thing,” Liam replied, “but the twenty-seven club does exist for a reason. Maybe Harry would have struggled even without any of the outside stuff just because of his brain or something. I dunno.”

Louis was silent as he contemplated that possibility. The implications of Harry choosing his twenty-seventh birthday hadn’t escaped his notice, but Louis had chosen to file it away as mere coincidence. Maybe it hadn’t been.

Louis remembered how hard things had been around twenty-seven for himself—so much so that when he’d confided in Lottie about it, she’d sent him some article about how the human brain goes through a series of changes as it finally matures that sends people’s mental states into temporary turmoil. Louis had thought it sounded a bit silly even though he’d experienced it himself, but maybe that really was a big part of why Harry was so…different now.

“Do you think he’ll ever be okay again?” Louis asked. “Do you think he’ll ever go back to normal?”

It took a troublingly long time for Liam to answer. “I think if he has the right people around to support him that he’ll be okay.”
Getting Liam to his terminal ended up being an ordeal that took nearly half an hour on its own, and by the end of it, Louis was almost glad to say his goodbyes. But then Louis realised as he hugged Liam in farewell that he would be nearly alone again, and that he had no idea when he would next see Liam, and there was a tell-tale behind Louis’s eyes as he pulled away.

“Crying over me already, Tommo?” Liam joked, noticing immediately despite Louis’s best efforts to stay composed.

“Like we both don’t know you’ll be in tears before take-off,” Louis shot back. “Give my love to the kids, all right?”

“Yeah, of course. Bye, Freddo. Be good to your dad, yeah?” Liam cast one last glance at Louis before stepping away from the car. “Good luck with Harry, mate.”

“Thanks.”

Louis waited until Liam had disappeared before pulling back out into the stream of traffic, taking the opportunity to point out a plane that was just taking off from the end of the runway ahead of them to Freddie, who was fascinated by the sight.

They headed straight for Briana’s afterward, Louis correctly anticipating Freddie’s fussiness just as soon as he got hungry again.

She was waiting practically at the door for them when they got back, and she pulled Freddie inside quickly, taking him from Louis without a word.

Louis wasn’t expecting much more than a hasty goodbye before being dismissed, so he was surprised when Briana looked up at him expectantly after determining that Freddie wanted dinner.

“You could always stay,” she said quietly, leaning down to give Freddie a hug. “If you want to, I mean.”

“Yeah, okay,” Louis replied, surprised by the invitation. “Of course.”

He stepped inside after them, still a bit hesitant even with Briana taking the lead, and helped her get Freddie settled down in front of the telly again, this time with a game of Minecraft. Louis thought the game seemed far too complicated for a child that was nowhere near hitting double
digits, but Freddie seemed oddly at ease with a gaming controller in his hand. Kids.

Louis ended up following Briana into the kitchen to help with dinner, falling into a routine that hadn’t been a part of his life in a decade. She seemed a little surprised by his offering of help, but merely handed him a cutting board and some vegetables as she got to work on the harder bits of the pasta dish she was preparing.

“Can I talk to you about something?” she asked after a few minutes of silence had passed.

Louis paused with the knife in mid-air for a moment before resuming chopping, striving for nonchalance. “Yeah, of course,” he replied. He wanted to ask what about, just so he wasn’t caught completely off-guard, but worried that if pressed she might decide not to confide in him after all.

Even with Louis’s easy acquiescence, it was another minute or so before Briana finally mustered up the courage to speak. “I talked to Harry about a week before you flew out here,” she said quietly. Her eyes remained focused on the pot she was slowly stirring.

“You—okay.” Louis’s heart had started racing, but he wanted to hear her out. He couldn’t even fathom why Harry or Briana would want to speak to each other, and the timing made Louis even more nervous. A week before Louis landed in LA was less than a week before Harry’s suicide attempt. And why was Briana telling him this now?

“Um.” Briana’s face was twisted up like whatever she wanted to say was physically paining her to give voice to. “He wanted to see Freddie. He asked me if he could see Freddie and I said no.”

It took another minute for that to sink in, for Louis to piece together what Briana had told him with Harry’s playlist, with his need to tie up loose ends. Harry had wanted to see Freddie one more time before he died, Louis realised with a feeling coming over him like he’d just been thrown into a tub of dry-ice. And Briana had said no. And now that she knew Harry was in hospital, she felt guilty for it.

“Why did you tell him no?” Louis asked, trying—and failing—to keep the judgment out of his voice.

Briana turned slowly to face him, her expression pleading for forgiveness. “What was I supposed to say?” she countered. “I haven’t said a word to him since Freddie was a baby. I didn’t even know it was him when I picked up the phone.”

Louis wondered absently how Harry had even got a hold of Briana’s number, but that wasn’t the important bit. “Why did you tell him no?” he asked again.

“Louis—”

“I’m just trying to understand the situation,” he said flatly.

“Because—” Briana cast her eyes around wildly, searching for anything other than Louis’s face to anchor onto as she struggled to answer. “I guess I just thought, well, like, Harry’s always been jealous of what I have. I was scared.”

“Of what?”

Her eyes widened even more, voice shooting up an octave as she replied, loud enough that Louis could no longer hear the sound of Freddie’s game over her talking. “I don’t know, Louis. I wasn’t thinking about any of this when he asked, I just—I didn’t think I’d ever have to explain myself, okay?”
There was a whirlwind of thoughts going round in Louis’s mind: accusations, scoldings, blame. He chose not to utter any of them, not just for Freddie’s sake in the next room, but because Briana hadn’t known what Harry was doing, and she didn’t deserve to feel guilty because of it.

“Okay,” he said in a low voice. “Thanks for telling me.” When Louis looked up at Briana again, her face was bright red, and she was clearly near tears. Louis decided not to comment on it.

Dinner was a tense affair despite Louis’s willingness to let things go. He knew that even though he’d chosen to overlook her decision to not let Harry meet Freddie that he couldn’t actually do anything to make her forgive herself.

Louis decided not to stay too long after they’d eaten. He’d already had Freddie to himself for most of the day, and he could tell that Briana needed some time to recuperate after the argument they’d had over Harry in the kitchen. He could use some time to think, too.

Louis wasn’t in any rush as he drove back to the condo. Some part of him didn’t ever want to make it back. There was an inherent calmness that came with driving through LA, like some part of Louis’s brain shut down every time he was behind the wheel. It was a perfect time, too, to listen to the less haunting songs that Harry had left for him. And Louis already knew the next one was a good one.

July 20, 2014
Manchester, England

“There seems more stressed than I am, love. It’s my wedding, not yours.”

His mum had a point, but that didn’t help curb the anxious butterflies swarming in the pit of Louis’s stomach as he waited for the guests to start arriving. He hadn’t told her exactly why he was so nervous, but he was fairly certain she already knew. The media had had a field day reporting on his apparent feud with Harry in the past few months; this would be the first time the two of them had been spotted together in public outside of strictly work-related events since early last year.

And it was just Louis’s luck that they were fighting, and that Louis was going to have to face Harry in front of all his friends and family and try to act like there was no truth to the rumours at all.

“I’m going to check on the catering,” Louis decided. He ignored his mother’s exasperated expression and walked back into the house to busy himself with actual wedding-related stress instead of Harry-related stress, as the former was a lot easier to deal with.

There was only so much Louis could do in the name of avoidance, however, and when Louis was roped into greeting the guests with the rest of his family, that meant greeting Harry, too. He was suddenly paralysed with fear over doing the wrong thing as Harry approached, sporting the new style he’d taken to recently—because Harry changed his look seemingly with every season.

Louis was fonder of this one than the flannels, even if the hats felt a bit pretentious. It felt more authentic, at least.

Harry barely met Louis’s eyes as he walked past him to warmly greet Jay instead. Louis sulked for a good hour after that until he got so caught up with the ceremony and its aftermath that he nearly forgot Harry was there. And then when he got drunk, later, he really did forget Harry was there, to
the point where, when he walked into Harry having a wee in the upstairs loo, Louis fully thought he was seeing things for at least ten whole seconds.

“Like when we met,” Harry remarked cryptically, and it took Louis another ten seconds to piece together what he meant.


“Good thing. Don’t think your mum would like that much.”

Louis stood in the doorway, silent, as Harry tucked himself back into his trousers and washed his hands. “So you're like, trying to come out properly, then,” he said.

Harry’s head snapped up to meet his eyes. He stared at Louis, hands still under the faucet as the water spilled out over his fingers and down the drain. “I wouldn’t say ‘properly’,” he replied in an even tone.

“What would you say?” Louis asked, wincing at how combative it sounded even to his own ears. “Sorry, I just—I don’t want to fuck this up for you. If this is what you want to do.”

“It is,” Harry said. “But I’m not making a big deal out of it. You don’t have to worry about that. I’m just not going to pretend anymore.”

“Right.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. Louis was too afraid of Harry’s potential reaction to break eye contact, to step away. Finally, Harry finished washing his hands and took a step back from the sink, turning his body to face Louis in full.

“So where do we go from here?” Harry asked.

“For tonight, or…?”

“Let’s say the foreseeable future.”

Louis licked his lips, pressing his fingers more firmly against the doorframe as if intending to borrow some of its stability. “Is ‘I don’t know’ a good answer?”

“It’s an answer,” Harry said.

“Then I don’t know.”

They continued staring at each other, Louis not sure what else to say even though there were a thousand different things running through his head.

“Is that it for us, then?” Harry asked sharply.

“Not if you don’t want it to be,” Louis offered. It was the most he could give. “I’ll still be around, if you want. I’ll always be—around,” he finished lamely. I’ll always be in love with you, was what he wanted to say, but it was too much. He didn’t want to put that weight on Harry, who deserved the freedom to go his own way and find out what he wanted for himself—away from Louis, if that was what it took.

“You’re going to stick with Eleanor?” Harry asked, and surprisingly, there was nothing that felt loaded about his question.
“For now,” Louis told him. “Apparently, Modest is willing to let the arrangement lapse if we decide to call it quits.”

Harry nodded. Louis half-expected some sort of ultimatum, or invitation at least, to follow, but there was nothing of the sort. “I guess I’ll see you downstairs,” he said as he tossed the used hand towel into the laundry basket.

There was a gentle graze of Harry’s hand against Louis’s as he passed through the doorway. Louis supposed that would have to suffice for now.

February 11, 2021
Los Angeles, California

The skies were clear by the time sunset turned to dusk, just as Louis was re-entering Beverly Hills proper. His mobile rang just as he pulled off the freeway, and Louis automatically reached over to answer it before looking at the caller ID on the dash to find out that it was Gemma. Of course it was Gemma.

Louis looked back at the road again, contemplating the consequences of not answering at all. But it wouldn’t be the mature thing to do, and Louis was striving to be an actual adult these days. He hit accept call and waited for Gemma to speak first.

“What happened with Liam?” she demanded, without even a ‘hello’ to soften the blow first.

“What do you mean?”

Gemma scoffed loudly. “My brother’s in a right stroppy mood and the only thing I have to go on is that you brought Liam by before his flight. I’m just trying to connect the dots.”

“You called me because Harry’s throwing a tantrum?” Louis asked. “Another one?”

“Louis—”

“He and Liam were fine,” Louis assured her. “More than fine, really. They seemed closer than Harry did with Niall.”

“Huh.” There was a deafening silence on the other end, extending for so long that Louis thought Gemma had been disconnected. “Harry won’t cooperate with the nurses at all anymore. And he won’t let me or Mum help, either.”

“And you’re telling me this because….”

“Well, what else am I meant to do?” Gemma replied. “You’ve stuck around for this long because you want to help, right? So help.”

Louis sighed and made a right instead of a left, already changing directions to head to Cedars-Sinai instead of the condo. “I’m on my way.”

“Thank you,” Gemma said with an exaggerated sigh of relief.

It wasn’t until Louis got there that he realised the extent of the situation Gemma had described
briefly over the phone. The nurses wanted Harry bathed so they could change his dressings again, but he was being stubbornly uncooperative, and being a celebrity of somewhat sound mind, the hospital staff was loath to actually sedate him for the process. But apparently, the option was already being considered.

“I’d advise not actually telling him about that bit,” Gemma suggested. “If you can’t convince him to let someone help him shower, then—” She shrugged helplessly. “Just try to calm him down, at least.”

“Won’t me being there just make things worse?” Louis pointed out. “You might have forgotten the part where he hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you,” Gemma replied firmly. “Harry doesn’t hate anyone. The worst he could do is not care about you at all. And he clearly cares.”

“Fine,” Louis agreed with a resigned sigh, though he still harboured fears that his own presence in Harry’s life was the reason the younger man was refusing to get better. “I suppose I’ll give it a go.”

Before they went inside, Gemma gave Louis a small blue square and explained that it was an electronic key for unlocking both Harry’s restraints as well as the door to the bathroom. Louis stared down at the tiny object sat in the palm of his hand, suddenly overwhelmed by responsibility, and then pocketed it before he could convince himself he was making a giant mistake.

The scene Louis walked into when he opened the door to Harry’s suite was more startling than surprising. Harry was hysterical. Anne was at his side, in tears as well. Louis stood in the doorway, paralysed by uncertainty, and then Gemma gave him a pointed nudge as she walked into the room behind him.

“Mum, come on, let’s grab a cup of coffee downstairs,” Gemma pleaded.

The way Anne looked at Louis as she passed by confirmed his suspicion that Gemma hadn’t exactly run her idea by Anne before implementing it. Louis could only hope that he didn’t end up sharing the blame if things went horribly wrong.

Louis waited until Anne and Gemma exited the room before walking over to Harry’s bed and sitting down next to him.

Harry, who hadn’t had the opportunity to collect himself after Louis had walked in on him mid-argument and mid-cry, looked an absolute mess, his eyes puffy and red, nose noticeably snotty even as he tried to covertly rub at it with the back of his hand. None of that mattered to Louis, who still had a hard time looking at Harry without being overwhelmed by him in every respect, even after so many years.

“Hi,” Louis said in lieu of a better greeting.

“Hi,” Harry replied miserably.

“You smell,” Louis told him, which got a bit of a laugh out of Harry, at least. “No, I’m serious, you do smell.”

“Well, I’ve been trapped in bed for more than a week, haven’t I?” Harry retorted with a frown, though there was less heat to it than if he’d actually taken offence to the comment.

“And whose fault is that?” Louis pointed out. Harry didn’t respond. “You know it’s not just a matter of hygiene, right?” Louis pointed out. “If it were up to me, I’d let you stink up the place all
day long—god knows I’m used to it after the early days on tour—but the nurses need to change your bandages and make sure nothing’s infected.”

Harry remained stubbornly silent.

“Harry—” Louis tried again, only to be interrupted before he could get another syllable out.

“I don’t want to be naked,” Harry said firmly. “And I don’t want—” His mouth snapped shut before he could finish, as if of its own accord.

“You were never shy about that before,” Louis pointed out. “I think I’ve seen you naked more than I’ve seen you in clothes,” he joked, hoping it wasn’t too much. When Harry still didn’t reply, he held out his hand, showing Harry the key Gemma had given him. “This unlocks your wrist cuff and the shower,” he offered, “if you’d be more comfortable letting me help you instead.” It was a long shot, and Louis had no expectations of Harry accepting.

Harry stared at the key in Louis’s hand for a moment like it was a dangerous reptile before answering. “Okay,” he said finally, taking Louis completely by surprise.

“Yeah?” Louis confirmed, half-afraid he’d heard wrong.

Harry nodded. “Yeah.”
Trying to get Harry’s wrist-cuff to unlock felt sort of like defusing a bomb. Or trying to get one of those motion-activated soap dispensers to work. It wouldn’t react at all—the light stubbornly refusing to change from red to green—and Louis was growing more and more frustrated with every passing second.

Then there was a soft noise emanating from Harry, and when Louis looked up, Harry was crying again, fat tears rolling quietly down his cheeks.

“Did you change your mind?” Louis asked worriedly. “We don’t—you don’t have to do this. With me, I mean.” Unfortunately for Harry, he would have to do it with someone, at some point. Being a celebrity with boatloads of money could only get you so much special treatment. Evidently, refusing to cooperate with the nurses was where that privilege ended.

“No, I’m just….” Harry sniffled. “Sorry,” he choked out around a sob.

“You don’t have to apologise,” Louis said just as the light went green.

Harry’s restraint popped open, and he snatched his hand to his chest reflexively, looking startled and confused all at once, like he wasn’t sure how to cope with his newfound freedom.

“They let you go to the loo, right?” Louis asked.

Harry looked back at him with a sceptical squint. “Of course they do,” he replied, sounding offended by the question, even though Louis thought it was perfectly reasonable given Harry’s reaction to Louis unlocking the wrist-cuff.

Then again, maybe it meant Harry had only agreed because he thought his cooperation would buy his freedom permanently. Louis wasn’t planning on putting the cuff back on him, but he didn’t have any guarantees that one of the nurses wouldn’t. He was still a bit hazy on the parameters of the suicide watch that was being enforced.

Harry only made it as far as swinging one leg over the edge of the bed before he stopped short. “Um.”

“I can get someone else,” Louis reminded him.
“It’s not that,” Harry replied. His face started to redden as he stared down at his foot, pale and attached to a leg that seemed far thinner than Louis remembered, even under his sweats. “I um, I know the nurses have seen me naked before,” he said, and Louis wasn’t quite sure where his train of thought was taking him. “It’s just that I don’t think I could handle them looking at me now,” he continued in a small voice, “now that I’m awake for it.”

Louis could have told him about the offer of sedation, but the option seemed repulsive to him, and even Gemma had sounded reluctant when she’d mentioned it.

“They wouldn’t judge you,” Louis found himself saying before thinking better of it. “I’m not going to judge you either.”

The look Harry gave him as he glanced up was so overwhelming in its vulnerability that Louis had to stop himself from staggering away from it on pure instinct. Then Harry looked down, and Louis could breathe again.

Harry tested the sole of his foot against the floor, a wood laminate, nicer than the faux tiles in the regular hospital rooms downstairs. “They usually have to help me get used to it,” he said cryptically.

It took Louis a few seconds to realise that Harry meant walking. “Right.” Louis moved closer, offering his arm for Harry to take. The feeling of Harry’s fingers slowly curling around his bicep knocked the breath out of him, even though he was prepared for it, expecting it. That didn’t matter.

When Harry finally stood on two feet, he resembled a baby giraffe more than he ever had before in the band. He was thin all over, but his legs still looked like they could hardly hold his weight, made even worse by the fact that he’d been bedridden for the better part of two whole weeks.

“Is that normal?” Louis asked, careful to keep as voice as steady as he was keeping Harry himself. “How long before it goes away?”

“I don’t know,” Harry replied miserably. “They said not to worry about it the first time, after I tripped in the bog, but I’m supposed to see a physical therapist tomorrow. Just to make sure something’s not really wrong, I guess.”

“And if nothing’s really wrong?” Louis asked. He hadn’t moved since Harry had gotten out of bed, wanting Harry to set the pace for their trek to the bathroom.

Harry’s face hardened slightly as he glanced up at Louis again and took a tentative step forward. “You’re wondering when they’ll discharge me.” It wasn’t a question.

“A bit, yeah.”

“I have to talk to psychiatrist first,” Harry said in a flat tone. He took another step, and then another, his feet flopping across the floor like dead fish attached at the ankles.

“And you don’t want to.”

Harry didn’t answer.

“All right,” Louis said with a sigh of resignation. “Let’s get you to the shower, then, yeah?”

Louis was surprised to find after reaching the shower that getting Harry there had been the easy part. He helped Harry sit down on the toilet seat and then leaned over him to turn on the water, leaving it to warm up while he focused on the more daunting task of getting Harry out of his
There was nothing remotely sexual about it despite their history together. Louis was too terrified to even register the fact that once upon a time this would have been a prelude to something more.

Harry froze up as soon as he felt the first tug of Louis’s fingers against his shirt.

“Haz,” Louis pleaded, “you’ve got to help me out here. I can’t—” He pulled futilely at Harry’s shirtsleeve until Harry finally lifted his arms above his head so Louis could slide his shirt all the way off.

Louis held his breath, expecting…something when Harry’s bare torso was finally revealed. But there was nothing unusual about his appearance except for the things Louis had already known: the swathes of gauze covering the right side of his body, and the unnatural thinness, hard to look at even though Louis knew it was only temporary.

“Let’s get this off first, then,” Louis said before reaching forward again to carefully peel the medical tape away from Harry’s skin, revealing angry red knots of healing scar tissue from where he’d been stitched back together.

Harry was quiet for the entirety of the process, giving a little shiver of discomfort here and there, but never once flinching away from Louis’s touch.

When it was over, he looked marginally more grotesque than he had while covered in bandages, but it was only just so. Louis preferred him like this, being able to see the evidence that he was healing, even slowly.

It wasn’t until Louis knelt down between Harry’s feet and pulled his sweatpants down around his ankles that he realised the reason for Harry’s uncharacteristic shyness.

“Oh,” Louis said, unable to suppress the quiet exclamation in time to keep Harry from hearing it. “Sorry,” he quickly added, feeling his cheeks flushing. Louis tried not to look at the pale scars criss-crossing the inside of Harry’s thighs as he untangled Harry’s feet from his sweats and started to pull off his socks next. “I said I wouldn’t—sorry.”

“I know, um. I know they’re ugly.”

Louis glanced up to find Harry staring down at him tearfully, looking more like a child than a twenty-seven-year-old in that moment, and Louis felt helpless as he struggled to find the right words to frame his reply.

“The scars aren’t what upsets me, love,” Louis told him.

They weren’t even altogether unexpected, if he was being honest. Louis had known that Harry had flirted with self-harm a few times in his teenage years, never serious enough that Louis felt he needed to step in, never bad enough to leave permanent marks. This time, Harry had left marks. Entire swathes of skin covered in delicate spiderwebs of scar tissue.

“I’m upset,” Louis continued, deciding that it would do more harm than good if he tried to be anything less than honest in this moment, “because I know how bad things must have been for you to do this.” He carefully brushed a hand over the outside of Harry’s thigh, not wanting to touch the scars themselves for fear of upsetting him further.

Harry was crying when Louis glanced up at him again, silent tears pouring out from under his hands.
“Hey, hey,” Louis said softly, reaching up to tug Harry’s fingers away from his face. “It’s okay now, right? It’s okay.”

It wasn’t actually, not by a long shot, but at least now Louis wasn’t an ocean and a continent away, thinking that things were peachy keen for Harry, who was slowly whittling himself down to nothing with no one around him to help.

“Let’s just get you washed up,” Louis said. There wasn’t much in the way of comfort he could really offer Harry. The best he could do was to be there for him when Harry allowed it. This was Louis’s chance to do right by Harry again, to show him that he was in it for the long haul if Harry would have him.

Harry sniffled loudly and nodded. He leaned heavily on Louis as Louis helped him step out of his underwear, and then refused to let go even after he’d sat down on the shower bench under the gentle spray. He flinched at the first contact of the water against his slowly healing skin, which was no doubt still sensitive, but he didn’t move out of the way, so Louis figured he was all right.

“Do you want me to help you wash?” Louis asked. He wasn’t sure to what extent he was meant to be assisting Harry.

Harry just nodded, his eyes fluttering shut at the first brush of Louis’s hands, slick with shampoo, through his wet hair.

Louis was nearly as soaked within a few minutes of helping Harry. His shirt had taken the brunt of it, so he stepped back just long enough to peel it off before picking up where he’d left off with Harry’s hair. After he finished, he scraped away the little bit of blonde stubble growing on Harry’s chin and handed him a bar of soap so he could wash his armpits and groin himself.

“I don’t know if I should…use soap to clean these,” Louis admitted with a sweeping hand toward Harry’s wounds, once he was passably clean everywhere else.

“That bottle there,” Harry replied. He pointed up at the shelf where a bright blue soap bottle with a nozzle was sitting next to the shampoo and other toiletries. “They told my mum she should use that if she helped me bathe.”

“Do you want me to…?” It was something Louis thought Harry was probably capable of doing for himself, but Harry nodded anyway. “Okay.”

Louis was gentle about it, probably more than he needed to be; Harry had never been afraid of a little pain. But Louis was, especially if it was Harry’s pain they were talking about. And there was a difference between seeing Harry squirming underneath a tattoo gun or with his arse red from Louis’s hand, and seeing him like this, when he was unimaginably breakable, and Louis was afraid that the slightest mistake might shatter him beyond repair.

Harry stared openly at Louis’s bare chest while he worked. Louis noticed but waited until it had gone on long enough that it would have been more awkward not to comment on it before saying anything.

“Looking for new tattoos?” he joked.

Harry’s face was serious as he replied. “Do you have some?”

Louis shook his head. “Haven’t felt the need to ink up in a long time,” he admitted.

Harry didn’t respond, finally looking away as soon as Louis finished talking. He remained quiet as
Louis helped him rinse off, and still said nothing as he stepped out of the shower and into the towel Louis held out to him, allowing Louis to bundle him up in its warmth without reacting at all.

Louis was starting to freak out a little when Harry just stood there like a doll as Louis dried him off. He stopped, one hand still holding the towel closed over Harry’s naked body, the other carefully perched on his uninjured shoulder.

“Haz—” he started to say, only to be cut off by the suddenness of Harry’s lips being pressed to his own, there for barely a second before Harry drew back, an unreadable expression on his face. “Why?” Louis asked.

“I don’t know,” Harry whispered. He looked like he might cry again, so Louis steered him back into the main suite and into bed, helping him into a fresh pair of sweatpants but leaving the shirt off for now.

“Do you want me to go get one of the nurses now?” Louis asked. He wasn’t sure if he should acknowledge the fact that Harry had just kissed him, seemingly without meaning to. He wasn’t sure if he was finished processing that fact for himself, even.

Harry shook his head. “Stay for a minute?”

Louis hesitated. “Okay. Do you want to…?” He reached for his mobile, holding it out to Harry like an offering. He was surprised somehow when Harry nodded his assent.

August 22, 2014
Houston, Texas

Louis knew about the bandana before he even saw Harry that night. That’s how fast information about each of them travelled, especially when it came to the seemingly indestructible rumours about their secret relationship. And the thing was, Louis knew that there was some truth to it, that Harry was making a statement. He just didn’t understand why.

Louis still didn’t understand when Harry slipped into their dressing room fifteen minutes before the show, locking the door behind him, or when Harry sauntered over and fell to his knees in front of Louis without a word.

Louis was still trying to remember how to form a coherent sentence by the time Harry’s mouth was on him. “Fuck,” he hissed, the word coming out more from instinct than anything else.

He grabbed at Harry’s hair, unsure if he wanted to push him down or pull him off. Harry made that choice for him, taking Louis into the back of his throat like he’d forgotten they had a show in less than twenty minutes.

Louis would have protested if he’d been able, but his resolve was blown to splintered pieces after going so long without being able to touch Harry in more than a strictly platonic way.

Louis came in an embarrassingly short amount of time, Harry pulling off just before Louis was finished so that when he sat back on his heels, Louis could see flecks of come dotting his lips and chin and sprinkled across the dark blue bandana around his neck.
“You’re not still going to wear that on stage, are you?” Louis asked hoarsely.

Harry stuck his tongue out to lick at the mess. Louis was entranced by the sight, but he’d missed a spot. Louis leaned down to wipe at a drop of come clinging to Harry’s chin and pulled his hand back, only to have Harry grab for it and stuff Louis’s thumb into his mouth.

“Course I am,” Harry replied with a cheeky smile. Letting go of Louis, he reached down and re-folded the bandana so the stains were no longer visible. Now only he and Louis knew they were there.

Louis felt suddenly very dizzy and braced himself against the makeup table behind him, loudly rattling the bottles of product lining the bottom of the mirror.

“So the bandana thing,” Louis said, voice still a bit shaky. “It’s not a joke.” Liam’s was clearly a joke. Louis hadn’t been sure what to make of Harry’s at first, but this had cemented things. Definitely not a joke.

“No, I—” Harry’s cheeks pinked up a little. “I thought it was a cute idea. Thought it’d be a good way to show you off, you know? While things are still….” He made a vague gesture with his hand that Louis assumed was meant to represent the tenuous state of their relationship after the wedding. The wedding from which Harry had kept his wristband, something else that hadn’t escaped Louis’s notice. “Especially since some of the fans have been talking about us breaking up,” he finished while looking down at his hands in his lap.

“So you’re intending to encourage the ones who still think we’re together,” Louis assumed.

Harry glanced back up at him worriedly. “You don’t want me to? It’s not like it would change anything,” he added. “For them, I mean.”

Louis shook his head. “You should do it if it’s important to you,” he said carefully. “I…it would make me very happy, I think,” he continued in a slow voice, “to see you wearing it.”

Harry’s grin as he stood back up was brighter than the sun. “I’ll see you on stage,” he said before placing a quick kiss against Louis’s lips and darting back out of the dressing room, quick as a flash.

February 11, 2021
Los Angeles, California

“You remember them?” Harry asked vaguely.

Louis nodded. “All of them.” He remembered everything from the songs that Harry had intended him to as well as things Harry himself still didn’t know about. Couldn’t know about, now that Louis had seen how fragile Harry really was in the aftermath of his suicide attempt. “I should probably go,” Louis said with a quiet sigh.

“Braid my hair again, first?” Harry replied quickly, grabbing at Louis’s hand to keep him from straying from his bedside. “Please?”

Louis hesitated for a moment. “Okay.” He moved a bit closer, sitting himself down right on the edge of the bed so Harry didn’t have to do much more than lean forward to let Louis work.
The silence should have been comfortable, and it seemed to be that way for Harry, who hummed quietly under his breath as Louis twisted and tugged at his hair. But Louis couldn’t let himself stop thinking for even a second.

“Why did you leave me those songs?” Louis asked. He regretted it before he’d even finished speaking, and then regretted it more when Harry turned his head to look up at him, an expression of clear disappointment plastered across his face.

“You really haven’t figured it out, yet?”

Louis sucked his lower lip into his mouth and bit down hard. “Forget it,” he muttered, quickly finishing the braid before hopping off Harry’s bed and heading for the door. “I’ll get your mum, too,” Louis reassured him as he slipped out of the room without looking back.
Louis’s shirt was still a bit damp when he re-joined Anne and Gemma out in the corridor. He could feel Anne’s eyes lingering on the wet spots darkening the fabric, and he consequently focused solely on Gemma instead as he addressed them both.

“Washed and dried, as requested,” Louis said, handing the little electronic key to Gemma, who immediately passed it off to Anne without saying a word.

“I’ll find one of the nurses,” Anne offered before turning around to do just that.

“Thank you,” Gemma said after she was gone, “for getting him to cooperate. I don’t know why he’s suddenly, you know, but.” She pursed her lips, perhaps expecting Louis to give her an explanation, but he wasn’t going to. If the nurses who had sponge bathed Harry while he was in a coma hadn’t seen fit to tell her about his self-harming, then Louis sure as hell wasn’t going to be the one to let the cat out of the bag.

“He’s been through a lot,” Louis replied tersely. He felt suddenly irritated with Gemma for putting this on him, even though at the time he’d wanted it. He’d appreciated the opportunity, even. Now after the fact, it felt like too much weight to carry, like Harry’s scars were an added burden to his mental inventory that he couldn’t make room for between everything else that was jammed in tight inside his head.

“I know that,” Gemma replied with a frown.

Louis forced his face to soften, not wanting Gemma to read blame where there shouldn’t be any. Not for her, at least.

Anne came back a few seconds later, before things could escalate further, a couple nurses in tow. They continued on toward Harry’s suite while Anne stopped at Gemma’s side.

“They said we can go in and sit with him,” Anne told her, but Gemma was still looking at Louis, brows furrowed with some unidentifiable emotion.

“Actually, I think I’m going to go back to the condo with Louis,” she said, finally turning to face her mother, who looked understandably confused by the response.

“Oh,” Anne replied. “Well, all right, then.” She glanced at Louis once, uncertain, before turning
back to Gemma, who was pulling out her keys to hand them over.

“You’ll be okay to drive back on your own, right?” Gemma asked as she deposited her car keys into the palm of Anne’s hand.

Anne nodded. “It’s only a few blocks.”

“Less traffic at night, too,” Louis supplied unhelpfully. Neither woman acknowledged him.

“Right,” Gemma remarked with an air of finality. “Give my love to Harry. I’ll come back with you in the morning.” She turned to face Louis again, expectant. “You don’t mind, right?” she asked belatedly.

Louis shook his head. “C’mon, then,” he replied, giving Anne a little wave as he headed toward the lifts with Gemma following just behind.

They were both silent as they waited for the doors to open, Gemma staring straight ahead after stepping inside, not even bothering to glance over at Louis as he hit the button for the ground floor.

Louis finally gathered up the courage to speak up after the first jerk of the lift shooting downward. “Why are you suddenly avoiding him?” he asked.

Gemma looked over at Louis, surprised by the question. “I’m not,” she replied with a frown. “I wanted to talk to you,” she continued. “In private.”

Louis really didn’t like the sound of that.

The doors opened a few seconds later, revealing a crowd of people waiting to go up and depriving Louis of his chance to ask just what it was Gemma was so keen to talk about. He’d lost his nerve entirely by the time they got to the car, and Gemma wasn’t any more forthcoming as they made the drive back to the condominium complex on Sherbourne where both were staying.

Gemma opened her mouth to speak again just as they pulled up in front of the condo she was sharing with Anne, near enough to Louis’s that he could have parked there and walked to his own if he was inclined to do so. “Come to mine for a drink?” she asked. “I’ve got tequila.”

Louis shifted into park and turned the key in the ignition. “Yeah, all right,” he agreed easily. Alcohol sounded better than lying in bed alone waiting to fall asleep for the next couple hours, which is undoubtedly what he would end up doing if left to his own devices.

Still, he was a bit nervous as they approached the front door. Louis wracked his mind trying to think of something he could have done that Gemma might have taken issue with, but she was the one who had asked him to help. Louis couldn’t think of anything. Maybe this wasn’t about Harry at all. But then what?

Gemma remained quiet as she led him into the kitchen, where she poured both of them drinks: tequila over ice the way Harry liked. Louis wondered if he’d picked that up from her or if it was the other way around.

“So,” Louis said, lifting the glass to his lips to take an experimental sip. Tequila wasn’t exactly his drink of choice, but whatever Gemma kept stocked was surprisingly smooth. He took another quick drink before she had a chance to reply.

“So,” she said right back, pursing her lips a little as she swirled her glass. Nervously, Louis thought.
“You said you wanted to talk,” Louis prompted. He hid his face behind the glass again as he waited for her response.

Gemma glanced down at the countertop and finally lifted her own glass to her lips. “I’m working up to it,” she replied uncertainly.

Louis let himself relax a little as he leaned back against the cabinets, less tense now that he knew they were both in the same boat for…whatever this was. “You had a boyfriend, last I heard,” he said nonchalantly, deciding to make small talk in lieu of enduring another taut silence. “Why isn’t he here?”

Gemma’s nostrils flared alarmingly. Apparently, it was a question he shouldn’t have asked. “We’re taking a break,” she replied stiffly. “I guess you’d know all about how that sort of thing works.”

Louis arched an eyebrow, surprised by the sudden aggressive shift in her tone. “Is that what you wanted to talk about, then?” he asked.

“Among other things.”

He waved his glass. “Have at it, then.”

She took a step back and swallowed her tequila in one go, crossing her arms over her chest after she set the empty glass down on the counter. “You said you and Harry were with each other for seven years,” she said. “But how much of that were you actually together?”

“Almost all of it,” Louis admitted, taking another drink and hoping Gemma wouldn’t notice his hand shaking as he lowered his glass. “Like I said, it was off and on.”

“I saw Harry go out with people all the time,” Gemma protested. “He even talked to me about—sex stuff—and that part definitely wasn’t to do with you. No offence.”

Louis shrugged. “We were more on than off, but things were so rocky with…. It didn’t feel right to ask him to be exclusive when we were practically breaking up every other month, you know?”

Gemma looked even more distressed by this revelation, her face contorting into a sympathetic grimace. On behalf of her brother, Louis assumed. Louis couldn’t imagine anything she felt toward him resembled sympathy in the slightest.

“Nothing about that sounds good for Harry,” she said in a low voice. “Especially not with Eleanor —”

“That’s complicated,” Louis cut in. “Eleanor wasn’t…. I wasn’t ever actually dating her.” He waited for realisation to dawn on Gemma’s face before he continued. “Harry knew that. He wasn’t seeing other people because of me. He wanted to. I don’t even know that if we’d been exclusive he wouldn’t have wanted to…explore, at the very least.” He took a deep breath. “I assume you know about the—”

“Threesome? I thought that was a one-time thing.”

“Not so much.”

Gemma scrutinised Louis’s expression without blinking. “And you were okay with all that?”

Louis shrugged. “I suppose I was always ready to take him however I could have him,” he replied quietly.
Gemma’s face turned a little sad, a little pitying, and that was harder to deal with than before when she’d been angry and accusing instead. “You still really love him,” she realised.

Louis glanced down quickly at his glass of tequila, watching the ice cubes at the top starting to sweat. He closed his eyes, opened them again, slowly. “Yeah, I suppose I do.” He sniffed loudly, turning away from Gemma so he wouldn’t have to face her when he looked up again. “You were here, right?” he said before she could get another word in. “When it happened? How come you weren’t—”

“I was in Oregon,” she said, “waiting for a flight. They’d gotten my times mixed up on the itinerary. I missed the one that was supposed to connect to LAX.”

Louis frowned and turned around slowly to stare at her in confusion. It was safer to look at her now that she wasn’t staring back at him with that horribly pitying expression that made Louis feel like he wanted nothing more than to crawl into a corner and never face the world again.

“You flight was routed through Portland?” he questioned. “From Heathrow?”

Gemma shrugged. “I thought it was due to weather,” she replied. “Harry was the one who booked it after I said I wanted to come out for his birthday.”

There was a moment in which Louis lost sight of where he was, his mind swallowing him up whole in the wake of Gemma’s words, more meaningful than she’d yet realised. “Harry booked it,” he said distantly, his voice sounding to him like it was coming from somewhere else, somewhere far away. “When?”

“Two months or so before—” Gemma stopped dead. “Oh,” Gemma said softly.

The truth dawned on them both at the same time.

It wasn’t a surprise to either of them that Harry’s decision hadn’t been a spur of the moment thing, but suddenly, Louis couldn’t breathe around the knowledge sitting heavily in his chest that Harry had been planning this for months, long enough to fuck up Gemma’s flights on purpose so that she wouldn’t even be in the same state when he finally went through with it.

“More tequila, maybe,” Louis suggested, his hands trembling worse than ever before.

Gemma nodded and reached for the bottle without saying a word.

Louis made it through another glass before things really started to go tits up. He clung to the counter top for stability as he stared hazily at Gemma, who was looking right back at him in concern.

“Do you need me to walk you back?” she asked. Apparently, Louis hadn’t been holding his liquor quite as well as he’d thought. “Or you can stay here if you want. The sofa’s pretty comfortable.”

Louis shook his head. Even drunk, the thought of Anne walking in to find Louis passed out on their sofa was beyond mortifying. “It’s like…one door over,” he said slowly, trying his best to clearly enunciate each syllable. The jury was out on whether he’d succeeded on forming a comprehensible sentence, but Gemma’s face didn’t change. “I’ll be fine.”

“You’re sure?”

Louis nodded, and then made a clumsy attempt at patting his head and rubbing his stomach simultaneously. “See? Totally sober, Officer.”
That got a small smile out of Gemma, who insisted on at least seeing him to the door.

Miraculously, Louis made it to his condo unscathed. Or at least, he was pretty sure it was his. The numbers on the door were a bit blurry as he walked up the front steps and plopped down right there on the stoop, not wanting to go inside just yet.

Louis pulled his knees up to his chest as he pulled out his mobile and scrolled through to the next date in the list. It hit him as he passed all the songs he’d already listened to just how close he was to the end, and still, even after Harry had put enough trust in Louis to let him see his scars, it didn’t feel like they were any closer to mending the fabric of their relationship.

Louis carefully selected the next song, hovering over it for a minute before hitting play. The first few notes were instantly familiar, and he felt himself relaxing with his back pressed up against the door, allowing himself to be lulled into a peaceful trance by the combination of the alcohol and the music.

This one…. He would have remembered this one without the date. He’d heard the song once before.

September 6, 2014
London, England

Louis collapsed into bed as soon as they got home—his home, not theirs—and did his best to suppress a flood of bitter tears that he could feel building just behind his eyes.

He wasn’t sure why he felt so miserable. Usually, being with Eleanor was easy enough. They were used to each other, and she’d long stopped expecting something more than what he could give her. She was content to exist as his shadow, quietly collecting paycheques, enjoying free trips, and doing god knows what on her own time when she wasn’t required to hang around him for the cameras.

Maybe it was just harder now that Eleanor was all Louis had, especially now that Harry spent most of his time half a world away when they weren’t on tour. Louis had tried to convince himself things were better that way, that absence made the heart grow fonder and all that.

Harry seemed convinced that they’d get along better during tour if they spent some time apart, and it was unfair to expect him to stay in London when it had held nothing but bad memories for Harry as of late.

But none of Louis’s typical rationalising made the abyss that had formed in the pit of his stomach disappear.

It was late, and Eleanor had already gone to bed in the room across the hall, and Louis was still lying in bed alone and feeling sorry for himself when his mobile suddenly started to ring.

“Yeah,” he mumbled after picking up, too exhausted and miserable to muster up a proper greeting.

“Did I wake you?”

Louis’s eyes shot open. He rolled over onto his back, staring up at the darkened ceiling as he
listened to the sound of Harry’s breathing into the receiver.

“No,” Louis replied quickly. “I couldn’t fall asleep. What’s up?” Louis was striving for nonchalance, but he was pretty sure he was failing.

“Niall called me. Said you were. I dunno. Not having the time of your life, I suppose. He was worried.”

Louis turned and buried a sigh into his pillow. “He shouldn’t have called you,” he said, finally. “You’ve got enough on your plate right now. You shouldn’t be fussing over me because I was sulking at a party.”

“I’m fine, Louis. Clearly, you aren’t.”

Louis could hear someone else speaking in the background, a higher-pitched murmur that gently faded away. “Is that Gemma?” he asked. “What time is it there?”

“Afternoon,” Harry replied vaguely. “You’re deflecting.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“What time is it there?” Harry asked, turning the question back on him.

Louis sighed. “Late. Really late.”

“You in bed?”

“We’re not really going to have phone sex, are we?” Louis asked. “I just heard your sister talking like ten seconds ago.”

Harry chuckled. “No, you wanker. I was actually going to offer to sing you a lullaby, unless that’s too girly for you.”

Louis sighed in exasperation. Harry had been doing that a lot lately, making these small self-deprecating comments about not being as masculine in comparison to the others. Louis didn’t understand it, but Harry had gotten tetchy the last time Louis had tried to bring it up to have a serious conversation about it. “I have four sisters, Haz. Nothing’s too girly for me.”

Harry’s laugh in his ear was soothing all on its own. Louis settled back against the pillows, wondering it he could fall asleep just like this, no lullaby even needed. “Comfortable?” Harry asked.

Louis hummed affirmatively.

“All right, here goes.”

February 11, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis nearly fell backwards into the entryway to the condo when the door abruptly opened behind him. He stared up into Sam’s concerned eyes and scrambled to pick himself up off the porch.
“There’s a motion detector on the doorbell,” Sam told him before he even had a chance to ask how she’d known he was out there. “Are you drunk?”

Louis’s sheepish smile was answer enough.

Sam sighed. “Let’s get you inside, then.”

Louis stumbled into the condo after Sam, nearly knocking over everything from the front door to the master bedroom despite Sam’s attempts to keep him from braining himself on the furniture. He would have been embarrassed if he wasn’t so drunk, but there was still some comfort in the fact that Sam wasn’t judging him, even silently.

Louis fell onto the bed face-first when they walked into the master bedroom. Dimly, he was aware of Sam taking off his shoes and tugging his trousers down off his hips; not the first time she’d had to go above and beyond the call of duty because Louis had made a poor choice earlier in the evening.

After Louis was mostly undressed, in just his t-shirt and pants, Sam helped nudge him up the bed until his head was actually lying on a pillow instead of on top of the duvet.

“Fuck,” Louis groaned. His head was already starting to throb, and he wasn’t even done being drunk yet. Thirty was going to be an absolute nightmare.

He could hear Sam rummaging around still right next to his head, but he didn’t want to open his eyes to see what she was up to.

“Be louder,” Louis mumbled ungratefully into the pillow.

Sam ignored him. “Gemma texted you,” she said instead. “She wants to get breakfast tomorrow morning before they go back to the hospital. If you’re not too hungover.”

“Is that part you talking, or did she actually say that?” Louis wondered.

Sam paused for a moment. “Both,” she finally answered. “What do you want me to tell her?”

Louis whined pitifully. “Yeah, all right,” he decided. “You’ll wake me up in the morning?” he asked, eyes still screwed shut.

“Of course.”

“Kay. Goodnight, then.” He was asleep before he could register whether Sam had replied.
Louis woke up with a splitting headache, which was exactly what he’d expected from the night before. Tequila had never been kind to him. Not one bit.

It took Louis less than a second to figure why he’d woken so suddenly; his eyes blinked open to find Sam frozen in a tip-toed stance halfway between the door and the bed, a guilty expression plastered across her face.

“I was about to say sorry for waking you,” she offered with a sheepish smile. “But then I remembered that was the whole point of me coming in here.”

Louis grunted tonelessly in response, his head and mouth both full of cotton.

“What you still want to go to breakfast?” Sam asked him cautiously. “We’re due at the restaurant in an hour, but I can text Gemma again if you’re not feeling up to it.”

Mustering up something that sounded like actual human speech was more difficult than it should’ve been, but with some effort, Louis finally managed to get the words out. “Just tell her we’ll be a few minutes late.”

He rolled over onto his other side and closed his eyes again, allowing himself to drift into a state of half-consciousness while Sam tip-toed back out of the room.

A few minutes turned into more than half an hour—but surprisingly, it wasn’t to do with Louis’s hangover at all.

Maybe it was just destined to be a bad day, he thought to himself as he turned the key in the ignition only to find that the engine wouldn’t turn over. It seemed only too fitting that after he’d much such progress with Harry the night before that things would immediately go to hell afterwards.

They ended up having to call a car service to come pick them up. Gemma and Anne had already left a good five minutes before Louis rolled out of bed, so there was no chance of carpooling even
though all were headed to the same destination. So much for sleeping in.

Louis settled into another gentle doze with his cheek pressed to the car window once things were settled, his earphones in and playing a slow tribal beat at the beginning of the next song in the playlist.

His body felt asleep still, but his mind didn’t, not all the way, at least. It was almost easier to focus on the music like this.

September 29, 2014
Charlotte, North Carolina

Harry was pacing the length of his hotel room when Louis got back, sweaty and in a foul mood the likes of which Harry hadn’t been witness to in quite some time. Later, he knew he’d be embarrassed by the display of churlishness, but right now, Louis just wanted to smash something to bits.

Harry stopped midway through his routine as soon as Louis walked through the door and plopped down on the bed instead, frantically picking at the duvet cover as Louis shed his clothes from the day out.

“Hate this shit,” Louis muttered. He stripped down to his boxers and threw himself down face-first onto the bed next to Harry, heaving out an exaggerated sigh.

He was fishing for sympathy in the most transparent way possible, but it was hard to care after the hours he’d spent pretending to enjoy a double date with Zayn when he could have stayed in with Harry instead and had hours of mind-blowing sex. For the amount of time they spent together, the percentage of that in which mutual orgasms were achieved was abysmally low.

“How was Perrie?” Harry asked gently. “I wish I could’ve seen her.”

“Perrie,” Louis replied with a grunt as Harry dug his thumb into a particularly tense knot around the base of his spine, “was lovely as always. It was all of the rest of it that was the problem.”

“Would sex make you feel better?”
Louis would have rolled his eyes if he’d been facing Harry. Trust him to go straight to sex as a solution. “I dunno,” he replied honestly, flipping over onto his stomach to look up at the other boy. “I just feel really out of sorts right now. I dunno if I’m even up to it.” He hadn’t meant to make a pun out of it, but Harry’s eyes darted to his crotch anyway, as if to verify Louis’s statement.

“Well, that’s kind of….” Harry tugged a hand through his curls. “I’ve been doing some reading up lately and—”

“Oh god, you aren’t going to try to get me to do yoga or guided meditation or something, are you?”

“No,” Harry replied emphatically, his mouth twisting into a tiny scowl. “If you’d just listen—”

“Right, sorry.”

“So like I said,” Harry continued, this time with a bit of an edge to his tone, “I’ve been reading about some stuff, and apparently, some people find it fulfilling to like, tell their partner what to do? Especially if they feel sort of powerless in their daily life, I guess.”

“You seem awfully unsure,” Louis pointed out. He was deflecting, because everything Harry was saying was resonating with him in a way that was simultaneously unpleasant and a little bit tempting.

“I’m just giving you an out,” Harry said with an impatient huff. “We don’t have to try it. But you liked tying me up, right? It’s like that, I suppose. But more.”

Louis couldn’t deny that he’d been curious about all the things that lay beyond a bit of silk ties around the wrists, but there hadn’t ever been a good opportunity to even bring it up with Harry, let alone actually try it. But here Harry was, apparently offering himself to Louis with no strings attached. They weren’t exclusive anymore, but for tonight, Louis could have Harry any way he wanted him.

Louis found himself nodding before he’d even finished processing his decision, his body keyed up and eager to begin after the stress of the day’s events.

“Sit up against the headboard,” Louis ordered. “Shorts off. I wanna try something.”

His hands were trembling slightly as he retrieved the lube and condoms from a bag next to Harry’s bed. Harry had never once asked Louis to bottom for him, but Louis had been curious enough to try it on his own—a few times now.

Fingers had felt weird and unpleasant, but Louis was determined to figure out why Harry seemed to go mad for having anything up his arse, so he’d tried a slim vibrator after that with slightly improved results. The actual…friction part, fucking it in and out, had just been distracting, and honestly it hadn’t felt that good. But once Louis had figured out the right position to press the vibe up against his prostate with a hand working over his cock, he wasn’t sure that he’d ever come harder before.

He wanted to try something like that now, and like this, with Harry loose and pliant and obedient underneath him, he couldn’t think of a better opportunity.

Harry looked a bit confused when Louis started to roll a condom onto him after wanking him to full hardness, but he kept his mouth shut and his limbs still, waiting patiently for Louis’s instructions.

“Don’t want you to move at all,” Louis told Harry as he finally straddled the younger boy’s lap.
His prep had consisted of nothing more than a quick three-finger stretch, just enough to make sure he could get Harry’s cock inside without any pain.

The whole point of this was the feeling of almost unbearable fullness. Louis didn’t want Harry to fuck him; he wanted Harry to sit there like a human sex toy while Louis used him to get himself off. If Harry was hoping for a rodeo, he’d be disappointed.

But Harry didn’t seem disappointed when Louis finally settled onto his cock with a drawn-out groan, seating himself fully in one slow movement with his arse pressed against the tops of Harry’s thighs. Harry’s mouth opened, falling slack as Louis put a hand over himself and started to slowly stroke with Harry right there watching but unable to help without Louis’s permission.

And Louis didn’t intend to give it. He wanted to get off quick, not have Harry tease and fumble his way through an agonisingly long handjob—because that was the sort of thing that Harry liked, but it wasn’t what Louis needed right now.

“You’re being so good,” Louis assured him, taking note of the way Harry’s fists clenched around handfuls of the sheets underneath him, his muscles straining with the effort to not fuck up into Louis as the older boy’s orgasm drew closer, causing him to tighten up unconsciously around Harry’s cock. “Such a good boy. I’m almost—fuck.”

There was so much pressure and Louis could feel it building to a breaking point, something finally imploding deep inside his belly as he came with an abrupt shout. He spurted up to Harry’s chest and chin, splattering his cheeks with it, and Harry stared at Louis in shock for less than a second before his eyes rolled back in his head.

Louis cradled Harry’s face between his palms and looked at him with concern. “Did you just come?” he asked, marvelling at the fact that Harry had managed it without voluntarily moving a single muscle in the process.

“Sorry,” Harry slurred.

It took a minute for Louis to realise why he was apologising. Right, because Louis hadn’t told him he could come. Maybe Harry was the one who had gotten more out of this little exercise, then.

Not that Louis was objecting. He’d gotten a fucking spectacular orgasm, and he felt marginally better that night after spooning in Harry’s bed, even knowing that they would have to go their separate ways again in the morning. But just for tonight, they had this. They had each other.

February 12, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis was a bit flushed by the time they stepped out of the car, but he’d managed to control himself for the most part. Sam gave him a weird look as they walked in, but Louis didn’t think it had so much to do with his odd behaviour as it did with his distinctly bedraggled appearance after nearly falling asleep in the car, which he knew was prime opportunity for an unflattering pap shot.

Luckily, no one caught them on the way into the restaurant, and Sam had the foresight to bring a hat and glasses for Louis to wear when they left: something she was insistent on. Jaime’s orders, no doubt.
Louis was expecting to be met with a trademarked Gemma Glare as soon as they sat down at their table, but he was surprised to find that both Gemma and Anne just looked vaguely worried as the group exchanged greetings, which in turn troubled Louis more than if they’d had a proper row over breakfast.

Louis was tempted to confront them about it as soon as the waiter had taken their orders but decided it would be a hassle if the ensuing discussion spoiled the rest of the meal. So he waited, making the appropriate amount of small talk while they ate, and then when it was time to get the cheque, Gemma finally turned to Louis with a pleading expression.

“What is it this time?” he asked, gentling his tone for Anne’s sake. If she hadn’t been there, Louis would have certainly been a bit snippier. He was tired of doing favours for Gemma and putting himself through the wringer every time. It was starting to take a toll.

Gemma’s face creased into an apologetic frown. “Harry has physical therapy this morning,” she told him. Something Louis had already known, for once. “He was asking about you, so I thought —”

Louis glanced sideways at Anne before responding. “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea,” he said slowly. He was hesitant to detail why with Harry’s mum sitting right there watching him, but it felt like it would only do more harm than good if Harry allowed himself to become dependent on Louis only for him to leave again.

Louis just didn’t want to set Harry up for failure later.

Gemma’s gaze was unrelenting. Louis let out a quiet sigh.

“You’ve got room for us in your car, then?” he asked.

Gemma started to nod just as the waiter came back with the cheque. Louis ignored her for the moment, writing out an absurd tip just because he didn’t feel like doing the maths, and also a little bit because he could.

That might be part of the problem, Louis realised. He thrived too much on the feeling of magnanimity; he didn’t want to say to no to Gemma even for Harry’s own good, because helping was instant gratification, and it was better than the alternative—feeling completely useless.

Despite his realisation, Louis didn’t protest when Gemma led them out to the car. The drive to Cedars-Sinai was expectedly tense. Not even the radio made much difference with all four of them packed inside, no one willing to break the silence now that their thoughts had turned to Harry.

Louis wasn’t sure what to expect when they finally arrived, but it certainly wasn’t the sight of a frazzled nurse that greeted him as soon as they approached the door to Harry’s suite, the handles of a wheelchair clutched in each hand. She looked slightly familiar, but that was all Louis had time to think before she was suddenly shoving the wheelchair toward him with a scowl.

“Back to save the day again?” she said in a rude tone that had even Louis flinching in response as she stalked away.

“Should we like, report her?” Louis wondered, glancing between Gemma and Anne.

“I’ll take care of it.” Anne replied. Her lips were pursed in a tight line as she stared after the wayward nurse. “Make sure he doesn’t miss his appointment?”

Louis nodded, still not sure what he was meant to accomplish here. He looked to Gemma as Anne
walked away, toward the nurse’s station. “Should I go in alone?” he asked her. His eyes flicked over to meet Sam’s for a brief second, looking for guidance, but she just shrugged.

Gemma mirrored the gesture. “If you want,” she replied. “Might be easier if we don’t ambush him after…whatever that was.”

“Oh, okay.” Louis stared down at the wheelchair in his hands and took a moment to mentally brace himself for whatever was lying in wait inside Harry’s room.

It was dark despite the morning sun outside; Harry’s curtains had been drawn over all the windows, keeping any light out. Louis could make out the shape of Harry under his covers, huddled into a tiny ball, and sighed. Maybe the nurse had been justified in her frustration after all.

“You’re meant to be downstairs in fifteen minutes,” Louis said in lieu of announcing his presence. Harry didn’t move.

“Haz, you have to go to your appointments,” Louis tried instead. “They’re just trying to help you.” Harry mumbled something incomprehensible into his pillow, and Louis wheeled the chair closer, straining to hear him.

“What’s that, love?” Louis asked, the endearment slipping out unintentionally.

Harry flipped around to face him with a melancholic frown etched into his face. “I don’t want to go,” he whispered.

“Why not?”

Harry hesitated before answering. He drew the covers over himself even higher, like a child hiding from the monster in their closet.

“What if something’s really wrong with me?” Harry asked, his voice barely audible. “What if they can’t fix me?”

Louis was beginning to suspect that physical therapy wasn’t the root of the problem here, but he only had so much time to solve this mess and getting Harry to his appointment was number one on his list of priorities for the time being.

Louis pushed the wheelchair away with a sigh and moved over to crouch down next to Harry’s bedside, putting them at eye level with each other. “You know hiding isn’t going to change anything, right?” he pointed out. “If something is wrong, you’ll just be putting yourself at risk by not letting them examine you properly.”

“I’m scared.” It didn’t take a fancy psychology degree to see that Harry meant it. He was terrified.

“Do you feel like something’s really wrong?” Louis asked, half-afraid of the answer. “You can feel your arms and legs, right? Everything’s in working order?”

Harry nodded slowly. “It’s just…hard,” he replied, hesitating. “It doesn’t feel the same. It’s like I’m swimming through the air.”

Louis nodded. “It’s just a bit of muscle weakness,” Louis reassured him. “It’s normal. The therapist is going to do a quick exam, and I’m sure he’ll say the same thing, and then he’ll probably give you some really annoying exercises to do. Niall used to complain about it all the time, remember?”
You won’t have it quite as bad, I’m sure.”

Harry still looked a little tentative, a little bit lost, but he nodded along with Louis’s words and slowly began to shed his cocoon of sheets and linens.

“Here,” Louis said, quickly pulling the wheelchair over to the bed. “I’ll help you.”

“Can you come with me?” Harry asked as Louis helped him into the chair. He dragged a blanket into his lap, swaddling himself again.

Louis hesitated, but he didn’t think there was any real reason he couldn’t go with Harry to his exam. Worst case scenario, he’d be turned away at the door. “Sure,” he agreed readily.

“Comfortable?”

Harry nodded.

“Let’s go, then.”
Chapter 58

February 12, 2021

Los Angeles, California

There was an unexpected advantage in Harry being confined to a wheelchair for the duration of their journey to the lower floors; with Louis standing behind him, Harry couldn’t see that Louis was absolutely bricking it.

It wasn’t like there was any reason for his nervousness, certainly not like there was for Harry, who would actually have to deal with the results of the impending physical exam. But Louis had spent so many years mediating other people’s anxiety—Zayn, Harry, Liam, even Niall to a degree—that he’d accumulated some of his own in return, and now that he was faced with the burden of keeping Harry level-headed after years without practice, he wasn’t sure he was up to the task any longer.

“I’m sorry for being such a baby about everything,” Harry said in a quiet voice after they’d stepped into the lift. He’d reassured his mum and sister that they didn’t need to accompany him, and the two of them had taken Sam into Harry’s vacant suite to wait for the boys to return.

“You don’t have to apologise,” Louis reassured him. He still felt that he should be the one apologising, if anything. “It’s understandable to be a bit muddled after everything that happened.”

“You don’t deserve it, though.”

Louis remained silent. As far as he was concerned, there wasn’t a single person on the planet who deserved to be on the receiving end of Harry’s emotional outbursts more than him. Well, maybe Simon or Modest bore more of the blame in the end, but Louis would rather die himself than see Harry put in the same room as those men ever again.

Louis had been a bit worried that someone might recognise Harry as Louis wheeled him through the corridor to the physical therapy centre, but everyone’s eyes seemed to skim right past him, like they were uncomfortable with the thought of being caught out staring at someone in a wheelchair. When they reached the waiting room, Louis was relieved to find it was vacant, only to have that fact irritate him that much more when they actually did have to wait.

“The appointment time’s not for five more minutes,” Harry reminded him.

Louis just sighed and tapped his foot against the floor even faster. He wanted this over with even more than Harry, it seemed.

Or maybe not. Over the course of the next couple minutes, Harry seemed to grow even paler under the fluorescent lights, his breaths coming shallow and quick. Louis was suddenly seized by the
urge to grab his hand, but they weren’t alone in the waiting room even if they were the only patients; Louis could see the watchful eyes of the receptionist trained on them from the other side of the glass.

And there was, of course, the fact that Louis didn’t know how Harry would react to such a gesture. The nature of their relationship was still up for debate. Louis didn’t want to push things too far.

When Harry’s appointment time came and went, Louis started to get even more annoyed. He reached for his mobile, pulling it out of his pocket and offering Harry one side of his earphones.

Harry accepted without question, merely tilting the screen of Louis’s mobile toward him as Louis scrolled down to the next song in the list. His eyes lit up as he smirked. “Oh, this is a good one,” he said under his breath, which was all Louis needed to hear to know that it was going to be a very, very bad one. For him, at least.

November 10, 2014
London, England

“Fuck you.”

It was the first thing Harry said to him when he barged into Louis’s flat unannounced, hair a mess and clothes dishevelled, like he’d pulled them on as soon as Louis’s thumb had hit the ‘send tweet’ button. In hindsight, Louis should have seen it coming.

“I thought we were done having this argument,” Louis said even though he knew it would only make Harry angrier.

“And I thought you were done being a fucking prick, so I guess we were both wrong.”

Louis stared at him impassively, wondering if that was what Harry had come all the way to his flat to say. A simple phone call would have sufficed.

“I’m not going to apologise,” Louis said once he’d determined that Harry wasn’t about to add anything else. “You’re doing what’s right for you; I’m doing what’s right for me.”

Louis had known when he’d sent the tweet—*I am in fact straight*—that he would receive his fair share of abuse for it courtesy of Harry. It was just bad timing all around. Louis didn’t think wearing a fucking shirt would turn into a massive headline linking him to Harry’s newfound boldness regarding his own sexuality, but it had, and Louis had panicked a bit.

Still, this time he didn’t much regret his actions. That article had been bollocks through and through, and Louis refused to apologise for calling it out. It was one thing to endure fan speculation, it was another for some journalist to take it upon themselves to legitimise it.

Harry still hadn’t moved from the entryway. Louis heaved out a sigh and gestured toward the kitchen. “Care for a drink, Harold?” He was surprised when Harry abruptly uncrossed his arms and walked into the kitchen without giving a response.

He was even more surprised to find Harry raiding his whiskey cabinet—kept mostly for show, sometimes for guests—when he trailed in after him.
“What?” Harry said defensively, bottle already halfway to his mouth. “You said I could have a drink.”

“Help yourself,” Louis muttered.

Harry did, taking a long gulp that soured his expression as soon as he pulled the mouth of the bottle away from his lips. “Foul,” he said to himself, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

It didn’t stop him from taking another drink before finally setting the bottle back down on the countertop, fingers still grasping loosely at the neck, like he didn’t quite want to let go.

“I think we should have sex,” Harry announced matter-of-factly.

“You’re drunk,” Louis pointed out.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Not yet.”

“What about that bloke you met at X Factor, what’s his name?”

“Haven’t shagged him yet,” Harry replied after taking another swig. “I think he might be straight. Actually straight.”

Louis had to suppress a wince. Low blow. “It’s not like that’s stopped you before,” Louis pointed out. A good portion of Harry’s ‘conquests’, so to speak, had purportedly been straight. And yet they’d all still slept with him. Harry just had that effect on people.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed easily. “I’m horny now, though.”

“Thought you were angry with me.”

“I am. Doesn’t mean I don’t want you to fuck me.”

Something twisted unpleasantly in Louis’s gut at the thought of having sex with Harry not an hour after he’d publicly declared for all the world that he was straight. One-hundred-percent straight.

With a girlfriend. No exceptions. Besides the one standing in front of him in his kitchen, of course.

Maybe that was what Harry wanted, Louis thought to himself. Maybe he’d come over here to propose sex because he knew it would make Louis feel guilty about what he’d done.

Sex as penance—atonement. Now that was a nice thought.

Louis stepped forward and kissed the whiskey off Harry’s lips, plunging his tongue into Harry’s mouth like it was nothing. It was; kissing was practically like breathing for them now. Even after time spent apart, Louis was convinced his body would never forget how to meet Harry’s eager, sloppy kisses, blow for blow, almost a literal sparring match in this case.

And Louis could tell Harry was angry, could taste the fury in his fierce, biting kisses, could feel all of Harry’s frustration pooling into the tips of the fingertips that were digging into his biceps, refusing to let go.

Louis didn’t feel like making it to bed.

He hitched Harry up against the counter, sliding the whiskey away to a safe distance before bringing Harry’s legs up around his waist and rocking into him. Harry, who had chosen to wear a pair of soft cotton joggers instead of his trademark skinny jeans, was already hard when their hips met, and Louis could feel the vibration of Harry’s moan against his lips when he pushed his hand
under the waistband to find nothing but warm, naked skin.

“Guess you’re right,” Harry gasped out as he tipped his head back against the cabinets, eyes closed in ecstasy as Louis tugged him off, fast and rough.

“About what?”

Harry’s eyes shot open. “It hasn’t stopped me,” he answered. He came messily over Louis’s hand and his own trousers and spent only a few seconds recovering before he slid off the counter and dropped to his knees on the kitchen floor.

Louis closed his eyes in turn, trying to shut out the guilt so he could focus on the unbearable pressure of Harry’s mouth, which felt designed at this point to get him off as quickly as possible. He wasn’t sure he’d succeeded by the time he came down Harry’s throat, his stomach churning from inner turmoil wracking his mind. Something needed to change, he decided. He didn’t know what exactly, but something needed to change.

February 12, 2021

Los Angeles, California

“Harry?”

Louis quickly ripped the earphones out of both their ears and tucked the whole mess back into his pocket. There was a relatively young-looking doctor standing at the door, with glasses so large they seemed to take up his entire face, but he was smiling with a kind expression that immediately put Louis at ease.

It took only one look to determine that Harry didn’t feel the same, so Louis gave his shoulder a quick, reassuring squeeze after standing up to push his wheelchair over.

“Is it okay if I sit in on his appointment?” Louis asked, knowing that if Harry were left to his own devices, he wouldn’t utter a goddamn word about it.

The doctor nodded agreeably and held the door open for them to enter the exam room. Which wasn’t actually an exam room at all, but rather a miniature gym, filled with various bits of exercise equipment and other medical paraphernalia, Louis assumed.

“I’m Dr Vaswani,” the man said after shutting the door behind them. He extended a hand for both Harry and Louis to shake. “Harry and—?”

“Louis.”

“Right. Well, if you’d wheel Harry over here to the exam table—”

Louis did so and watched nervously as Dr Vaswani helped Harry out of the chair and up onto the table.

“Let me know if anything hurts,” Dr Vaswani told him. “Louis, you can have a seat right over there, if you’d like.”

Louis felt more out of place than ever as he sat down in a chair against the wall, watching as Dr
Vaswani poked and prodded at Harry’s legs for a moment before finally asking him to strip down to his underwear so he could get a better idea of the degree of muscle atrophy.

For a moment, Louis thought Harry would refuse, but after a few seconds of hesitation, he finally pulled down his sweats to reveal a pair of boxer briefs underneath, long enough that the scars on the inside of his thighs were completely obscured.

Dr Vaswani continued his examination, this time having Harry stretch his legs out in various positions, which seemed to tire him out quickly. Louis was a little surprised when Harry was then stood up next to the exam table on shaky legs only to have Dr Vaswani put a hand over his spine instead.

“Have you always had posture issues?” he asked Harry, who nodded.

Louis was a little surprised to hear it. He knew Harry had problems with back pain, once upon a time, but he’d assumed it was due to their poor sleeping habits. Harry had stopped complaining about it after a few months, once management had started him on an exercise regimen. Problem solved, he’d thought. Apparently not.

“I do yoga to help,” Harry said quietly. “Well, I used to do yoga.”

“And you’re a runner?” Dr Vaswani asked. Harry nodded again. “Well, good news and bad news,” the doctor continued. “The muscle weakness is easily treatable. I’ll give you a list of exercises to do on your own, and you should be back to normal within a few days, maybe a week. The curvature of your spine does concern me, however. And I can tell your leg lengths are a little mismatched. Have you seen a physical therapist for that before?”

Harry shook his head.

“All right, well, I’ll have Cindy make a follow up appointment for you, and once you’re discharged we can see about referring you to another therapist. Have you been experiencing back pain recently?” he asked. Another nod from Harry. “Before or after your hospitalisation?”

“Both,” Harry replied in a small voice, so quiet that Louis could barely hear him.

Dr Vaswani nodded as if he’d expected that answer and helped Harry back up onto the table. “Let’s go over those exercises and get you out of here, all right?”

The exercises were all fairly simple, but Harry seemed to struggle with them, only able to lift his legs and hold them for a few seconds at a time. Eventually, Dr Vaswani left Harry to his own devices for the moment and retreated into his office to draw up a prescription for Harry’s back pain. Louis took that as his cue to return to Harry’s side.

“Feeling okay?” he asked with a wry smile as Harry strained to get his arse up in the air with his feet and shoulders planted firmly on the table. Louis was making a joke out of it, but it was uncomfortable to watch Harry struggle with something that Louis knew was once as easy as breathing.

“Feel like I’ve been run over,” Harry said through gasping breaths. “Fuck!” He collapsed back down onto the table, his right thigh spasming uncontrollably. “Can you—ah! Ow, ow, ow—”

“Do you want me to get the doctor?” Louis asked, already panicking.

“No, can you just—ow!—just like—” Harry gestured vaguely at his leg, unable to get the words out.
Louis put his hands on the cramping muscle without thinking and squeezed tight, hoping it would help. “Better?” he asked, digging his fingers in when Harry let out a hiss of relief.

Harry nodded, letting his eyes drift closed as Louis massaged his thigh. It felt normal to touch Harry again like this, like the last ten years hadn’t even happened, and then the door to Dr Vaswani’s office swung open again, and Louis jumped away from Harry like he’d been caught in the middle of some illicit act. He didn’t have to see Harry’s face to know that his expression was probably dripping with disdain at Louis’s seeming inability to so much as touch Harry if someone else was in the room.

But it wasn’t like that. It wasn’t.

“Everything okay?” Dr Vaswani asked as he walked over, perhaps sensing the tension between the two of them.

“Cramp,” Harry replied quickly, his face still twisted up with pain.

Louis swallowed hard, feeling like the lowest of the low for allowing himself to leave Harry’s side when he was hurting like that. He strayed a little closer again, watching as Dr Vaswani expertly massaged Harry’s leg until the muscle finally stilled.

After, he turned slightly to address both Louis and Harry as he handed over the prescription. “I understand there are unusual circumstances, so if your mother or sister want to pick this up for you later—”

“I can get it,” Louis volunteered. He snatched the slip of paper out of the doctor’s hand before Harry could disagree and then stared down at him, daring Harry to protest.

“All right,” Dr Vaswani said nodding. “The pharmacy is on the other end of the floor. You’ll see signs for it once you’re out in the hall. I’ll just finish Harry up with some stretches, and you can come collect him when you’re done.” He smiled brightly, and Louis struggled to return it with a smile of his own.

It wasn’t until he was out of the physical therapy centre and on his way to the pharmacy that he felt like he could breathe normally again. It had hurt more than Louis had expected to see Harry in pain like that, even though it was something so temporary.

Louis rushed through the process of filling Harry’s prescription, ignoring the raised eyebrows from the pharmacist when he reached the counter and she saw Harry’s name on the slip of paper. She filled it without saying a word, thankfully, sparing Louis the inevitably embarrassing outburst that would have ensued if she’d so much as opened her mouth.

It wasn’t her fault so much as the fact that Louis could feel the weeks of tension coiling up tight inside him, building and building with no actual release, even now that Harry was no longer at death’s door. Things had only gotten more complicated, in fact, since Harry had woken up.

When Louis returned to the physical therapy centre with Harry’s prescription in hand, he became aware of two things simultaneously. The first was that Dr Vaswani had vanished again, and the second was that Harry was curled up on the exam table in a ball, gently sobbing into his bent knees.

“What happened?” Louis demanded, rushing over to his side. He looked around frantically for Dr Vaswani with no luck.

Harry shook his head. “I asked him to get me some tea,” he replied through hiccupping sobs. “I just
—I can’t really—can you just hug me for a minute?” he asked desperately, staring up at Louis with red-rimmed eyes. “Please?”

Louis wound his arms around Harry’s shoulders and held him tight. This time, when Dr Vaswani came back into the room, Louis didn’t let go.
It took some time after finishing up his appointment for Louis to coax Harry back upstairs. He was adamant about not wanting his mum and sister to see him immediately after his emotional breakdown, which was understandable. Louis held onto him in the waiting room for as long as he was certain he could get away with before finally letting Harry go and gently reminding him that Harry’s family was still waiting on them back at his suite.

The pain relievers Dr Vaswani had prescribed were nothing more than an extra strength anti-inflammatory combined with a muscle relaxant, but Harry seemed remarkably out of it when they finally reached the eighth floor. Maybe from the lack of pain more than the actual effects of the drugs themselves.

In any case, Harry smiled dopily at Gemma when Louis wheeled him back into his suite, and summarily announced: “You look really pretty.”

“Thanks?” she replied, quirking an eyebrow at Louis. “They didn’t give him morphine or something, did they?”

Louis shook his head. “Think he just needs some rest.”

He helped Harry up out of the chair, onto wobbling legs, and back into bed, where Harry curled up like a cat under the covers and immediately closed his eyes.

“How did things go?” Anne asked, glancing between Louis and her son, who already seemed to be well on his way to unconsciousness.

Louis shrugged. He didn’t want to tell them about the bad stuff, but he didn’t want to lie either.

“The doctor said the muscle weakness is normal and gave him some exercises,” Louis said. “He seemed more concerned about Harry’s back problems, honestly. Wants him to do more therapy for that, to help with his posture.”

“What about the wheelchair?” Anne pressed worriedly.

“They just didn’t want him to strain himself,” Louis told her. “He had a pretty bad cramp, but as long as he keeps doing the exercises, the doctor said he’ll be back to normal soon.”

Anne nodded, clearly relieved by that news. Louis could understand why. Even knowing the
reason for it, seeing Harry almost completely unable to walk must have been difficult for her to
deal with. And she probably knew better than anyone about Harry’s tendency to keep any suffering
close to the chest, usually until the problem got too big for him to deal with on his own.

“I’ll make sure he does them,” Gemma volunteered. “Did they say how long after he’s discharged
he needs to keep it up?”

Louis shook his head. “I assume they’d figure that out after,” he replied. “Does he already have a
discharge date?”

Anne and Gemma exchanged a worrying glance. “No,” Gemma replied in a slow voice. “Not
exactly.” She pursed her lips in a way that made it very clear she wasn’t up to saying anything else
on the matter.

Louis was still tempted to ask, but then Harry snored loudly from where he lay in between the four
of them, and Louis felt instantly guilty for discussing Harry’s life and future like he wasn’t right
there.

“Maybe we should go,” Louis decided, glancing up to meet Sam’s eyes. “Text me, I guess,” he told
Gemma, “if he wakes up and needs something.”

Gemma nodded, her face still frozen in a stiff mask of discomfort.

Louis was going to have to ask Harry about his discharge plans again later. The way Gemma had
spoken about it seemed to imply that something must have changed since Louis had learned Harry
was avoiding his psychiatric evaluation.

He couldn’t contemplate it all right now. At the moment, he wanted nothing more than to head
back to the condo and just relax for a few hours.

Sam was on board with that plan in theory, but not so much in practice. Once they stepped inside
the condo, she darted to the guest room to grab her laptop and then parked herself on the sofa to
work.

Louis walked over to her with a look of pure determination plastered on his face and plucked the
computer right out of her hands. “We’re relaxing,” he said firmly, ignoring her pleading expression
as he placed the laptop safely out of her reach in one of the empty kitchen cabinets.

Sam resembled a wounded puppy when Louis turned back around to face her, but he held firm.
They put on a movie, Sam’s choice to make up for Louis bullying her into putting work down for
more than two seconds. She picked a ghost movie, one that ended up being legitimately scary
much to Louis’s surprise.

He enjoyed it; there was something to be said for horror and true crime and the like, in that it gave
his brain no room to worry about anything other than what was playing right in front of his eyes.
For a couple hours, Louis forgot all about Harry and whatever secrets Anne and Gemma were
hiding.

They were barely half an hour into the sequel when Jaime called. Louis ignored it, justifying his
decision with the fact that there wasn’t anything time sensitive that needed to be discussed. But
then Jaime called Sam immediately after, and despite Louis’s pointed glare, she answered.

“Hello?” Sam said with an apologetic smile aimed at Louis. “Yeah, he’s right here. Okay, give me
a second to get my laptop set up.”
Louis flopped back against the cushions with a sigh loud enough that he was confident Jaime would be able to hear it through Sam’s mobile. “What does she want?” he asked.

Sam didn’t reply, as she was already climbing up onto the counter to grab her laptop from the cupboard. She placed it down ceremoniously right next to where Louis’s feet were resting on the coffee table, and clicked a few times before sitting back down.

Jaime’s face appeared onscreen a few seconds later.

“Hiya,” Louis said dryly.

Jaime didn’t acknowledge the greeting. “We need to talk about tour again,” she said, and Louis had to bite back the urge to let out an exasperated groan. He didn’t want to think about tour right now. He had too much on his plate still with Harry.

The discussion was quick and to the point, at least. Jaime mainly wanted to go over the logistics of resuming the tour with Louis’s new schedule in place—a necessary evil, but not one that Louis had any interest in being involved with. He hated meetings. There was a reason he delegated that sort of thing with the expectation that Sam and Jaime would make any decision in his best interest.

But with the lack of breaks between the remaining legs of the tour, things were a bit more complicated. They were going to have to switch crews for the rescheduled European dates, and anyone working all three legs was to be paid an additional rate for the inconvenience.

Deciding to drop everything to come play nursemaid to Harry certainly hadn’t come without its material consequences. Louis still couldn’t bring himself to regret it.

Once they’d finalised everything Jaime wanted to go over, Louis was in an undeniably sour mood. But it wasn’t the cost or the hectic schedule that he was fussed about.

“You’re usually excited about tour,” Sam noted in a quiet voice after the call had ended.

Louis gave a half-hearted shrug. “Yeah, well, different circumstances.”

“Because of Harry, you mean?”

“Yeah,” Louis replied with an impassive stare, “because of Harry.”

He stared down at his mobile, which had somehow ended up in his lap over the course of the video call. He spun it around between his fingers aimlessly, the screen still dark.

“There’s something I should tell you,” he said, “about those songs Harry wrote.”

Louis explained the situation in detail, leaving nothing out. He trusted Sam perhaps more than he trusted himself; the only reason he’d hidden everything from her before this was simply because he didn’t want to be confronted with the reality of Harry leaving him a fucking suicide mixtape.

He avoided looking at Sam as he spoke, not sure if he could handle any ounce of emotion that might be contained in her face in response to his explanation. When Louis finally glanced up at her again, her expression was carefully neutral in a way that made it clear she knew he didn’t want her pity.

“Would you play another one?” Sam asked when he was done speaking, and Louis knew that if he told her no, she wouldn’t push him.
Instead, he nodded and set the phone down between them on the coffee table, quickly pulling up the list and hitting play on the next one.

November 23, 2014
Los Angeles, California

Louis knew something was up with Harry from the first opening notes to the song, his suspicions only confirmed when Harry could barely keep his eyes off of Louis throughout in what was perhaps his most blatant display yet.

For whatever reason, it didn’t bother Louis as much as it should have. He met Harry’s gaze as often as he could without forcing it, almost wishing he could do more.

That didn’t seem to matter to Harry, who was pink-cheeked and smiling in the car on the way back to the hotel. He was almost manic, which worried Louis a little as soon as he opened his mouth to speak.

“Do you ever think about what we’re going to do after?”

“After?”

Harry gave Louis a strange look even as he moved closer, scooting to the side until they were touching from shoulder to ankle all along their sides. “Well, we aren’t going to do this forever, are we?”

Louis wasn’t sure exactly what Harry meant by that. Music? The band? Truth be told, he’d never given it much thought. He hadn’t even really banked on ever getting this far. Looking beyond the bounds of the path that had been laid out for them seemed too difficult to even consider right then.

“What, you want to go back to being a baker?” Louis asked.

Harry rolled his eyes, huffing out a laugh. “I suppose the idea of a normal life seems nice sometimes, but no. I think I’m all right with things now.”

Louis wasn’t sure just how much of that was true, but maybe Harry’s quiet struggles with social media and the press had taught him a valuable lesson that he had yet to share with the others. If Louis’s instincts were right, he didn’t think Harry would ever share it.

“What, then?” Louis asked, tired of the guessing game.

Harry stared at him like he couldn’t possibly fathom how Louis wasn’t already on the same page. “Well, we aren’t going to be singing bubble-gum pop to teenage girls forever,” he said matter-of-factly.

Right. There it was, the answer Louis had suspected—feared, even. Maybe it wasn’t rational to live so in the moment that Louis couldn’t even envision his life at thirty, but truthfully, he still wasn’t quite sure how he’d even made it this far.

“So you’re thinking of leaving the band, then.” It came out more accusatory than Louis had meant it to.
“No…” Harry replied cautiously. “I meant after the band. Like all of us. We can finally make the music we want to make, you know?”

Louis didn’t know, because as far as he was concerned, he was making the music he wanted to make, with just a few small adjustments here and there. And frankly, he hadn’t even realised Harry didn’t feel the same.

“Right,” Louis said, settling in against Harry with an unpleasant feeling stirring in the pit of his stomach. He didn’t want to talk about this anymore, but now that Harry had brought it up, he knew it would only be a matter of time before it came up again.

Louis wondered if Zayn had been the one to plant the suggestion in Harry’s head. They’d been spending more time together lately in private, away from even Liam, who had once clung to Zayn like a stubborn barnacle. Louis had suspected that something was wrong when that started too, but he’d convinced himself that if he ignored it, it would go away.

“I guess I’m not sure what I want to do,” he offered.

Harry nuzzled his face into Louis’s hair and let out a happy hum. “It’s all right,” he said. “We’ll figure it out.”

February 12, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis suspected that Harry had started compiling his solo music then, that that’s why he’d included that particular date despite its relative neutrality. There hadn’t been any blow-up, any significant reunion, just an unsettling push in a different direction. One that had caused a ripple in the careful balance of things not so much later on.

Sam wore a peculiar expression on her face as the song ended, and Louis knew it spelled trouble. “D’you think he wanted you to write on them?” she asked without any prompting whatsoever.

Louis dropped his head into his hands, forced himself to keep his breathing even and measured. “I don’t know why on earth he would want something like that,” he replied, even though Liam had asked the same thing.

Sam made a soft sound under her breath. “Have you talked about it yet?”

“Yes,” Louis said, glancing back up at her with a morose expression. “He seemed utterly disappointed that I hadn’t figured it out for myself.” Louis missed out the part where he’d practically fled the scene afterwards, not giving Harry a chance to either explain himself or answer the question.

Sam’s features didn’t budge from their set of pensive determination. “I still think he meant for you to write lyrics,” she said after a few seconds of silence had passed. “It’s something you’d done before, right? In the band?”

“Not often,” Louis replied, aware that he sounded unnecessarily defensive. “It was mostly with Liam. And when I wrote with Harry, it was—that was different.”
Sam frowned as she tilted her head to one side, curling her knees closer to her chest, like she was trying to make herself smaller so as to appear less threatening. “I assume you’re referring to the song-writing team changing things,” she said, waiting for Louis’s hesitant nod before she continued. “Maybe Harry wanted you to have something that was purely you and him. No outside influence whatsoever. He didn’t even tell anyone he’d left you the songs, did he?”

Louis nodded again. “Not to my knowledge,” he amended. “But even if I did write on them, what would be the point? To leave it to rot untouched in a vault somewhere? It’s not like I could publish them myself.”

Sam shrugged. “Putting them out into the world wouldn’t necessarily mean capitalising on them,” she pointed out. “I’m sure he trusted you to make the right decision.”

Louis felt sick at that. He didn’t want the responsibility of doing right by Harry in the public eye—after his death, no less—and he wished now more than anything that Sam hadn’t brought any of this up.

But then again, maybe she was right. Louis was obligated to at least entertain the possibility. It wasn’t as if the thought hadn’t crossed his own mind as well.

Louis sat back and sighed, stretching his arms up over his head. His stomach gave a pathetic gurgle, right on cue. “You feeling up to lunch just yet?”

“Sure,” Sam answered, with a look that implied she thought Louis was trying to change the subject to avoid arriving at a solid conclusion about the playlist.

“I’m considering it,” he informed her. “The lyrics, I mean. I’m just not sure yet.”

But maybe he was a little bit more certain after their lunch, when they stopped off in a hipster stationery store to buy a journal and pen. If Louis was going to do this, he was going to do it right.

Louis’s plans of staying in and focusing on nothing but writing were dashed, however, as soon as he walked in the door to the condo. He knew the second his mobile started to ring that it wasn’t Jaime; she’d definitely gone to bed as soon as they’d finished their video call earlier.

He wasn’t expecting it to be Briana when he dug his mobile out of his pocket. Louis answered quickly, worried that the unexpected call meant something was wrong with Freddie.

“Oh thank god,” Briana said as soon as he picked up, which did nothing to assuage his fears. “Are you busy?”

Louis could hear what sounded like crying in the background. He walked quickly over to the master bedroom and shut himself inside. “No,” he replied. “What’s wrong?”

“Freddie had a nightmare,” she told him. “He’s convinced you’re going to leave and never come back.”

Louis sighed heavily as he sat down on the edge of the bed. “Put him on?” he asked.

It was nearly a minute before Louis heard Freddie’s heavy breathing on the other end of the line, the rhythm of it indicating Briana had only just managed to get him to stop crying. “Daddy?”

“Hey, bud, it’s me. What’s the matter, huh? Your mom said you had a bad dream.”

“I thought you left again,” Freddie replied in a small voice, sniffling softly. “And you weren’t
going to come back ever.”

“Fred, we talked about this before, remember?” Louis kept his tone gentle. It was difficult to explain his schedule to a child; he wished he didn’t have to. “And I wouldn’t ever leave without coming to say goodbye first, okay? Can you hand the phone back to your mom now? I’m going to ask her if I can come have dinner with you guys.”

“Okay.”

Briana’s response was immediate. “It was on speaker,” she informed Louis.

“Is that a yes?”

“Well, I can’t exactly say no,” she replied with a quiet sigh. “It’s fine. You mind if we go out? I wasn’t really planning on company, so.”

“Yeah, just tell me where you want us to meet you?”

“Us?” Briana’s tone was guarded. Louis wondered if she was afraid he intended to bring Harry along.

“Sam,” he replied. “My personal assistant. That’s okay with you, right?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll text you with the reservations. Thanks for…you know.”

“Well, it is my fault, I guess,” Louis joked. “Maybe if we bring him to some of the West Coast shows it’ll make more sense to him when I’m gone? Just a thought, though.”

“It might be tough with school, but…. Yeah, maybe. We can talk about it tonight.”

“All right. See you later, then.”

Louis toppled over backwards onto the mattress after Briana hung up and stared at the ceiling fan’s endless rotation. Someday, after tour was over and all the madness was behind him, he was going to have to take Freddie and Briana on a very long holiday somewhere far away.
Dinner was…nice, which hadn’t been something Louis had expected to say about it when he and Sam had left the condo a couple hours after Briana’s phone call. In the interim, Louis had insisted on another movie and a rousing game of scrabble via their mobiles. Sam had won, of course.

Once at the restaurant, Louis had sort of expected to fall into his and Briana’s usual routine of their relationship remaining civil but strained. But things did seem easier throughout their meal, even though Louis knew now about Briana’s conversation with Harry before his hospitalisation.

Sam’s presence certainly helped things along. She took to Freddie immediately, having some kind of natural affinity for meeting children on their level. It reminded Louis a lot of Harry, actually, especially once she asked their waiter for two sets of crayons and set about drawing a field of cacti and flowers on the back of her menu at Freddie’s urging.

Table talk was light-hearted by necessity with Freddie there (not to mention a restaurant full of other patrons in close quarters), but maybe that was really what Louis had needed all along. A break from thinking about any of his real problems, distracted enough by light conversation and a good meal that Louis didn’t even have room to obsess about Harry or anything else in even the furthest corners of the back of his mind.

At the end of the night, when all parties were full and disappointingly sober, Louis walked Briana and Freddie to her car, not only because it was the sort of gentlemanly thing his mum would have expected him to do, but because he genuinely didn’t want to see them leave.

“You are planning to stop by before you fly back to the UK, right?” Briana asked, hefting Freddie onto one hip so he was high enough for Louis to lean down and kiss him goodbye.

“Oh of course,” Louis replied.

He didn’t mention the fact that he had yet to book a flight out of LA because he hadn’t decided yet whether he wanted to go home first or head straight to South America for the first tour date. The former would mean less time with Harry while the latter meant not seeing his sisters until after the tour ended. Either way, he was going to sacrifice something, which is why he couldn’t help but continue to put off making a decision about it.

Louis put that out of his mind for now and angled his head out of instinct, leaning down to press his lips gently against Briana’s cheek like he had with Freddie before finally drawing back.
She seemed surprised by the gesture but managed to pull herself together after a beat or two. “Say goodbye to Daddy, Freddie.”

“Bye,” Freddie said through a yawn, giving a half-hearted wave with his free hand, the other clinging to Briana’s jumper to keep him from spilling out of her arms.

Louis mussed the kid’s blonde hair with a fond smile and stepped out of the way to let Briana buckle him into his booster seat in the back. He watched as she finally pulled out of their parking space, returning the gesture when he spotted Freddie’s arm again waving frantically from the back seat. And then they were gone, and Louis could feel all the warmth from their evening together quickly starting to fade.

“Thanks for coming with,” Louis said to Sam as they began their slow walk back to his car. He bumped his hip into hers gently, a quiet show of affection.

“Thanks for buying me dinner,” she replied with a wry smile. “Again.”

There was a long silence after that, one that lasted through them getting buckled in and setting off for the condo again and wasn’t broken until Sam suddenly let out an unhappy sound under her breath as she scrolled religiously through social media on her mobile.

Louis knew that sound. His stomach dropped before he could even get the words out. “What is it this time?”

“It’s not a big deal,” Sam replied uneasily. That didn’t mean much; Sam always tried to convince him it wasn’t a big deal, no matter the circumstances.

“Just tell me,” Louis said through gritted teeth. It was better to hear it now, whatever it was, when he had no choice but to keep his emotions safely contained as he drove.

“It’s really not—someone took a photo in the car park.”

“Where?” Louis replied dumbly, his brain taking a few seconds to catch up to his tongue. “Oh, you mean—”

“Yeah.” Sam tapped at her phone a few times, quietly reading. “It’s all nonsense, really. The usual conspiracy theorising. Nothing new.”

Louis had known all that before she’d said it, but he was still seething over the thought of someone taking a perfectly innocent gesture and turning it into something more malicious. Like there wasn’t a living, breathing human child at the centre of it all.

“How come no one ever bothers to float the idea that it’s perfectly normal for two parents to show affection in front of their child?” he demanded, more of the universe than Sam herself. “I kissed her on the cheek,” he continued. “I kiss my sisters on the cheek.”

“I know,” Sam replied quietly, stopping Louis in his tracks.

“Sorry,” he said, feeling his face heat up. He hadn’t meant to take his anger out on her. “Look, can you just text Briana and let her know? She might want to turn off comments on her Instagram if it blows up.”

“Sure.”

It was an unfortunate necessity by now that Sam was well-used to handling. Some people just lost
any capacity for basic human decency the second they opened a web browser, it seemed. Louis was used to it; for other people in his life—Briana included—it was a bit harder to deal with.

Louis wasn’t feeling up to conversation when they got back to the condo, but Sam didn’t put any pressure on him to socialise. She was content to go back to the work she’d been neglecting all day at Louis’s behest, and he took the opportunity to retreat to his room, intending to finally crack open the journal he’d purchased earlier to begin writing the lyrics Harry may or may not have wanted from him.

Now that Louis had peace and quiet and the journal he’d bought set out in front of him, he pulled out his mobile, scrolling to the next song on the list. He wanted to start with something he hadn’t already listened to, intending to get his creative juices flowing by just writing whatever came to him as he listened.

It was harder this way, working backwards from a nearly complete piece of music, but sometimes Louis savoured the challenge.

December 15, 2014
London, England

Louis was freezing. He was freezing because Harry was a bloody lunatic who didn’t even think to turn the heat on when he was the one who had invited guests over, and for once it wasn’t even Louis making a big deal out of nothing, because clearly the other lads were feeling similarly.

“Sorry,” Harry said, crouching down next to the fireplace as he made several poor attempts to light it. “I don’t really notice it myself.”

Liam gave him another minute before finally stepping in to take care of the fire himself, and once it was finally lit Louis surged forward to warm his hands, ignoring the snickers from the others at how overeager he seemed. Louis wasn’t fussed about any of that. He just wanted to get warm. And figure out just why the hell Harry had been so intent on getting them all here.

They were all at their wit’s end was the thing. Too much time spent cooped up together, and Louis could tell that every one of them was sick of it. Louis had been looking forward to going home to his mum’s and spending some time with his sisters—and away from Harry—but then this had come out of nowhere at the tail end of their book signing earlier in the week.

A band meeting. They didn’t have those anymore, not the way they used to, without a room full of executives and industry bigwigs watching their every move.

“Now that we’re not freezing our bollocks off, you mind telling us why we’re hanging out here at half-eight instead of catching up on sleep?” It was Niall, of course, unafraid to be blunt even more so than Louis sometimes.

Louis could see Harry shooting him a glare out of the corner of his eye. He turned to face them, not wanting to miss a single detail of the discussion. Whatever Harry had brought them here for, it had to be important.

It was only Harry’s happy-go-lucky attitude that had kept Louis’s nerves from imploding. He didn’t seem distressed at all, and while Harry was better than most at keeping his emotions in
check, he wasn’t \textit{that} good. If there was something to be worried about, Louis would have known it already.

That false sense of security was what left Louis blindsided when Harry finally opened his mouth. “I think we should take a break,” he said all in one breath, and then holding it after.

Silence followed his statement, and then Zayn finally spoke up. “What, you mean the band?”

“Of course I mean the band,” Harry snapped a bit hotly. “What the fuck else would I mean?”

No one answered but there was an unspoken reply hanging heavy in the air.

Louis was too fixated on the fact that he should have known this was coming to formulate any kind of coherent response. Harry had practically broadcasted his thoughts a few weeks ago, back in November, when he’d asked Louis what he wanted to do after the band. Because apparently, after was \textit{now}. Or at least that’s what Harry wanted.

“What do you mean by a break?” Liam inquired, cautious as ever.

“I mean a break,” Harry replied flatly. “No recording, no touring. A break. To do whatever we want.” He sucked in a deep breath. “Or maybe to record and tour other stuff,” he continued. “Other projects. Whatever we want,” he said again. “We’d actually have time to think about what we really want to be doing, you know?”

It took Louis a minute to unpack what he was saying. From their silence, Louis guessed that the other lads were having a similarly difficult time figuring it out. Suddenly, their casual positions on Harry’s furniture looked like feigned nonchalance, none of them wanting to betray their reactions to the news by moving.

“Haz, we have a ten-year management contract,” Louis pointed out.

“Only for One Direction!” Harry replied, just slightly too enthusiastic for the sombreness of the atmosphere filling the room. “I mean, I know some of us need an actual break, but like, the option’s there, you know? We could do our own stuff, too.”

“You want to quit the band to go solo,” Zayn said tonelessly.

Louis glanced over at him, curious about his reaction, but he couldn’t find an answer in Zayn’s expression. He didn’t seem upset about what Harry was proposing, but he certainly didn’t seem happy about it either.

“I’m not talking about quitting,” Harry retorted, his face pinking up in obvious frustration. “It’s just a break.”

“Yeah, you keep saying that,” Niall cut in, “but I don’t get what you mean.”

“We can’t keep doing an album and a tour a year!” Harry replied, his politely eager façade finally cracking under the intense scrutiny from the others. The sound of the fireplace crackling in the background suddenly seemed sinister rather than merry. “You hate it, I know you all hate it, but you act like there aren’t any other options!”

“So what exactly are you proposing?” Liam asked. Louis could tell by his tone and posture that he’d reverted to Daddy Direction-mode in the face of all the chaos, but Harry’s emotional outburst had clearly distressed him to some degree. “We’ll take a vote.”
Harry laid out his plan in a surprisingly articulate manner, keying Louis in even more to the fact that he must have been planning on this for ages, had probably rehearsed the speech and all. And it wasn’t altogether a bad plan: he wanted to bring an ultimatum to Modest, asking for a year off with no obligations before they all got together again to record their fifth album—the last one they were obligated to write together as dictated by the contract they’d originally signed with Syco.

“What about the tour?” Niall asked with a contemplative frown. It was a good question. They’d already announced dates, sold tickets…. Rescheduling would be a logistical nightmare.

Harry shook his head. “We can ask them to…I dunno.” He was losing steam already, but it was clear he wasn’t planning to give up. “If they won’t let us skive off a whole tour then at least they can take the pressure off to do another album at the same time.” He glanced around at all of the boys separately, pleading for their commiseration. “We’ve just done five different events in multiple countries in as many days,” he pointed out. “I’m exhausted. We’re all exhausted. We can’t do another year of this.”

Louis knew that Harry was right, that their schedule was destroying them physically and mentally, but he couldn’t help but feel like there was something Harry wasn’t telling them, that there was something else Harry wanted out of this proposed break that he was keeping close to the chest.

Louis looked down before Harry could catch his eye. He already knew his answer.

“Is that everything?” Liam asked. “Should we put it to a vote?”

Harry looked unhappy about the prospect but nodded in agreement anyway.

Liam sucked in a quick breath. “Guess I’ll go first. I’m gonna have to say no to the idea, sorry Haz.”

Harry took it well, pursing his lips and nodding as he waited for the next verdict.

Niall cleared his throat. “It’s a no from me as well.”

Louis could feel the tension in his shoulders loosening now that the pressure was off of him to give a deciding vote. Two no’s and once Zayn gave his, Louis would be off the hook. He’d side with Harry publicly and explain to the others if necessary that he’d agreed with them but wanted to give Harry a show of solidarity.

Then Zayn spoke. “I think we should take the break.”

Louis stomach dropped. He could tell right away that he wasn’t the only one surprised by Zayn’s response. Even Harry looked taken aback by Zayn’s willingness to go along with his plan.

Liam was the first to recover, turning to Louis quickly. “What about you, Louis?” he prompted.

Suddenly every pair of eyes were on Louis and it was up to him to give the deciding vote after all. Majority rules. He swallowed heavily, taking care to avoid Harry’s eyes as he opened his mouth to answer. “I think the band should stay together,” he said carefully, focusing on Liam to keep himself from looking over at Harry. “I think we should stay together for now.”

“That’s three to two, then,” Liam announced. “You’re okay with that, Harry?”

It was clear from the tone of his voice that he was very not okay with it. “Doesn’t seem like I really have much of a choice if the rest of you won’t back me up,” he said tightly.
Louis could practically feel Harry’s eyes boring into his skull, but still he refused to look up, refused to face him. He was the only one Harry didn’t even say a word to later when the band left the house, even knowing that they wouldn’t see each other for weeks after. Louis felt like he deserved it.

February 12, 2021
Los Angeles, California

By the end of the song, Louis had nothing in front of him on the first page of the journal except for a half-hearted pen mark, a false start where Louis had been fooled into thinking something might come to him if he just put pen to paper and tried to force it out. Evidently, that hadn’t been the solution to whatever writing block he was experiencing.

He tapped his pen against the page, willing something to come out. Anything, a word, a half-formed idea, just…something, to prove that this hadn’t all been for naught. But Louis’s mind—an entity of its own, and one he could barely get to shut up at the best of times—was suddenly blank. He couldn’t think of where to even start.

Louis was tempted to scrap the whole idea in that instant. A Louis from years, maybe even just months, before would have done it without question, filing the whole attempt away as just a bit of foolish whimsy, never to be attempted again. Louis liked to think he was a bit more determined than that now.

Louis pushed the journal aside for the moment and laid down on the bed, flat on his back as he stared up at the ceiling, thinking. He ran through what he remembered from his therapy sessions in the past—the parts of it he hadn’t immediately dismissed as utter bollocks, anyway.

If he couldn’t write, that meant there was something preventing him from focusing on writing. He’d never been good at clearing his head. Usually he worked around that with cigarettes and alcohol, or a bit of weed, but seeing as the latter wasn’t available to him at the moment and was really just a plaster over a gaping wound in the end….

Louis decided he was going to try to be an adult about it this time. What was bothering him? Harry, obviously. But what about Harry?

There was a tug of guilt low in his gut. Ah, there it was. The secrets he’d been keeping for years, to protect Harry, now a point of confrontation he couldn’t ignore. If Louis truly wanted to turn Harry’s songs into something that felt authentically theirs—equal parts of both of their hearts and minds—he had no choice but to come clean about what he’d done nearly seven years ago.

Louis didn’t have a choice anymore. He had to tell Harry about the sex tape.
Chapter 61

Louis woke significantly later in the morning than he had in quite some time, feeling unusually well-rested. It took him a few minutes to fully regain consciousness, that’s how deeply he’d been asleep, and for a moment he wondered if he’d taken something before bed last night and just forgotten.

But no, apparently forcing yourself to confront your issues head-on instead of just avoiding them worked better than even a sleeping tablet.

Louis laid there for several more minutes, thinking about his decision to finally come clean. It was the right one; he was sure of that now, but it didn’t make things any easier.

He gave himself another moment to come to terms with it before forcing himself up and out of bed. The condo was quiet when Louis made his way into the kitchen to pour a bowl of cereal, but that didn’t necessarily mean Sam was still asleep.

More likely than not, she was working again, though it was entirely possible that she’d worked herself to the bone until dawn before finally passing out.

Louis took a quick peek inside her room after breakfast to determine that this was indeed the case. That made things easier for him, as he really didn’t care to come up with an explanation for why he needed to see Harry alone.

Next up was making sure Anne and Gemma weren’t going to be hanging around when Louis arrived. He really wasn’t sure what to do about that, but he sent the text anyway, hoping for the best.

Apparently, the cosmos had decided he was making the right decision after all because luck shone down upon him when Gemma replied only a few seconds later. *I’m out getting breakfast with mum. Should be back in an hour. What’s up?*

Louis didn’t expend any effort in coming up with an answer, having already secured the
information he needed.

Louis decided to time himself in the shower using the next song on the playlist. He didn’t want to waste any time, even though an hour was plenty long enough to get to the hospital and tell Harry what he needed to get off his chest.

Louis was grateful to discover the date was what it was. He didn’t think he could have handled something depressing right before finally coming clean to Harry. Louis was committed, yeah, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew there was every possibility that this would all blow up in his face and that Harry had every right to hate him for what he’d done. So he’d take the happy song for now and hope for the best.

December 25, 2014
Manchester, England

“Hey.”
“Hi.”

Louis glanced around at the interior of the hotel suite Harry had booked in Manchester. Neutral ground. It was the only way he would agree to even see Louis ahead of their scheduled reunion with the rest of the band to begin preparations for the upcoming tour. The tour he hadn’t even wanted to do.

“I don’t really know what to say,” Louis admitted.

Harry was sat on the bed with Louis stood in front of him, both their arms crossed over their chests in unconscious gestures of stubborn pride.

“Well, you’re the one who wanted to do this,” Harry pointed out.

And well, he was right, unfortunately. But Louis had never been great with heartfelt speeches. He was even worse with apologies.

Louis took a step forward. “I’m sorry, then, I suppose.”

Harry crooked an eyebrow. “You suppose?”

Louis’s expression turned helpless, pleading. He was making a solid effort. He really was. Couldn’t Harry see that?

Apparently not, because Harry’s face didn’t change.

“I am sorry,” Louis tried again. “I’m sorry for hurting you. But I was only doing what I thought was best.”

“For who?” Harry said with a sharp laugh, the mirth in it nowhere to be found.

“For me,” Louis replied firmly, and it was clear his response had taken Harry by surprise. He took advantage of Harry’s stunned silence and barrelled onward. “I don’t think I’ll have much of a career outside the band,” he said, dumping all the words out in one quick breath. “So forgive me if
I want to make the most of it while I still can.”

Harry blinked at him, confused. “I wasn’t saying we should quit the band,” he insisted, but Louis knew better.

Sure, Harry wasn’t lying, but Louis could already tell where the path he was on led. Once Harry was free of the band’s shackles, there was nothing stopping every manager and label from approaching him with shiny multi-million pound contracts. Jeff was already waiting in the wings, and Louis wasn’t stupid enough to think he wouldn’t leap at the chance to get Harry signed as a solo artist.

And after that, there wouldn’t be a band, because Louis wasn’t stupid enough to think that One Direction could even exist without Harry. And then Louis wouldn’t have anything at all.

“All the contracts? I don’t think that’s in the cards for me. I’ll write probably, maybe produce, but come on, Harry—no one comes to a One Direction concert just to see me.”

Louis had never expected to be stood in front of a sold-out stadium, and he could be okay knowing that it would never happen again. But not right now. Not while they still had time.

Harry’s frown softened. “You could’ve told me that’s what was bothering you,” he said.

Louis shook his head, arms still crossed tight over his chest. “You didn’t give me a chance,” he pointed out. “I didn’t know you were going to spring something like that on us when you invited me to your house, Haz.”

Harry nodded solemnly, like he understood, and then extended his arms, gesturing for Louis to step closer.

Louis did so, moving into the V of Harry’s thighs until they were just centimetres apart. He didn’t even bat an eyelid when Harry started to undo his fly.

“Apology blowjobs?” Louis joked.

Harry stared up at him from under his lashes and rolled his eyes. “If that were the case, I’d think you’d be the one down here,” he retorted.

Louis still thought that was up for debate, but he certainly wasn’t about to look a gift blowjob in the mouth. Especially not one as pretty as Harry’s.

Harry’s nose was still cold from the chill air outside when he pressed it against Louis’s stomach, breathing in the scent of him where it was strongest like he was wont to do sometimes. Louis used to make fun of him for it at first, but then he’d realised how hot it got Harry to do it and he stopped. Let him smell the roses, as it were.

But for all that Harry’s nose was cold, the inside of his mouth felt even hotter in comparison when he finally swallowed Louis down right to the base, pushing his frost-tipped nose into the thatch of hair that Louis left a little longer than he would have done if Harry hadn’t requested it. Sometimes Harry liked to run his fingers through it, which always felt a bit weird, but Louis would have let Harry do literally anything involving his hands near Louis’s cock.

He wasn’t sure why he was thinking about all this when he had Harry right there in front of him, mouth lazily sucking as he bobbed his head back and forth, but for some reason all Louis could
think about was the past even though Harry was still with him in the present.

“Missed this,” Louis murmured as he threaded his hands through Harry’s long curls, and when the words reached his own ears they sounded like ‘missed you’ instead.

And if Louis smiled to himself on Boxing Day while looking at pictures of Harry out in Manchester wearing a blue handkerchief around his neck, no one needed be the wiser.

February 13, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis left the condo quickly, not wanting to waste any time, and took the car to Cedars-Sinai. Traffic was in his favour; it only took a few minutes to make it to the car park after turning onto the main road. Still, Louis was bursting with nervous energy by the time he got there and overly paranoid at the possibility that Gemma might have overestimated how long they’d be out. Louis couldn’t afford any ill-timed interruptions.

Louis was half-expecting something to halt his progress after the easy trip there. Maybe the lifts wouldn’t work, or a nurse would stop him before he could get to Harry’s room because they needed to run tests for some reason. But nothing of the sort happened. Louis arrived outside the door to Harry’s suite right on schedule, and there wasn’t a single thing stopping him from marching in and saying his piece.

Except himself, as it turned out. But Louis was determined. He gave himself five seconds, counting them out loud under his breath, and then placed his hand on the knob and turned.

Louis finally threw open the door to Harry’s room, steeling himself to vomit out a confession he wasn’t sure he was even physically capable of giving voice to now that Harry was right there, and then stopped short.

Because the last person on earth Louis expected to see stood at the foot of Harry’s bed was Zayn, his hands braced against the safety rail, face drawn, and looking nearly as exhausted as Harry himself.

“What are you doing here?” The words tumbled out of Louis’s mouth before he could think better of them, and suddenly the air inside the room was oppressive, suffocatingly dense.

Zayn hadn’t mentioned coming to see Harry when they’d spoken over the phone. As far as Louis knew, he hadn’t told anyone at all he was flying out from New York, because that was definitely the sort of thing Gemma would have warned him about. Even Harry wasn’t dumb enough to keep that a secret.

Zayn stared at him for a moment with hollow eyes. “Maybe we should talk a bit outside, yeah?” he suggested in a quiet voice.

Louis looked at Harry, who seemed stricken by the whole situation. Maybe Zayn was right. All Louis knew is that any plans he’d had of telling Harry about the tape had been indefinitely postpone.

Louis followed Zayn out into the corridor and waited for him to close the door. When he’d first
realised it was Zayn standing there, he hadn’t been able to process anything except pure shock. But now—now Louis was angry.

Things between two of them had always been complicated. That hadn’t changed after Louis and Harry had gone their separate ways—for the final time.

If anything, that had only made things worse. Because Louis had made the now-regrettable decision to patch things up with Zayn after his mother had passed only to have that thrown back in his face once things with Harry had ended.

And truth be told, Louis still didn’t get it. Harry and Zayn had had their moments, and Louis had always suspected that Zayn was a bit friendlier with Harry than he himself would have liked, but they hadn’t been close.

“What are you doing here?” Louis asked again, tone a bit more acrid than it had been the first time.

“You called me,” Zayn reminded him. As if Louis could even forget.

“Yeah, I’m aware,” Louis replied. “You didn’t mention anything about coming to see Harry when we spoke.”

Zayn laughed. “So anyone who wants to come visit Harry in hospital has to clear it with you, first? That’s a bit rich, innit?” He slouched against the wall next to the door to Harry’s suite, fingers playing with the corner of a fag carton poking out of his pocket.

Zayn was bulkier than he’d been the last time Louis had seen him. He looked healthier, despite the clear exhaustion etched into the lines of his face. He didn’t smell like cigarette smoke either, despite the carton in his pocket. Louis wondered if it was a security blanket of sorts. That if Zayn needed a smoke, he could have one, even if he wasn’t ever planning on going through with it.

“Things are different now,” Louis said confidently, and he believed it.

Zayn evidently didn’t. “Oh?” he said, lifting his eyebrows in pure scepticism. “I don’t remember reading about your coming out story in Attitude.”

“You read Attitude?” Louis shot back, the joke flying from his lips out of instinct. Muscle memory.

Zayn didn’t laugh. He didn’t even crack a smile. “If you’re trying to get Harry back in your good graces,” he warned, “don’t. You’ve done enough damage.”

“Oh yeah,” Louis countered, “because you’ve clearly been a great friend.”

Zayn’s face contorted like he was trying to keep himself from replying but couldn’t. Finally, the words emerged. “Harry tried to call me,” he said in halting voice, “the night he—” He stopped short of actually saying it out loud. “I was asleep, so I didn’t answer. He left a voicemail, saying he wanted me to tell you something.”

“What?” Louis asked.

Zayn shook his head. “You can ask him yourself.” With that he stalked off, leaving Louis alone in the corridor to stew in a maelstrom of frantic thoughts.

It took Louis a few more minutes to compose himself well enough that he felt comfortable stepping inside Harry’s suite again.
Harry, who had crawled under the covers in their absence, perked up again once Louis walked in. “Where’s Zayn?” he asked immediately.

Louis pretended not to notice that Harry looked disappointed by Zayn’s disappearance. “Dunno,” he admitted. “Think he’s waiting for me to clear out before he comes back.”

“Oh.”

Louis moved closer to the bed, eyeing up the bit of empty space by Harry’s feet. “Mind if I sit?” he asked. He wasn’t sure at all anymore if he should go through with his original plan after Zayn’s revelation, but maybe…maybe he could use his intended confession to his advantage now.

Louis waited for Harry to nod in permission before taking a seat. He opened his mouth quickly, wanting to get the first word in before Harry had the opportunity to side-track things.

“I came here to tell you something,” Louis said quickly. He met Harry’s eyes, twin mirrors reflecting his own apprehension, and suddenly it was like all the mental preparation Louis had gone through to get to this point meant nothing at all. “But there’s something I want to ask you first.”

“Okay?” Harry replied in a small voice.

Louis licked his lips. “When you left that voicemail for Zayn…what did you ask him to tell me?”

Harry’s face crumpled, his eyes watering within seconds. He shook his head, but Louis held his gaze steady, refusing to back down. He needed to know this. If Harry decided to never speak to Louis again after he finally came clean, then he could live with that, but he needed to know this first.

“I….” Harry stopped; started again. “I wanted him to tell you that I’d forgiven you. For what happened.” He looked down at his lap as he uttered the words, unable to meet Louis’s eyes any longer.

Louis suddenly felt like there was a boulder lodged squarely in his oesophagus, crushing his windpipe, making it impossible to breathe. He wanted to run, but he couldn’t even move past twisting his fingers tighter in the blanket underneath him, searching for some small measure of stability. He didn’t deserve Harry’s forgiveness. He hadn’t earned an ounce of it.

The silence stretched on for several moments before Harry finally looked up again, his eyes a little redder now around the edges. “You said you had something to tell me,” he prompted.

Louis opened his mouth, trying to force the words out. “It’s about the video I leaked,” he finally managed.

Zayn’s presence was an even crueler reminder now of all the fallout that had come after, with not just Harry but the whole band, how Louis had suddenly become a liability to them all. Louis had wondered sometimes, if Zayn would have stuck around if Louis hadn’t betrayed his trust like that. But he wasn’t brave enough to ever ask.

Harry stared at him, wide-eyed, waiting.

“Some of the songs you wrote—” Louis cut himself off before he could finish the thought. That wasn’t what this was about. “I lied to you back then,” he admitted after a drawn-out silence.

Harry’s face didn’t change. “What do you mean?” he asked. He frowned slightly. “You weren’t the
“I was,” Louis corrected hastily. It was probably best if he didn’t let Harry conjure up a better version of him right before he smashed his own dignity to pieces. “I just lied about the why.”

“Okay,” Harry said stiffly. His expression had gone taut as he waited for an explanation.

Louis sucked in a deep breath. “The video I traded for wasn’t from Wellington,” he explained. “It wasn’t of me at all. It was a video of you.”

Harry didn’t understand. “What do you mean, it was of me?” he questioned.

“It was a sex tape, Harry,” Louis replied bluntly. He could talk around it any longer. He desperately wanted the whole thing to be over. “Someone filmed you and tried to sell it to the tabs.” There it was. The secret Louis had kept for years, out in the open, finally.

It was another minute before Harry replied. It was the longest minute of Louis’s life.

“Who?” Harry asked in a small voice. He was as white as a ghost.

“That bloke from the reality show? I can never remember his name.” Louis was trying to keep his tone light, to ease the blow, even though he knew nothing would ever make it better.

“How did you find out?”

“I happened to answer your phone when Griffiths called,” Louis admitted. “It was sheer luck, honestly.”

“And you told him not to tell me?”

Louis’s expression turned pleading. He needed Harry to understand. “I thought it was better if you didn’t know,” he answered.

Harry nodded. “Okay,” he said quietly. “I think you should go now.”

“Harry—”

“Just go, Louis.”

Harry didn’t look up once, not even when Louis lingered in the door, waiting for him to change his mind, something. It was really over, then. Just like that.
February 13, 2021
Los Angeles, California

It was well past noon by the time that Sam woke up and realised something was wrong.

Louis could hear her pacing through the condo for several minutes before she tried the bedroom door. Upon finding it locked, she gave a polite knock, which Louis felt compelled to answer if only to keep her from involving someone else, like Jaime—or god forbid, Lottie.

Louis pushed his laptop to the side and heaved himself up and out of bed to open the door. Sam peered at him for only a second before pushing past to get inside. When she spotted the pause screen of a true crime documentary on his laptop, she sighed loudly.

“How long have you been at that?” she demanded.

Louis shrugged. “A while.” He wasn’t about to lie to her.

Sam’s eyes roved the room critically before landing on the discarded journal sat on Louis’s desk. She stared at it, frowning. “What happened to your big plan from yesterday?” she asked, making no secret of her disappointment.

Louis sighed and sat back down on the bed, curling himself up in the centre with the blankets drawn up over his legs. “There’s no point,” he replied simply.

“How?” Sam inquired as she sat down on the edge of the bed next to him.

Her expression was open and inviting, and even though Louis didn’t think she could help, he wanted to confide in her anyhow. So that’s what he did.

Sam listened patiently, not saying a word until he was completely finished. “I’m sorry it didn’t go well,” she said, and it wasn’t patronising in the way that most apologies came across.

Louis still felt a bit breathless after spilling everything. “It’s okay,” he replied automatically, even though it really wasn’t.

Sam frowned sympathetically. “It’s all right to be upset about what happened,” she said, “but this
really might be a good thing for both of you in the end. You just have to give him some time to come to terms with what happened. It’s a lot to process, you know?”

Maybe she was right. Louis wasn’t quite so optimistic.

Louis took a few deep breaths before opening his mouth again. “I appreciate the reassurance,” he told her, “I really do, but—I think it’d be better if you just left me alone for a little bit.”

And that was the really great thing about Sam: she never took any of Louis’s foul moods personally.

“Okay,” she said, nodding. She gave the mattress a gentle little pat as she stood up. “Well, if you need me, you know where to find me.”

It was harder to lose himself in the gore and drama of the documentary Louis had been watching once Sam was gone again. Her presence, or maybe just the rehashing of what had happened with Harry, had shaken something loose, and now it was all Louis could think about.

It was the playlist, he decided after a few minutes of restless obsessing. The remaining songs were hanging over his head like a guillotine. Even if Harry chose to never speak to him again, he needed to get the rest of the playlist out of the way once and for all.

February 8, 2015
Sydney, Australia

“Harder, come on, fuck—”

Louis wasn’t sure he was even capable of complying with Harry’s wishes, seeing as the headboard on his hotel bed was already well on its way to leaving a massive dent in the wall. He made a valiant attempt, though, and after realising it wasn’t good enough—the scratches Harry was leaving on his back as he whined and pleaded were evidence enough—decided to change tacks.

Louis pulled out of Harry, ignoring the protests spilling out of the other boy’s mouth as he did so, and flipped over onto his back. “You do it,” he said, “since I’m clearly not doing a good enough job.”

Harry rolled his eyes and reached for the lube. He slicked Louis up again, keeping their eyes connected the whole time, but Louis didn’t back down.

When Harry moved to straddle him, however, Louis shook his head. “Nah, do it the other way around.”

“Is my face suddenly offensive to you now?” Harry asked, looking put out.

“No, but your back is gorgeous,” Louis retorted. “It doesn’t get nearly enough love, from my point of view.” He traced a finger down Harry’s spine as if to emphasise his point. “Your arse, too,” he continued. “Wanna see you split open on my cock, riding me, yeah?”

Harry nodded eagerly, apparently on board with the idea now after Louis’s flattery. He braced himself against the mattress, letting Louis guide himself in before taking control once he was fully
He hadn’t been lying about how hard he’d wanted it, at least. Harry slammed his hips against Louis’s thighs, lifting himself up and down with enough force to leave pink marks against their skin, like they both been spanked.

That sparked a flash of inspiration, and suddenly Louis was bringing his hand down on Harry’s arse for real, leaving an even brighter patch of red in the shape of his hand against the curve of Harry’s arse-cheek.

He belatedly realised he probably should have asked beforehand, but Harry seemed to like it, if the suddenly high-pitched moaning pouring out of his throat was anything to go by.

Louis struck him again, putting a bit more force behind it this time.

Harry threw his head back, letting his hair hang loose against his neck and shoulders as he fucked himself on Louis’s cock. “Harder,” he gasped out. “Hit me harder.”

So Louis did.

But this time, when the loud smack of Louis’s palm striking Harry’s flank faded into silence, it was followed by the sound of the hotel room door opening.

It wasn’t the first time they’d been walked in on, though the last incident had been accompanied by a rather large sum of money paid to the accidental observer in exchange for their signature on an NDA. This time it wasn’t a maid; it was Eleanor.

She stared at them with a perfectly blank expression for several seconds as they stared back, stunned and frozen in place from shock, and then she turned round and marched straight back out of the room without uttering a single word.

Louis pulled out of Harry, wincing briefly at the little cry of discomfort eked out by the other boy before stripping off the condom and throwing a pair of joggers on. He grabbed a dirty t-shirt too on the way out, just for good measure, and was relieved to find Eleanor still stood in the hotel corridor outside their room.

She looked shell-shocked, and Louis couldn’t exactly blame her. They weren’t in a real relationship after all, but that didn’t mean he’d told her about Harry. Not that knowing would have prepared her in the slightest for what she’d seen just then.

“Can we talk about this?” Louis pleaded.

Eleanor looked him up and down, eyes skimming over the bulge of his still-hard dick inside his joggers before glancing away uncomfortably and looking toward the door to the hotel room instead. “Where?” she asked.

Louis grabbed her arm gently and guided her down the hallway toward the lifts, where he knew there was an empty conference room on their floor. After checking to make sure it was indeed vacant, he led her inside and quickly closed the door behind him.

“So,” Louis said uncertainly, his back still pressed up against the door, as if ready to make a quick escape at any moment.

Eleanor didn’t reply. She just stared at him, looking almost disappointed, and Louis wasn’t quite sure why.
“Aren’t you going to say anything?” he tried.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” Eleanor’s voice was calm, perfectly even, but her face didn’t match.

“Anything,” Louis replied desperately. He didn’t think anything could be worse than the silence.

“Okay.” Eleanor pursed her lips. “I think we should break up.”

“What?” Out of all the things Louis had been anticipating she might say, that hadn’t been on the list.

The look on her face suddenly turned pained. She shifted uncomfortably, from one foot to the other, before opening her mouth to finally answer.

“I didn’t realise—” she started to say, and then stopped. “Look, I suppose it’s my fault for getting my hopes up, but the reason I’ve stuck this whole arrangement out is because I thought it might—that we might—”

Realisation dawned on Louis as he stared back at her in mild horror. He’d never really questioned why she seemed so content to fake a relationship for money even though it had been going on for years now, because it wasn’t really an unusual practice when removed from the added fame factor, and it wasn’t like Louis really demanded much from her. But to find out that she’d been hoping their relationship would become real? That was entirely unexpected.

“I’m sorry,” Louis said, even though he wasn’t sure why he was even apologising.

Eleanor shook her head tightly. “It was my mistake,” she told him. “But I’d rather if we didn’t continue things now that we’re both on the same page.”

“Of course.”

They both knew their break-up would have to be carefully staged just like the relationship had been, to avoid portraying either party in a negative light, but for now Louis made arrangements for Eleanor to be placed in a new room to avoid any undue awkwardness.

By the time Louis finally made it back to his own suite, Harry was gone.

February 13, 2021

Los Angeles, California

When the song was over, Louis hovered his thumb over the next one in the list, trying to force himself to hit play. But he couldn’t do it. He felt a wave of self-loathing wash over him at the implication of weakness. It shouldn’t have been that hard, and yet, there he was, struggling to listen to these last few songs. For what? Because he couldn’t let go?

Louis tossed the bedcovers aside and left his phone tangled up in the sheets as he marched out of his room, intending to pour himself a stiff drink, hoping Sam wouldn’t dissuade him from it.

Louis stopped short with one foot through the door, catching sight of a familiar dark head of hair pressed against the sofa cushions. He froze, giving Zayn all the time he needed to get up and stop
Louis before he could retreat back into the master bedroom.

“I just want to talk,” Zayn pleaded in a soft voice.

That was the last thing Louis wanted to do, but he found himself nodding anyway. He looked to Sam as he followed Zayn into the kitchen. She gave a brief but encouraging nod before slipping away into her own room to give the two of them some privacy.

Louis sat himself on one of the barstools and waited. Zayn said nothing, letting the silence stretch into something uncomfortable before Louis finally decided to break it.

“You’re the one who wanted to talk,” he pointed out.

Zayn nodded, bracing his elbows against the kitchen island. “I’m sorry about earlier,” he said. “About how I acted. And before, when you first called to tell me about Harry. That, too.”

Louis gave a slow nod, unsure if he was meant to verbally forgive Zayn or what. They hadn’t seen things eye-to-eye in a very long time.

Zayn’s betrayal—if it could even be called that anymore, as Louis wasn’t so convinced of his own innocence these days—had come days after Louis and Harry had gone their separate ways for the final time. Louis hadn’t anticipated the vitriol that Zayn had rained down upon him in response to their break-up, but he supposed he’d deserved it then, even if he hadn’t known it at the time.

Zayn had called Louis a coward—he was. Zayn had told Louis he didn’t care about Harry as much as he thought he did—and he’d probably been right about that too, even if Louis didn’t want to admit it.

“When you called,” Zayn continued, and apparently his apology wasn’t quite finished. “I was freaked out, you know? I didn’t know how to react, I was just…. After he left me that voicemail, I tried to call him back but he never answered and I was worried it meant you were getting back together, and I was worried about him, you know? No offense. And then when I found out what really happened—” Zayn shrugged, swallowing hard.

Louis nodded again. He was struggling to process everything that Zayn was trying to tell him. He hadn’t realised Zayn and Harry were that close, even though Zayn had sided with Harry after everything had gone up in smoke. He wanted to ask if that closeness had turned into anything else, if that’s why Zayn had been worried, if that’s why he was here now, but it didn’t feel appropriate.

“I appreciate the apology,” Louis managed, “but I don’t really know if I deserve it.”

Zayn shook his head, sighing. “Maybe not. None of that shit really feels like it matters anymore.” He sucked in a deep breath before he continued. “I talked to Harry after you left the hospital earlier,” he said. “He told me what you said.”

“Oh.”

Louis stared at his folded hands against the granite and waited for Zayn to chew him out the way he’d done back then. He braced himself for a storm he’d weathered once already: the accusations that Louis had led Harry on, and that they should have broken things off the second they realised they didn’t need the same things, and that Louis’s closeting had been nearly as traumatic for Harry as his own.

“I think you made the right decision,” Zayn said suddenly, jolting Louis out of his masochistic reverie.
Louis lifted his head, staring quizzically at Zayn. “What? How?”

“Not lying,” Zayn amended as he straightened up. “You never should have lied about it. I figure you know that now, though. But it was…the intent. It was the right thing, you know? To keep that shit out of the press. No one deserves that.”

“What about you?” Louis countered. He hadn’t forgotten how angry Zayn had been after the video of them had come out, when he’d learned what Louis had done. Half of it, anyway.

Zayn shrugged with a half-smile. “It made things easier afterward, if I’m honest. Didn’t really have to pretend I was all clean-cut and wholesome like ‘church-boy Niall’, yeah?”

Louis rolled his eyes. “As if anyone thought you were clean-cut and wholesome.”

That got a bit of laugh out of Zayn. “Right. I was the mysterious one. Drugs should have been part of the branding from day one. Everyone loves a bad boy.”

Louis grinned. Despite the tattoos and weed, Zayn had never resembled anything close to the image that had been painted for him. Poking fun at it felt warmly familiar, like they’d gone back in time to the old days before Zayn had left the band.

“Anyway,” Zayn said, picking up the thread of their original conversation, “I just think you should know that Harry doesn’t like…hate you or anything.”

Louis almost fell out of his chair.

Zayn laughed, taking note of his overenthusiasm. “Hold your horses,” he advised. “He still needs time to work through it all, I think, but he knows your heart was in the right place. Even if you did lie about it.”

Louis winced. “Yeah, well…yeah.” There wasn’t really a good excuse for that decision, even if at the time it had seemed like the best course of action. Looking back on it now, Louis realised he’d been sparing himself more than Harry.

“I know it’s been a while,” Zayn said, “but do you want to grab a bite to eat or something? Catch up?”


LA had never really been much of a mainstay for Zayn, so Louis was surprised to discover that he had his hole-in-the-wall spots just like Harry. They ended up at a Jamaican food shack buried in a back alley in Malibu, and Louis squeezed into the tiny booth opposite Zayn, marvelling that some place the size of a closet with no front signage was still managing to stay up and running.

“The food’s really good,” Zayn said in answer to Louis’s questioning expression.

That was confirmed for Louis once their food was actually brought out, and for a while they both lost themselves in wolfing their meals down as quickly as possible. It was Zayn who broke the silence again, bringing Harry up without an ounce of hesitation.

“You know I’m not really sure what to think about the whole in-patient facility thing,” he remarked casually. “Harry hates being on lock-down more than anything. Doesn’t seem like it’d be good for him.”

Louis dropped his piece of chicken. “The what?”
“Gemma didn’t tell you?” Zayn asked, quirking an eyebrow. He seemed genuinely surprised that Louis wasn’t in the know.

Maybe that’s what Gemma had been so hesitant to reveal about the terms of Harry’s discharge, Louis realised. He was forced to agree with Zayn, too. Harry could barely stand to stay in the same country more than six months at a time. Louis couldn’t imagine how he’d fare if they shut him up in some luxury rehab facility, or wherever they were planning to send him.

“Why would Gemma even want that?” Louis wondered. Surely, she had to know it wasn’t a good plan. “Or Anne?”

Zayn shrugged. “Apparently, it’s not really up to them. He’s still considered a suicide risk, and since he refuses to cooperate with his psychiatrist, they can’t evaluate him for discharge. And he can’t stay at Cedars-Sinai forever.”

Louis stared down at his food with a frown, considering. “So all he has to do is talk to this psychiatrist before they’ll discharge him?”

“Well, and pass the evaluation, but yeah.”

Louis shoved the rest of his food to the side and climbed out of the booth. “I need to talk to him.”

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?” Zayn asked, even as he made to follow.

“I don’t care,” Louis shot back, fire in his eyes. “I’m going.”

Zayn didn’t try to stop him.
Chapter 63

I've been trying to upload these pretty early in the morning on the West Coast, but the times might be a little wonky thanks to my surgery, which is coming up on Tuesday. Provided everything goes as planned, I should still be updating according to the normal schedule for this fic. And as a reminder, if you want to help me out, I have a GoFundMe post that can be shared on both Twitter and Tumblr. On Twitter it's a reply to my pinned tweet, on Tumblr it should be among my most recent posts or searchable on my blog using "GoFundMe" as a key term.

Twitter: @vondrostes & @vondrostesupd8s
Tumblr: @vondrostes

February 13, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis made his first mistake when they climbed into the car, his hand reaching automatically to connect his phone to the in-car stereo so he could play the next song on the playlist, like he would have if Liam were sitting opposite him in the passenger seat.

Zayn wasn’t Liam.

Louis froze mid-movement after belatedly remembering that Zayn had just arrived. He didn’t know about the playlist—or maybe he did. Maybe Harry had told him about that, too.

“Louis?” Zayn cocked his head to the side like a curious bird. “Are you okay, mate?”

“Yeah,” Louis replied quickly as he snatched his hand back and placed both carefully on the steering wheel. “Yeah, I’m—” He stopped.

Why was he lying to Zayn now, of all times? What was the point? “Actually, no,” he amended. “I have to tell you about something.”

“Oh…” Zayn’s expression was cautious, but patient. He’d always been good about not pressuring Louis into talking about anything if he didn’t want to. But this was something that Louis was certain he needed to be open about for once.

Still, it was a few moments spent alone, sat in the car illuminated only by the lights from the local eatery they’d just vacated, before Louis finally found the words to proceed.

“So Harry left me a bunch of his songs,” Louis told him, “instead of like, a proper suicide note.” Just because he’d found the words didn’t mean they were glamorous in any sense. There were
plenty of ways to dress up the situation to make it more tragic or romantic, but Louis was plain-spoken. Always had been.

Zayn was silent, prompting Louis to continue.

“Anyway, um, I’ve been listening to them, but here and there, you know? Sometimes it gets a little….” Louis waved a hand vaguely, trying to communicate the daunting feeling of being overwhelmed by the combination of Harry’s emotive musical ability as well as his own memories.

Zayn nodded. “If you want to play it, go right ahead,” he said finally, sensing that Louis had given him all the explanation he could. “If you don’t want to, that’s all right too, bro, it’s not a big deal, yeah?”

Louis returned the nod gratefully and considered his own feelings before making a decision. He waited another moment and then reached forward again to press play.

March 17, 2015
Hong Kong, China

Louis had gone to bed early instead of going out to dinner with the others, even though he knew he’d regret it the following night during the show. But what could he say? Jet lag was a real bitch.

He had fallen asleep and woken up again by midnight. He was hoping to at least catch a quick nap before soundcheck the next day. For now, he was hunched over a notebook in bed with his knees drawn up, painstakingly editing the rhythm of the lyrics he’d jotted down the day before to better suit the melody Liam had come up with in response.

Louis was still mired in his work but finally approaching another patch of drowsiness that he intended to take full advantage of when he heard the soft knock at his door nearly an hour later. He glanced at his phone first, figuring whoever it was would have at least sent a text message to make sure he was awake first, but there were no new notifications of any kind.

Louis waited a few seconds more, wondering if whoever it was had already gone. Probably a member of hotel staff, he surmised.

But then there was another knock.

Louis sighed quietly to himself and squeezed his eyes shut tight, wishing this could have waited until the morning, or that whoever was on the other side of the door had decided to bother him an hour ago when he was wide awake instead. He climbed out of bed, leaving his notebook lying open on top of the duvet, and made his way to the door in just his boxers and nothing else.

That was the first thing Harry commented on when Louis opened the door to reveal him slumped against the outer wall of Louis’s room, of course.

“It’s like you read my mind,” Harry drawled, raking his eyes openly over Louis’s exposed torso.

Louis just raised an eyebrow, unfazed. “Are you drunk?” he inquired.

Harry pinched his thumb and index finger together with a wink. “Little bit.” He made an attempt at
standing and failed miserably, slumping against the wall again to keep himself upright. “They closed the pool for the night,” he said cryptically. “But I have a key. Wanna come?”

“That sounds like a terrible idea,” Louis said honestly.

Harry grinned. “I know.”

Somehow, less than a minute later, Louis was following Harry down the corridor to the lifts in nothing more than a pair of sweats and a hoodie, just enough clothing to avoid attracting unwanted attention while they made their way down to the pool. Because of course they weren’t just swimming, no—they were skinny-dipping.

Truthfully, Louis hadn’t kicked up as much of a fuss as he could have at the idea. He liked seeing Harry naked and the occasions for it seemed to be fewer and farther between as of late. So if the opportunity presented itself in the form of Harry asking him to sneak into the hotel swimming pool in the middle of the night, Louis was going to take it.

The indoor pool when they got there was illuminated from under the water with soft neons, but the surrounding deck area was completely dark. Louis was entranced by the sight for a moment, long enough to find himself sufficiently distracted as Harry quickly stripped off all his clothes before leaving them in a messy heap on the deck. Louis took notice just as Harry dashed by him and leapt into the pool, hitting the water with a loud splash.

Louis didn’t waste any time in joining him. He was pleasantly surprised to find the water was warm, like bathwater that had sat a bit too long. It was nice though, and the current that rippled softly through the water made it feel more like the ocean than a stagnant body of water.

“You aren’t just going to sit there, are you?” Harry taunted as he swam tantalisingly close to Louis before kicking off the wall to launch himself just out of arm’s reach.

Louis gave chase, swimming in circles as Harry evade him at every turn. On land, Louis was definitely quicker, the more athletically-inclined of the two without question, but underwater things were different. Maybe Harry’s tattoo was secretly an homage to his mermaid heritage.

After a few minutes, Harry gave up. Perhaps he’d tired out, or perhaps he just wanted Louis to cage him in against the wall in the shallow end of the pool, with Louis’s hips pressed perfectly against his arse.

“Fuck me,” Harry breathed, putting an end to any mystery there might have been as to his intentions.

“Can’t,” Louis reminded him even as he dragged his nose down over the slick, wet skin of Harry’s neck, wishing he could breathe in Harry’s scent underneath the overpowering chemicals.

Harry pushed his arse out, not willing to take no for answer. It was enough friction to make Louis gasp, to get him hard enough to push back, between Harry’s cheeks, a rough drag of skin against skin that simultaneously felt like too much and not enough.

Louis wasn’t used to the sensation, wasn’t sure if he liked it, wasn’t sure if he could come—and then he was, spilling into the pocket of space between them as he slumped into Harry’s back, hooking his chin over Harry’s shoulder and breathing heavily into his ear.

Harry pushed him away quickly, rubbing at his ear and shaking his head like a dog. “Tickled,” he said defensively.
Louis glanced down at him, noting that he was still hard. “Want me to?”

Harry shook his head. “Want you to watch.”

Louis was fine with that.

He moved back a little, wanting to get a better angle of Harry’s hand moving beneath the water. He looked a little frustrated as he worked his cock, like he couldn’t quite wank himself the way he liked, but somehow his frustrated expression made it hotter, built up the anticipation to the point where Louis wished he’d waited to come so that they could have gotten off at the same time, together.

When Harry finished, Louis couldn’t help but continue to stare, fascinated and a little disgusted, as his come swirled through the water before being washed out of sight by the gentle current flowing past them.

Louis looked up again to meet Harry’s eyes and was surprised to find sadness tinging the otherwise-blissed out expression painted on his face. He reminded Louis of one of those Renaissance angels, beautiful and tragic all at once.

“What’s wrong?” Louis murmured quietly. He was doing best not to jump to any conclusions, but he couldn’t deny that he was worried by the look on Harry’s face.

“It’s Zayn,” Harry replied, leaving Louis cold until he explained. “Something’s wrong with him. You’ve noticed it too, yeah?”

Louis nodded. He kept his expression neutral, not wanting to betray the sudden wave of relief that had washed over him at the realisation that Harry was concerned about the band, and not something else. Harry hated it when he got jealous.

“I just thought he was fighting with Liam,” Louis replied cautiously.

Harry shook his head. “I think it’s something else,” he said. “I think something’s really wrong.”

Louis, ever the one to sweep things under the rug if given the option, placed a gentle hand against Harry’s hand in reassurance. “I’m sure Zayn’ll be fine, love. He’ll come around.”

He hadn’t. Louis had been wrong about that, too.

February 13, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis’s hands had formed a vice-grip on the steering wheel as he drove himself and Zayn back to Cedars-Sinai with Harry’s song playing in the background. White-knuckled the whole way there; by the time Louis finally peeled one hand away to shift into park, his joints ached from how hard he’d been holding on.

Louis’s overflow of anxious energy was all-too obvious to Zayn, who settled a calming hand on his shoulder as soon as they both stepped out of the car.

“Hey,” Zayn said quietly, giving his shoulder a brief squeeze, “try not to come on too strong, all
Louis nodded shakily. “Yeah, you’re right. I’ll keep a lid on it. I’m just.” He flailed an arm in a useless gesture that communicated absolutely nothing at all, but Zayn just nodded like he’d understood anyway.

They walked into the hospital practically hand-in-hand, that’s how close Zayn stuck to Louis in an effort to keep him grounded as they made their way to Harry’s suite. Zayn, who was probably one of the most recognisable people on the planet, had made no attempt to minimise that factor, but for whatever reason, not a single person dared approach them despite how crowded it was right around the lifts. Louis took notice of a few curious glances, but there was nothing that couldn’t be easily ignored in favour of staying on target.

Louis was just starting to calm down a bit when they emerged from the lift and walked straight into Anne, who looked ready to bring down the wrath of heaven upon them. Or well, on Louis, at least.

He looked to Zayn, feeling betrayed. Zayn shrugged.

“I told Gemma,” he said in answer to Louis’s unspoken question. “I thought she needed to know.”

Louis couldn’t really fault Zayn for that decision, but it was hard not to feel a bit mingled off now that it had resulted in Anne standing between them and Harry.

“We’re just trying to help,” Louis tried, but Anne wasn’t having it.

“I think you’ve helped enough, Louis,” she replied in a scathing tone.

Harry must have told her what he’d done as well, Louis realised. He wasn’t so surprised by it, but it was the sort of thing he might have waited on himself before going around telling immediate family members. He wondered if Harry had mentioned the details of the sex tape in question or whether that had been omitted from the tale so as not to scar his mother any further.

“Look,” Louis said carefully. He glanced at Zayn again, this time looking for help, but none seemed to be coming.

They needed to wrap this up soon—and carefully. The eighth storey might have been relatively unoccupied compared to the lower floors, but they were still making quite a scene right there in front of the lifts where anyone could see.

“I know I’ve messed up in the past when it comes to Harry,” Louis continued, “and I’m still trying to fix that however I can. But right now, I’m just trying to help him—”

“You’ve done enough damage already,” Anne interrupted with an angry hiss, wearing a glare severe enough that Louis flinched in response.

“And I think you’ve helped enough, Louis,” she replied in a scathing tone.

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“You’ve done enough damage already,” Anne interrupted with an angry hiss, wearing a glare severe enough that Louis flinched in response.

“Anne,” Zayn tried to intervene, but she whirled on him, expression just as fierce.

“What?” she demanded. “Harry may not think so, but as far as I’m concerned, all of you abandoned my son when he needed it most. I’m his mother. Gemma may not think so, but I deserve to have a say in what happens to my own child!”

“Mum.” The girl in question had been standing behind Anne for nearly the entirety of her unexpected tirade, which had left both Zayn and Louis completely speechless. Gemma wasn’t quite so affected. “I’m sorry if you felt like I was leaving you out of things,” Gemma said carefully. “I just didn’t want to burden you with things I could take care of myself.”
Louis was tempted to point out that there was a lot she hadn’t taken care of herself, since she’d been using Louis to do most of her dirty work for her, but now really wasn’t the time.

“Anne,” Zayn tried again. “We really do just want to help.”

“Maybe we should sit down for a minute,” Gemma suggested. “We can talk about things first, all right?”

Anne was a dewy-eyed mess when they all finally sat down together in a gaggle of chairs next to a couple vending machines. Louis was afraid opening his mouth would only make things worse, so he let Gemma and Zayn do most of the convincing instead, choosing to nod in agreement only where appropriate.

“I told Louis about the terms of Harry’s discharge from hospital,” Zayn explained. “I thought he already knew.”

Gemma shot Louis an apologetic glance, presumably for keeping that information from him. “Harry didn’t want you to know,” she explained with a pained expression. “I think he was… embarrassed, more than anything.”

That made sense. Gemma had clearly been hiding it well before Louis had ruined things between himself and Harry, so the reason couldn’t have been related to that—though he was sure Harry would be only that much more displeased to learn that Louis was in the loop now. Maybe this was a bad idea after all.

“We wanted to help,” Zayn reiterated in a gentle tone. “We thought if we talked to Harry, he might reconsider his decision to not comply with the mandatory evaluation.”

Louis appreciated Zayn phrasing it as though it had been a collaborative plan rather than a half-baked impulse on Louis’s part, one that he was now second-guessing.

Anne didn’t look all that convinced. She glared at each of them in turn through narrowed eyes, lingering the longest on Louis before looking back down again at where her hands were twisted together in her lap.

Now that Louis was paying attention, he could see that her formerly well-manicured nails had been chewed down to the nub, the cuticles raw and irritated from where she’d been picking at them constantly through the weeks of stress. Louis knew if he looked down at his own hands that his fingers would be an almost identical match.

“I don’t want to force him into something he’s not ready for,” Anne argued. “I’d rather know that he’s safe in hospital somewhere than have him out on his own again so soon after—” Her voice broke, and she snapped her mouth shut immediately, shuttering her expression just as tears began to sprout in her eyes.

“Mum,” Gemma said in a soft voice as she carefully placed her hands over Anne’s. “We’re not trying to throw Harry to the wolves here. If he does the evaluation and the doctor really doesn’t think he’s ready, they aren’t going to just toss him out. It’s better to know, isn’t it? Whether he’s ready to go home or not?”

“What if the doctor’s wrong?” Anne asked desperately. “What if he comes home with us and he…. She stopped again, swallowing heavily. “I don’t want to lose him.”

“You can’t keep him under lock and key forever just because you’re scared,” Gemma argued right back. “All of us are scared for Harry right now, but shielding him from all the hard bits isn’t going
to help him get better.”

Anne looked to Louis, as if hoping he would take her side even though he’d come there with Zayn to convince Harry to do the exact opposite of what she wanted.

She wasn’t entirely wrong, though. If things had been just slightly different, Louis would have gone with her solution in a heartbeat. But he could see Harry withering away in there like a house plant shut inside a dark room. Being trapped in Cedars-Sinai was torture for him, even if he was living in one of the most luxurious suites they had to offer. An in-patient facility likely wouldn’t be any better, especially if he was cut off from his friends and family in the name of some sort of ambiguous ‘recovery’ process. Maybe it was right for some people, but not Harry.

Louis shook his head, silently communicating that he was sticking to his original plan.

Zayn spoke up again. “Look, Anne, if you really think this is a bad idea, we’ll walk away. You’re right, he’s your son. It’s up to you.”

Anne glanced down at her hands again, shrouded by her daughter’s freckled fingers, and sighed. “You can have fifteen minutes with him,” she finally said. “If he still doesn’t want to do the evaluation after that, then we leave it alone, all right? I don’t want to push him if he’s not ready. Not with this.”

The other three nodded in agreement. Zayn nudged Louis as he got up from his seat. “Come on,” he said. “We’d best be quick about it.”
The pace of Louis’s heartbeat ratcheted up in increments with every step he took toward Harry’s door. What if fifteen minutes wasn’t enough? What if they couldn’t get Harry to agree to see the psychiatrist?

Louis had to remind himself that he wasn’t responsible for Harry anymore. Harry could make his own decisions—in fact, he needed to. He wouldn’t get any better if he didn’t.

“Ready?” Zayn asked, hand reaching toward the door.

Louis nodded.

The first and most apparent observation that Louis made was that Harry was in no way pleased to see them. Or well, him, rather. Louis, specifically.

“I don’t want to see you right now,” Harry said bluntly.

Louis couldn’t begrudge him that, but they had more important things to discuss. Naturally, he looked to Zayn for help.

Zayn sighed as he took in Louis’s pleading expression. “We need to talk, Harry.”

“About what?” Harry replied, eyes flicking frantically from one man to the other, his expression defensive, like a trapped animal.

Zayn nudged Louis, urging him to answer. “About the psych eval,” Louis said all in one breath. Harry’s eyes widened. Louis kept going, afraid that if he allowed himself to stop talking for even a second, he’d lose any ounce of courage he might have had.

“I don’t want to talk about that,” Harry snapped. “Get out of my room.”

“We’re not leaving.” Not yet, anyway. “Harry, you need to do this.”

“But why?”
Harry drew his blankets up to his chin as Zayn and Louis took a step closer. He almost looked afraid—of them—and that made Louis stop in his tracks. Zayn didn’t share his trepidation, moving over to Harry’s side without pause and parking himself on the edge of Harry’s bed.

“Because you can’t get better if you won’t even try.”

Harry looked devastated. Louis was tempted to leave right then, if only to avoid having to see that expression on Harry’s face. But they hadn’t gotten what they’d come for. And their fifteen minutes weren’t up. Louis had to see this through. He wouldn’t ever be able to forgive himself if he didn’t.

“Why are you so…?” Louis started to ask before catching himself just in time. Harry had every right to be afraid. “Why don’t you want to do it?” he asked instead. “Don’t you want to go home with your mum and Gemma?”

Harry glanced up at him, eyes already a bit swollen though he had yet to shed a tear since they’d come in. “Of course I do,” he replied in a hoarse voice. “But talking about things…. It just makes everything worse.” He shook his head. “I don’t want to feel like that again.”

Zayn smoothed a hand over the blankets, rubbing gently over the slight protrusion of Harry’s knee. “I know it’s hard,” he said, “but you need to talk about this if you want to get better. None of us know why this happened, and that’s all right. You don’t have to tell us. But you do have to tell the doctor, Harry, so they can help you.”

Louis wondered if Zayn was speaking from his own experience, though it was something he would never even dare to ask. They’d all had their struggles in the past, and Zayn’s certainly hadn’t been insignificant. Maybe Harry would listen to him, knowing that much.

But when Harry glanced up again, he was looking at Louis, not Zayn. “Why do you even care about this?” he demanded, tears finally welling in his eyes.

Louis’s mouth opened, but nothing came out. He could feel Zayn’s eyes on him after a beat of silence, and he knew he had to say something. “Because I care about you,” Louis finally replied. “I want you to be okay again.”

Harry looked away just as soon as their eyes met. He sniffled quietly. “Okay,” he said.

“Okay?” Zayn questioned.

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I’ll see her. The doctor.”

Louis felt something come over his face in response to Harry’s acquiescence, but he quickly forced his expression into something more neutral before Harry had the chance to look up again. “You’re serious?” he asked, hardly able to believe that it had been that easy. He’d expected more hand-wringing, or crying, at least.

Harry nodded again, eyes narrowing in something close to irritation as he looked up at them. Zayn closed a hand around Louis’s bicep as he got up and tugged him toward the door.

“I’ll let your mum know so she can talk to the doctor,” Zayn said. “All right?”

Harry gave another, more pitiful nod.

Louis opened his mouth to say—something, he hadn’t decided what yet—but Zayn’s hand became more insistent, pushing him steadily out of the room before he had a chance to come up with a single word.
“Don’t push your luck,” Zayn murmured to Louis as he shut the door behind them. “He needs time.”

“I know that,” Louis replied automatically. Did he?

Gemma came running over to them a few seconds later, putting an end to their hushed conversation just outside Harry’s door. “Well?” she asked hopefully.

Louis nodded. “He said he’d do it,” he offered.

Gemma breathed out a sigh of relief. “Thank god,” she said. “And thanks for doing this, even though, you know.”

Louis pursed his lips and nodded again, stiffly. He wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“Don’t let him try to worm his way out of it,” Zayn said casually, as if they were discussing the prospect of Harry trying to skive off footie practise and not the fact that he seemed determined to actively jeopardise his own recovery process. “If I know anything about him, he’ll probably change his mind half a dozen times before he settles on it, but he wants to get out of here just as much as we want him to.”

Gemma glanced at the door behind them, nodding sadly. “I’ll let Mum know,” she said. “I don’t know if she’ll be happy about it right away, but it’ll nice to have him home.”

They were already talking as if Harry had gone through his evaluation and passed with flying colours, an imminent discharge from the hospital already in his future. But what if the doctor decided he wasn’t ready to go home and Harry ended up in the same place he would have if they’d done nothing at all? That would crush him even more than if he hadn’t put in the effort in the first place.

There were a few seconds of tense silence in which Louis debated whether to give voice to the nagging thoughts rattling around at the back of his brain, but then Zayn spoke up again.

“We should probably head on out,” he said to Gemma. He gave Louis an amicable pat on the back, almost like the last two and a half years had never happened.

“Yeah,” Gemma said, her eyes focussing somewhere between the two of them without really looking at either one in full. “Well, it was good to see you.”

“You too,” Zayn replied before Louis could fully process which of them she was addressing. “Let me know how it goes, yeah?”

Louis barely had the chance to mumble out a goodbye before Zayn was pulling him away toward the lifts. “You’re in a hurry,” he couldn’t help but comment, earning a snippy look from Zayn.

“You shouldn’t hang around here so much,” Zayn replied quickly. “It’s bad for you.”

Louis wondered if Zayn meant that Harry was bad for him. He was too afraid of a confirmation to ask.

“Where to?” Louis finally asked after they’d exited the hospital together and returned to Louis’s car.

“I’m in a hotel nearby,” Zayn said before rattling off the address.
Louis lifted an eyebrow. “Pricey.” And inconvenient, he realised after quickly mapping the place. It was nearly half an hour out of the way.

“Not so much for one night,” Zayn countered. “My flight leaves in the morning.”

“You’re not staying?” It was a struggle for Louis to keep the disappointment out of his voice. He was altogether sure he’d succeeded, either, judging from the look on Zayn’s face.

Zayn shook his head. “Harry doesn’t need me,” he said.

But Louis heard, “Harry doesn’t need you,” instead. It was hard to shake.

The drive out to Zayn’s hotel was mostly silent, with just the low hum of the radio playing in the background. Louis didn’t feel up to listening to another one of Harry’s songs just yet.

“You’re not mad, yeah?” Zayn asked while they were stopped at a traffic light.

Louis glanced over at him, taking in the angles of his face illuminated by the dim reflection of the red lights. “No,” he said honestly. He’d been angrier with Liam even though Liam had his reasons as well. But Louis knew not to expect the same things from Zayn. “I’m not mad.” He didn’t explain further, and Zayn didn’t ask.

They hugged outside the hotel, neither seeming entirely willing to let go when it came right down to it.

Louis was the first to finally break away. “It was good seeing you again,” he said, not bothering to disguise the roughness in his voice. There was no point when Zayn looked just as shaken.

“Yeah,” Zayn replied. “I really missed you, you know?”

“Yeah,” Louis said in a soft voice. “I know.”

They communicated their goodbyes in reciprocal promises of seeing each other soon. Louis wasn’t certain if either of them meant it, but he was encouraged by the optimism nonetheless. He hadn’t anticipated mending fences with Zayn again. Their rekindled friendship, or truce, or whatever the hell it was, was better than the alternative.

The minute Zayn stepped out of the car, Louis felt his mood plummet. The sudden onset of Louis’s co-dependency was worrying, even more so now that he seemed to be latching onto people he’d been perfectly content to not have in his life at all before.

Or well, not perfectly.

Louis’s attitude hadn’t improved any by the time he got back to the condo, alone, and found Sam waiting for him on the sectional in the living room.

She looked concerned. “No Zayn?”

“Dropped him off back at his hotel,” Louis said in short clipped syllables as he shrugged off his jacket and walked into the kitchen to pour himself a drink.

There was an unusual tension between them. Louis didn’t know how to deal with it, or make it disappear, so he just tried to ignore it instead.

Sam was either oblivious to the strangely smothering atmosphere or was convinced she could just push through it. “How was your dinner?” she asked.
“Fine.”

Louis felt hot and prickly all over, the same way he’d felt any time Eleanor tried to have these conversations with him, the ‘hi honey, how was your day’ type of nonsense that never felt natural between them. His relationship with Sam was a far cry from what he’d had with Eleanor, but suddenly he couldn’t quite shake the association.

“You were gone a while,” Sam continued, for some reason still not registering Louis’s obvious discomfort.

“Yeah.”

She paused for a moment, finally seeming to sense something was wrong. “Are you okay?” she asked.

Louis set his glass down on the countertop with a heavy clack. “No offence, Sam, but I really don’t want to have this discussion right now.”

Sam seemed stunned into silence by Louis’s biting tone. He immediately felt bad, but it still wasn’t enough to motivate him to sit through a conversation about his feelings about Zayn—or Harry. God only knew he’d had enough of the latter already.

“I’m gonna head to bed, I think,” Louis added in a kinder tone. He wanted Sam to know that he wasn’t actually angry with her. Himself, more than anything. Or the situation that he was in, at least. Everything was still so fucked up.

“Okay,” Sam replied with a nod of understanding. Her brow was still furrowed slightly in concern, but she didn’t try to argue the point. “I guess I’ll see you in the morning, then. Goodnight.”

“Night,” Louis replied as he threw back the remainder of his drink.

He marched straight into the bedroom after and closed the door, collapsing face-first onto the mattress with a heavy sigh. He knew already that he was going to listen to the next song on the playlist, but it was nearly fifteen minutes before he got up and extracted his phone from his pocket to queue up the song.

A good memory, Louis realised as he looked down at the date. He could use one of those.

April 5, 2015

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Louis woke up first, per usual, and climbed into the shower immediately. He spent a long time luxuriating under the warm spray. It was nice to have a bit of alone time amidst all the chaos that ensued the rest of the time they were on tour together, so Louis tended to draw his showers out for as long as possible, just to squeeze a bit of relaxation in.

Things had been rough now that Zayn was gone, even though it had only been a couple weeks. Harry was more hot and cold than ever before, which was great when he was feeling good, and horrible when he wasn’t.
Right now, things seemed to be going well, and Harry had been practically glued to Louis’s side every second of the day prior, but they both knew it wouldn’t last much longer. It was a day to day struggle that Louis had come to expect. He was adapting, quickly. He didn’t have much of a choice in the matter anymore.

Louis was deep in thought when he felt a pair of arms slowly winding around his waist, having not even noticed Harry opening the shower door behind him.

“You’re up early,” Louis remarked with a smirk as he watched the teasing path of Harry’s hands from his chest down to his groin.

“Not,” Harry replied, breathing the word into his ear as he took hold of Louis’s cock with one hand. “You’ve been in the shower ages.”

“Have I?” Louis asked, stuttering a little over his words.

“Mhmm.” Harry was doing his best to get Louis hard as quickly as possible, which wasn’t all that difficult seeing as his naked front was practically glued to Louis’s back. “You’re always mopey after a long shower,” Harry told him. “I wanted to cheer you up.”

“And how were you planning on doing that?”

Suddenly, the motion of Harry’s hand stopped. Louis turned around, trying to figure out what was wrong, but there was no answer to be found in Harry’s perfectly innocent expression.

Louis tried to kiss him, only for Harry to duck unexpectedly out of the way. “What’s with you?” Louis asked with a laugh. There was a hollowness in the pit of his stomach warning him that this might be it, that Harry was pulling away again, even though nothing had changed. Louis did his best to ignore it. There was no use in getting ahead of himself now.

“Nothing,” Harry replied quickly. It was obviously a lie.

Louis pinned him against the glass of the shower cubicle and pressed his lips under Harry’s jaw, where he could feel Harry’s pulse fluttering just a bit too quickly under his skin.

“Come on,” Louis coaxed. “Out with it.” He was still mostly hard from the proximity between them—and maybe a little from the anticipation, as well. He wanted to know what was going on in Harry’s head that had him so riled up.

Harry licked his lips and drew back as far as the confines of the shower would allow. “I wanted us to try something,” he said, eyes darker than usual, the green of his irises barely visible around the void of his pupil.

He was hard now too, Louis realised. Whatever Harry wanted, he wanted it bad enough that he was chubbing up right in front of Louis’s eyes without any stimulation at all. Louis couldn’t wait.

“Are you gonna tell me what it is?” Louis asked teasingly.

Harry’s eyes lowered. “Have you ever heard of…of rimming?” His eyes lifted again just in time to catch the brief, involuntary flash of disgust in Louis’s expression, and Harry flushed a deep red in response.

“Sorry,” Louis said, “I’m just. I know what it is, obviously, but I’ve never thought about—I wouldn’t even know what to—”
“I thought I could do it to you,” Harry said, almost too fast to be understood.

Louis blinked a few times, trying to process it. “What?”

“I wanted to do you,” Harry said. This time he sounded a bit more confident about it. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while,” he admitted.

“How long is a while?” Louis wondered.

Harry didn’t answer that, which meant it was probably a very, very long time. “Can I?” he asked instead.

He was practically begging, and Louis couldn’t understand that in the slightest. Fucking was one thing, but putting your mouth there? Having Harry’s mouth on him? It just felt like too much.

But Harry was already sinking onto his knees right there under the warm spray, letting the water soak into his curls and dyeing them nearly black. “Please?” he asked in a small voice.

Louis found himself nodding without even realising what he was doing, and then Harry’s hands were on his thighs, slowly turning him around so that his back was to Harry and his hands were braced against the shower wall.

Louis sucked in an anticipatory breath as Harry nudged his legs even further apart. He could feel Harry’s breath against the inside of his thighs even with the distraction of the water hitting his skin, and then there was a new kind of wetness right against his hole, and all of a sudden Louis lost all ability to think straight.

His mind was split between how fucking good it felt to have Harry’s mouth on him and the irrepressible feeling of wrongness that he couldn’t seem to shake. It took Louis a few seconds to realise why this, over everything else they’d done, was having such an effect on him, and then it hit him all at once.

Louis was finally vulnerable.

Even when he’d had Harry’s cock inside him, Louis had been in control every step of the way. But right now, with Harry’s tongue against one of his most intimate places, Louis was completely at his mercy. And he felt lost.

Right up until Harry pulled away for just a brief moment, only long enough to murmur against the back of Louis’s thigh: “Love you so fucking much.”

Louis dropped his head against the cradle of his arms and felt the tension bleeding out of him as he gave himself over to Harry completely.
Chapter 65

February 14, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Sam bustled into Louis’s room early the next morning, waking him more with the smell of cooked bacon than the noise. He sat bolt upright and started to salivate as she walked over with a platter piled high with a full fry up.

“For me?” he asked cheekily, winking as he stretched his arms out above his head.

Sam responded with a light-hearted laugh and passed him the platter. “I was feeling a bit homesick,” she confessed as she perched on the edge of the bed while Louis started in on his food. “I thought you might be, too.”

Louis paused with a sausage impaled on the end of his fork hovering centimetres away from his mouth. He hadn’t realised it fully until Sam had mentioned it, but he was, at that. Even with having Harry, Liam, Niall, and Zayn around—even with Freddie around—LA wasn’t home. It had never been home.

But Louis didn’t want to dwell on that.

“Sorry for last night,” he said instead, mumbling the words around his sausage. The grown-up thing to do would have been to apologise last night before he’d fallen asleep instead of making Sam wait a good nine, ten hours for it, but better late than never.

Sam smiled softly. “It’s fine,” she replied. “I understand things are stressful still.”

That was putting it mildly, but she wasn’t wrong. And stress or not, Sam hadn’t done a single thing to deserve Louis’s ire. He reached out for Sam, pulling her in for a quick cuddle and then letting go again. “Sorry,” he repeated, daring her with his eyes to brush it off a second time.

Sam just shook her head and sighed. “Your sister called,” she said without preamble, surprising Louis into choking on his eggs. “I told her you were asleep.”

“Is that all you told her?” Louis asked, waggling his eyebrows teasingly.
Sam’s expression didn’t change. “Yes,” she replied plainly.

Louis sighed and shovelled even more scrambled egg into his mouth. “You know I wouldn’t care if you two—you know,” he said as he waved his fork around wildly.

When Sam still didn’t react, Louis finally decided to give up on his tenuous attempt at matchmaking and addressed what Lottie had actually called about instead. Sam didn’t ask, as it turned out, due to not wanting to pry, but she’d ascertained that it wasn’t an emergency, at the very least, so Louis waited until after he’d finished his breakfast before calling Lottie back.

She was out of breath when she answered, eliciting even more curiosity from Louis as to the purpose of her calling so early.

“Little ones just got home from school,” she informed him.

“You’re in Donny?” Louis asked, confused. He hadn’t seen any mention of Lottie leaving London on any of her social media, nor anything indicating she was with their other siblings on theirs.

“Just for a few days,” Lottie replied. “The twins have a double date tonight and I wanted to be there to do the whole ‘meet the parents’ thing for them, you know?”

Louis felt a pang right in the centre of his chest. He should have been there with her, would’ve been, if it weren’t for his decision to come to the States to see Harry. Not that he blamed Harry for that, but still. He was acutely aware in that moment of just what he was really missing.

“I hope the boys are cute.”

“Boy and a girl, actually,” Lottie corrected.

“Oh!” Louis probably should have been less surprised. Maybe homosexuality ran in the family. Or maybe Gen Z were just more open-minded. “Well, tell them to be safe, and um….”

“Don’t strain yourself,” Lottie said, laughing.

“Sorry. Out of practice, I guess.” It had definitely been a while since he’d seen any of the younger kids. “The little ones still around?” Louis asked, hopeful.

“Yeah, give me a minute to round ‘em all up,” Lottie said. He could hear her shuffling up the stairs in what must have been her slippers, and Louis remained silent until she prompted, “You could catch me up on things, you know.”

“Oh. Right.”

Louis took the opportunity to fill Lottie in on the situation with Zayn, omitting everything that had to do with Harry and the sex tape, and pausing when appropriate while Lottie rounded up all their siblings and brought them down to the sitting room so Louis could talk to them over the speaker.

“Hello, all,” Louis said, forcing a bit more enthusiasm into his voice than he would usually muster first thing in the morning. He got a chorus of ‘hi’s back. “I’d chat with you over FaceTime,” he informed his siblings, “but it seems kinder to spare you the sight of me not having showered.”

The truth was that Louis wasn’t quite sure he could maintain a conversation with his younger siblings, who he so rarely got to see, without tearing up a bit. And he didn’t want them burdened with that.
Lottie hosted a fairly chaotic round table between the seven siblings before shooing them away after they’d all had their turn to chat with Louis a bit. She took her mobile off speaker and cleared her throat.

“Doing all right?” she asked.

“Now, or in general?” Louis replied.

“Both, I suppose.”

Louis spent a few seconds considering the question. “I don’t know,” he answered honestly. “Ask me again in a week.”

Lottie made a sound that seemed vaguely disapproving. “So does that mean I should set a reminder on my calendar to call you up again next Wednesday?” she asked in a voice dripping with disdain.

Louis winced. “Sorry,” he said, “I did mean to ring you, but I got caught up with the whole Zayn thing and—”

“That’s not what I meant,” Lottie interrupted. “When are you coming home, Lou?”

Louis leaned back against the pillows and let out a quiet sigh. “I don’t know,” he told her sadly. The deadline for making that decision was barrelling toward him and still, Louis couldn’t see himself committing to either choice with any degree of certainty. But if he did want to go home, he’d have to decide sooner rather than later.

“Let me know when you figure it out, I suppose,” Lottie said a bit sadly. “Look, I should get going, I’ve still got dinner to make for all the kids, and I need to clean the house before the twins’ dates come over.”

“Right, yeah. I’ll let you go, then.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Lou,” Lottie said in parting before hanging up, leaving Louis feeling even more knocked off balance at the realisation that two entire weeks had passed since Harry had been hospitalised, and that it was fucking Valentine’s Day to boot.

Louis lowered his mobile down to his lap and wondered if he should call up Briana and ask her out to dinner again, but just as quickly dismissed the idea. They shared a son, and Louis preferred this new equilibrium between them where they engaged in something that at least resembled friendship, but he didn’t have any right to her life. Maybe she already had plans.

The thought of Briana going out with someone else for Valentine’s day—as an actual, romantically-intentioned date—made Louis’s brain ping with anxiety on behalf of Freddie. But it wasn’t any of his business unless it got serious, and Louis knew from experience that if it ever did get to that point, Briana would let him know first.

Sam poked her head in again less than a minute later, not giving Louis much time to dwell on his plans, or lack thereof, for Valentine’s Day. Until she opened her mouth, that is, to ask about just that.

“Um,” Louis hedged, “I dunno, really.”

The idea of seeing Harry flashed through his mind mostly out of habit before he remembered that it was no longer a possibility. But even just the thought of Harry was an unpleasant reminder that Harry was meant to be meeting with the hospital psychiatrist, and Louis felt a bit sick afterward.
“Maybe we should just have a lazy day,” Louis suggested.

He was relieved when Sam agreed without arguing that she had something more important to do instead and found himself being coaxed into the living room to watch a few episodes of a banal medical drama at her behest.

Louis was thankful to be deprived of any decision-making for the time being and had just started to finally relax when Sam unexpectedly hit pause and turned to him with a pensive expression.

“What?” Louis asked, dreading whatever was about to come next.

Sam pursed her lips. “Have you tried…writing again?” she asked.

Louis stiffened and avoided meeting her eyes. “Didn’t really have much chance,” he reminded her. “What with Zayn showing up, and all.”

Sam nodded like she understood, but her expression didn’t change in the slightest. “Maybe you should try again,” she cajoled.

Louis wanted to resist, he really did, but deep down he knew she was right. There was a part of him that wouldn’t rest until he’d at least tried to get something down on paper, and the more he kept everything bottled up inside himself without any form of release, the worse he’d feel.

“Yeah, okay,” Louis agreed. He braced his palms against the sofa cushions on either side of his hips, but it was another thirty seconds before he mustered up the willpower to make himself stand up and move toward the bedroom, where the blank journal lay on the desk, still waiting.

It was no less intimidating when Louis finally walked inside and sat down after closing the door behind him. The silence inside the master bedroom was heavier for the sounds of televised chaos that had preceded it. Louis felt like there was a tangible weight pressing down against every centimetre of body, keeping him pinned to the desk chair after he’d taken a seat.

Louis barely entertained the thought of re-listening to one of the previous songs. If he was actually dealing with some kind of writer’s block, he needed to start fresh.

After setting his mobile down on the desk, Louis glanced down at the date and responded with a full-bodied flinch before he’d even had the chance to hit play. This one was definitely going to hurt.

April 28, 2015

Los Angeles, California

They were off again.

It was Louis’s fault for taking the bait. Or maybe it was Harry’s, for inciting the argument in the first place. Louis was too angry to make a solid determination.

“I knew that’s what you wanted all along,” Louis accused, practically spitting the words into Harry’s face. “Knew that’s why you wanted to quit the band, so you could force me to—”

“No one’s forcing you to do anything, Lou!” Harry retorted.
Louis stumbled backwards as if Harry had struck him, nearly falling over the back of the sofa in his haste to get away. They were in his house, but Louis suddenly felt like running. Somewhere. Anywhere. He didn’t care where, as long as it was as far away from Harry as he could get in a single night.

An hour later, Louis was sat in his car outside a bar near the recording studio because there wasn’t anywhere else he could think to go. He didn’t know LA like Harry knew LA, and even that thought instilled in him a rage so overwhelming that Louis felt like he could have snapped the steering wheel clean off its mount if he wasn’t careful.

There was a knock at the passenger window. Louis scrambled to roll it down without even thinking of the potential consequences first and was surprised to find a familiar blonde head waiting on the other side.

“What are you doing here?” she asked with a toothy smile.

Louis gaped at her for a moment, struggling to come up with a reasonable excuse. “I don’t know,” he finally admitted. “I just wound up here, I suppose.”

Briana laughed. “You’re not drunk, are you?” she asked, eyeing Louis’s hands on the wheel with a healthy amount of scepticism.

Louis shook his head. “Are you?” he asked.

“Yep,” she chirped. “I was just about to catch a cab home, but I thought I recognised the car.”

“I could drive you,” Louis found himself offering, much to both Briana’s surprise and his own.

“Really?” she asked. “I mean…you don’t have to, I can just get a taxi—”

“It’s fine,” Louis assured her. “Hop in.” He unlocked the doors to let her inside before he could second-guess his decision to offer a ride home to the stylist who had been incessantly flirting with him since the first time they’d met.

Up until now, Louis had always done his best to politely ignore her, and it had never been that hard, if he was honest. He’d chalked that up at the time to his…gayness, or whatever, but now…. He wasn’t sure anymore. Maybe he’d just been confused. Maybe Harry was the problem. Maybe Briana being outside the bar at the exact time that Louis happened to show up meant that it was fate somehow.

Louis had Briana plug her address into the GPS on his mobile and couldn’t quite decide if he was relieved or disappointed when it turned out to be a relatively short journey.

Relieved, he decided once they were on the road and Louis couldn’t think of a single word to say.

“So…” Briana said, breaking the silence for him. “Is there any particular reason you happened to end up outside a bar in the middle of the night?” she asked.

Louis waited a few seconds before answering. “Had a fight with someone,” he confessed. “A friend.” If she suspected the friend in question was one of the band, she didn’t ask.

She didn’t say another word, in fact, until Louis pulled up outside her flat, at which point she turned to Louis with one hand on the door handle, the other braced against the dash. “Do you want to come up?” she asked.
Louis wasn’t sure when his doubts had turned to calm certainty, but he found himself following her up the flight of steps, pressing into her as she fumbled with the keys, accepting her offer of a drink when he waltzed inside.

Louis hadn’t been drunk when he picked her up, but he was pissed when he finally took her to bed, both of them fumbling in the dark until finally Louis came and rolled off of her with a devastated sigh. He wasn’t sure if she’d finished, but she’d gone quiet as soon as he moved away, and with every second the silence hanging over them grew heavier.

“I should probably go,” Louis told her. Briana still didn’t respond.

Louis rolled out of bed and dashed into the bathroom to wipe off and redress. When he emerged again, Briana still hadn’t moved from where she was curled up under the covers.

Louis didn’t know what he was supposed to do, so after making sure that she was at least alive and breathing, he left, making the long drive back to his house despite the residual alcoholic buzz still weighing down his arms and legs and brain, too.

His heart dropped into his stomach when he pulled up in front of the house to find Harry’s car still there. Harry hadn’t left.

There was a dark shape sat at the dining table when Louis walked inside, brown curls cast into illumination as soon as Louis flicked on the light. Harry looked up at him with dark eyes, narrowed into slits.

“You’re drunk,” he observed. “And you smell, like—” Harry’s mouth snapped closed in realisation.

Suddenly, Louis found himself scrambling for ways to rationalise all of this, to make it make sense somehow. Not just to Harry, but to himself.

Louis wasn’t the type to let his eyes wander, not when he had Harry. He didn’t truly begrudge that Harry wasn’t the same, but that was different. This wasn’t them. This wasn’t Louis.

“Who was it?” Harry asked, swallowing heavily.

“Does it matter?” Louis replied, but Harry just stared back at him, stone-faced, refusing to so much as blink.

When Louis still didn’t answer, Harry’s mouth curled into something resembling a snarl. “I know it was a girl,” he said as if the knowledge itself were ammunition.

Louis wasn’t sure who the bullet was meant for. “I didn’t realise you were that intimately acquainted with the smell of pussy,” he replied with faux-nonchalance, turning to get a glass and a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet purely so he wouldn’t have to show Harry his face.

But Harry had already stood up from the table. He strode over to Louis, spinning the other man around to face him again.

“You have lipstick on your t-shirt,” Harry pointed out, grabbing at the offending garment to display the evidence and shoving Louis away as he let go. “I can’t believe you.”

“What,” Louis scoffed, “because I’m too much of a flaming queer to ever get it up for a girl?”

Harry looked ready to punch him. Looked close to doing it, too, if the fist clenched tightly at his
side was any indication. “You’re such a fucking arsehole,” he spat, finally taking a step back from Louis to put some space between them. Maybe he was worried Louis would be the one to make things physical. “You really think I’m upset because it was some random girl?”

“Aren’t you?” Louis challenged.

“No,” Harry replied in a softer voice. “I’m not.” But he didn’t explain himself, just turned tail and left. And Louis couldn’t blame him.

February 14, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis was surprised when he lifted his pen away from the page as the song faded away into silence. Somehow, he’d managed to jot down an entire verse and a chorus without much trouble at all, in addition to a few throwaway lines that he could use later to bulk out the rest of the song.

So maybe he was cured, then. Maybe opening up to Harry had done the trick after all.
Now that Louis had finished one song, he had a choice. He could take a break for a bit and try to recover a bit of emotional sanity or push through in the hopes that now that his creative juices were flowing, the next one would be easier.

He decided to go with the latter, hitting play before he had a chance to second-guess himself.

June 11, 2015
Vienna, Austria

Louis felt like they’d broke up and made up another half a dozen times before the summer, and there seemed to be no end in sight to it. The slightest thing would set Harry off, and Louis wasn’t much better—though Harry was more stubborn when it came to doling out apologies. Luckily for Louis, forgiveness wasn’t in short supply.

They fucked, and then fought, and then fucked again, until Louis barely knew which days of the week they were supposed to be enemies and which they were meant to spend tangled up in bed with each other.

Work days were a strange middle ground, made even stranger by the fact that Harry and Louis had been assigned—yes, assigned—a song to write together for the next album. The final album, Louis reminded himself. He’d had to do that a lot, lately.

Today had been neutral, for the most part. He and Harry had stayed in their respective rooms while Louis worked on lyrics and Harry did…whatever it was he was doing. Louis hadn’t asked, and he was doing his best to pretend he didn’t care.

Finally, Louis emerged with something workable and headed straight down the hotel corridor to Harry’s room to show him.

Harry was hardly dressed when he opened the door, covered in a dressing gown with god only knew what underneath. He didn’t look annoyed at seeing Louis waiting there in the entryway, but he didn’t seem very happy about it either.
“Lyrics,” Louis said, proudly giving the page clutched in his hand a little wave.

Harry plucked the item from him without saying a word and turned on his heel, trudging back toward the bed in the centre of the room. He didn’t so much as look behind him to check that Louis had followed.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and scanned over the page while Louis looked on, nervously awaiting judgment.

Finally, Harry looked up. “Are you having my arse?”

Louis arched an eyebrow, waiting for Harry to elaborate. “I’ve had your arse a few times, Harold, you’ll have to be more specific.”

Harry wasn’t amused by the quip. “We can’t put this on the album,” he said flatly.

Louis was struggling to hide how offended he really was, now. “Why not?” he demanded.

“It’s about me,” Harry replied, as if his reasoning should have been obvious.

“I write a lot of songs about you,” Louis pointed out.

“Yeah, but not like this,” Harry countered. “This is….”

“Not a positive portrayal of our relationship?”

“Yeah.”

Louis shrugged. “Well, it’s the truth, innit?”

Harry rolled his eyes and leaned back with his palms braced against the mattress. “Since when do we ever tell the truth?”

Louis took a few steps forward, crowding into Harry’s space, close enough that Harry had to spread his legs a little to make room for him. “Why not start now?” he suggested, leaning in to place his palms adjacent to Harry and pushing him back down against the mattress in the process.

“You can’t seduce me into going with your idea,” Harry told him, but he made no effort to squirm out from underneath Louis’s body. His eyes fluttered closed, perhaps out of habit, as Louis’s mouth drifted down to his neck to place a gentle kiss there.

“Why don’t you want to put it on the record?” Louis asked. He wanted a straight answer; something of a rarity when it came to Harry. But he rolled off Harry first, giving him some room to breathe.

Harry stretched his arms out over his head with a soft sigh. “Don’t you ever think about our legacy?”

“Screaming teenage girls and a shitload of money? Oh yeah, all the time.”

Harry slapped at Louis’s arm lightly. “No, I mean ours, not the band.” He was doing that thing where he stared at Louis without so much as blinking, and no matter how badly Louis wanted to look away, he couldn’t.

Their legacy. Enough arguments and missed opportunities to last a lifetime? A laundry list of mistakes? Because that was all Louis saw, and it was what he’d written in the song Harry had
rejected for the last project they’d likely ever do together.

“Okay, so you’ve vetoed the song,” Louis said one long moment later. He avoided answering Harry’s question. “That leaves us with nothing once we’re back in the studio, you realise.”

“We can just come up with something now,” Harry proposed, ever the optimist, of course.

So they did, lying in bed together side by side as they came up with lyrics more appropriate to their sound and image, and ones that didn’t paint a picture of a broken relationship for the whole world to gawk at.

When they were finished, they had a half-decent song that would probably receive only a few minor tweaks in the studio, and Harry seemed happy.

Louis, as was often the case when Harry was smiling bright enough to put the sun to shame, couldn’t help but lean over to kiss him, quick and soft on the lips before pulling away. Harry was the one to deepen it, rolling on top of Louis with an enthusiastic squeak as soon as Louis’s hands came up to steady Harry at his waist.

“You taste like fruit,” Louis observed as he licked the remnants of it from his own lips.

Harry grinned at him from above. “Bummed some mango lip balm off Caro earlier.”

Louis hummed a little as Harry kissed him again. “It tastes good, babe,” he said.

Harry flushed a little at the endearment. “Well, it is objectively the best fruit of the lot.”

“Right, ‘cos you’ve tried every fruit there is,” Louis scoffed.

Harry kissed him once more as if to persuade Louis to his side of the argument. “Well, out of every fruit you can get at Waitrose,” he amended.

Louis let out a soft noise of disagreement as he carefully rolled them over until their positions were reversed. “Nah,” he said, pushing Harry into the mattress. “Tastes good cause it’s you.”

“Would you say it tastes ‘perfect’?” Harry asked with a cheeky wink.

This time when Louis kissed him, he didn’t let up until Harry was left breathless and squirming beneath him, half-hard already just from that one kiss.

They fucked slow on top of the covers, and when Harry stared up at him starry-eyed, his mouth hanging open as he panted out quiet little breaths with each thrust of Louis’s cock inside him, Louis returned the gaze in full, refusing to break contact to even blink until they were through.

Louis dragged it out as long as he could, bringing Harry to the edge over and over again until Louis couldn’t take it anymore either. By the time they broke apart, they weren’t just sated, they were exhausted, their chests slick with sweat and heaving in broken counterrhythm as both lay shoulder to shoulder and tried to catch their breath.

Harry’s eyes were closed when Louis turned his head to stare at the other boy in unbridled wonder, so caught up in the sight that he almost didn’t notice when Harry started speaking again.

“Do you ever worry about—” He stopped short. Harry’s eyes were still shut, but his face was relaxed, like he’d fallen asleep midsentence. “I’m afraid that when I wake up one day,” he said in a soft voice, his speech even slower than normal, “all this will just be a memory that I won’t even
want to remember.”

It was a while before Louis finally replied. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “Me too.”

February 14, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis should have expected Harry to put the original version of Perfect that they’d written together on the playlist, especially after being treated to a re-worked version of Harry’s Stockholm Syndrome. He’d been surprised by it though, letting nearly thirty seconds go by uninterrupted before briefly pausing the song to look up the old lyrics so he could tweak them.

The line nearly everyone had interpreted as a reference to Taylor, the one Harry had insisted be left in at all costs just so he could have a ‘fuck you’ engraved in platinum, had actually been about Louis—and so he left it in, a memento to his own mistakes.

The rest had definitely needed tweaking though, and Harry had extended the length of the song, leaving room for an additional chorus, one Louis intended to write from scratch to fit the rhyme scheme.

He spent nearly an hour crafting his new version of the song, going over it again and again to make sure everything about it was exactly right. When he’d finished, he walked out into the sitting room again to take a break, feeling several degrees lighter than he had before, like he’d really done something he could feel good about.

Louis still wasn’t sure if he would ever have the chance to show Harry the new and improved lyrics, but that was a different worry for a different day.

“You’re in a good mood,” Sam remarked after giving Louis a quick once-over.

“Yeah, well.” Louis settled in next to her on the couch but didn’t explain any further. “What have I missed?”

Sam paused long enough to catch Louis up on the fact that the chief of staff was apparently sleeping with a student-doctor who had gotten said chief of staff pregnant and now both characters were arguing what to do about the baby. Or foetus, as the chief of staff was choosing to refer to it.

It was mindless melodramatic fodder, which was exactly what Louis needed after putting his brain through the wringer with Harry’s songs. It wasn’t a surprise to either Louis or Sam when he nodded off less than three-quarters of the way through the episode.

What was a surprise was the sight of Anne looming over him when Louis opened his eyes again at the conclusion of his kip on the sofa.

“Oh,” he said anticlimactically. Louis pulled himself up into a seated position and made a clumsy attempt to wipe the sleep away from his eyes. Sam was still sitting curled up into the corner of the sofa, typing away on her laptop with an innocent expression, as if she had no idea who was responsible for letting Anne inside. “Hi,” Louis continued in a flat tone after glancing back up at Anne again.
She pursed her lips a moment before speaking. “Harry had his evaluation this morning,” she told him. “He’ll likely be discharged by the end of the day.”

“What—”

“They still have to make sure that he’s ready physically,” Anne informed him. “But they think he’ll be ready to leave in a few hours.”

Louis leaned back into the sofa cushions against his shoulders, wishing that Anne’s presence in front of him didn’t make him feel automatically trapped. “And you’re telling me this because….”

“I thought…if you wanted to be there when he was discharged….”

That was about the last thing Louis expected her to say. “I don’t think Harry wants to see me,” he pointed out.

But Anne remained firm. “He’d make an exception,” she insisted. “For this.”

Louis wasn’t convinced, and he had no interest in making a scene on hospital premises because Anne thought his presence would be a nice surprise. “I’ll have to think about it,” he finally decided.

Anne looked a bit disappointed with his answer, but she didn’t try to argue. She nodded, taking a step back from the sofa. “Let me know what you decide,” she said stiffly. “And, thank you, by the way.”

“For what?” Louis asked with a frown.

Anne sighed softly. “For last night. I wasn’t thinking clearly, I was—”

“Scared?”

Anne nodded.

“Yeah, well, I can’t blame you,” Louis replied. “I was, too.”

Louis caught himself wondering if a hug was appropriate, given the circumstances, but Anne made the decision for him. She stepped forward to wrap her arms around him for just a few seconds before drawing back again. “Thank you,” she said again as Louis stood up to walk her to the door.

Louis could see Gemma waiting in the car outside when he opened the door to let Anne out and wondered if she was there by choice or because Anne had asked her to stay behind. He waved at her, a bit experimentally; she waved back before driving away.

Sam was staring at him when he turned around again after shutting and locking the front door. “What?” he asked her, meaning for it to sound less defensive than how it actually came out.

Sam shrugged. “If you want to talk about it…” she offered, but Louis didn’t. Not at all.

“I’d rather just get out of my own head a bit, actually,” he replied as he parked himself on the sofa next to her again, reaching for the remote so he could resume the episode he had missed nearly the entirety of thanks to his nap.

Regardless of Louis’s poor attention span, having the show on as background noise was good enough. He didn’t so much as think about Harry or Anne or anything else for another hour and a half, until there was a knock at the door.
Louis glanced at Sam, hoping she’d ordered takeout or something and had just forgotten to mention it. She shook her head, frowning, and Louis felt his stomach churn. There was absolutely no way that answering it would turn out well, but it wasn’t like he could just pretend he wasn’t home. Anyone that knew where Louis was staying undoubtedly knew he spent most of his time at the condo, too.

Louis wasn’t so much surprised to see Gemma as he was resigned. He let her inside without a word and waited for the other shoe to drop. There was little uncertainty in his mind that she was there to either convince Louis to go along with what Anne wanted, or to talk him out of it.

“What have you decided?” Gemma asked with her hands poised at her hips.

Sam was behind her, still curled up on the sofa, looking like she would have rather been anywhere in the world right at that second.

Louis couldn’t blame her. Gemma looked ready for a fight, and Sam had always been rather conflict-averse.

Louis shrugged, finally. “Was still weighing my options,” he informed Gemma, whose expression only soured further at the news.

“Well, stop,” she said churlishly. “You realise if you don’t show up tonight—after everything—that it’ll be like the last two weeks haven’t even happened?”

Louis frowned. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Gemma barked out a short sigh, running a hand through her hair as she shifted restlessly from side to side. “Harry needs to know you still care about him,” she said rapidly, “even if he isn’t quite ready to accept it yet.”

Louis stared at her for a long moment, trying to process what she’d said. “You know, if I didn’t know any better,” he joked, “I’d think you were trying to set us up.”

If Louis had thought the look on her face was bad before, it was nothing compared to the way her features curdled as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

“As if,” Gemma responded in an acrid tone. “I wouldn’t be here if I thought any of this was a gimmick to try and take advantage of my brother. And you wouldn’t be here either. Because you’d be dead,” she finished flatly.

Louis grimaced, wishing he’d never made the joke in the first place. “Right. Sorry.”

Gemma sucked in a deep breath before continuing, moving her hands away from her hips so she could cross her arms over her chest instead. Meanwhile, Sam still hadn’t moved and looked more displeased than ever to be an unwilling witness to their confrontation.

“Look,” Gemma said, “I just want to know that Harry’s made his peace with you so he can move on with his life. Because clearly, whatever happened between the two of you messed him up more than any of us knew. And I want my brother back.”

Louis winced. But maybe she was right. “You really think I should show up?” he questioned.

Gemma gave a stiff nod in answer.

Louis breathed out a quiet sigh and nodded. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll do it.”
Gemma left not long after Louis agreed to be there for Harry’s homecoming. Once appeased, she didn’t have much else to say. Louis’s face burned as he turned around again to face Sam after showing Gemma out, both from the embarrassment at being thoroughly dressed down by Gemma as well as the humiliation from his own ill-timed attempt at a joke.

Sam tossed Louis a look that made him feel even lower than he had before, but she didn’t say a word. Somehow that was worse, her leaving Louis to stew in his own guilt rather than giving him the satisfaction of a lecture.

Louis glanced up at the clock hanging up in the kitchen and then back down again toward Sam. “I guess we better get ready,” he said.

Sam’s eyes shot up to her hairline. “You want me to come with?” she said, sounding surprisingly startled for someone who accompanied Louis nearly everywhere he was meant to go.

“Of course I do,” he replied. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Sam shook her head. “I just didn’t think—never mind,” she finished quickly.

Louis was tempted to push her for the reason she’d been so hesitant but decided to leave it. “Dress nice,” he suggested. “I doubt we’ll be lucky enough to avoid a photo op.”
February 14, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis was lucky that he’d had a suit delivered weeks ago—and even luckier that this was the occasion in which it was needed, rather than at Harry’s funeral. Out of the ensemble, Louis decided to wear just the blazer and brogues, matching them with a cashmere sweater and some dark jeans. He wanted to look nice, but not overdone.

Sam had adopted a similar strategy, opting for a grey blouse and slacks under a long trench coat. She looked perfectly professional, but Louis already knew that wouldn’t do anything to stem the inevitable speculation in the tabs about the ‘mystery woman’ on his arm.

Louis had known to expect their fair share of pap attention when Harry was released from hospital, but what he hadn’t anticipated was a full-on stake out set up before he and Sam had even arrived. He kept his head down as much as possible as they pulled into the car park, but there was no help for staying hidden when they exited the vehicle, not with a few dozen telephoto lenses just on the other side of the street.

Louis ignored the paps the best he could and walked through the hospital entrance, making a beeline to the lifts. The people inside had clearly figured out that something was amiss outside, and Louis didn’t want to attract any of that attention to himself.

“How did they know?” Sam asked in a low voice after the lift doors had shut behind them.

Louis pressed the button for the eighth floor and shrugged. She looked worried by the photographers, but Louis had dealt with far worse. “Hospital staff don’t always keep their mouths shut when it comes to things like this,” he told her.

It was the likeliest explanation. Some nurse had probably let it slip to one of their friends, who had decided to post it to Twitter, and from there information tended to travel like a virus straight to the paparazzi.

Anne and Gemma were both stood outside Harry’s room like guards stationed on either side of the door. Gemma nodded in acknowledgment as Louis approached; he returned the gesture. “Is everything all right?” he asked, wondering why they both looked so solemn.

Anne nodded before replying. “We’re just waiting for Harry to finish getting dressed,” she informed Louis, but there was a degree of hesitance in her voice, like she wasn’t telling the whole story.
Louis decided not to pry. He’d had enough arguments to last him a lifetime already, and if it was something he needed to know about, it would undoubtedly come up sooner or later.

“Paps are already outside,” he informed them instead.

Anne frowned at the news, while Gemma’s face twisted into a scowl. “Where?” Anne asked. “Maybe we can—”

“Everywhere,” Louis replied. “The best we can do is just to pretend they aren’t there.”

Neither woman looked very satisfied with that answer, but Louis was the expert, after all.

Several seconds ticked on by with no sign of Harry. Louis leaned up against the wall next to Gemma with Sam at his side and resigned himself to waiting. He knew first-hand that Harry could spend hours in front of a mirror, particularly if he was stressed, but he wasn’t about to suggest that they try to hurry him along.

“So,” Anne said out of nowhere nearly a minute later. She turned slightly to look directly at Louis. “We’re planning on dinner together to celebrate after we leave. You’re welcome to join us. Afterwards, we’re taking Harry back to the condo for a little while.”

“On Sherbourne?” Louis asked, too surprised by the information to question why Anne felt the need to tell him any of this. “Why not…?” He trailed off, realising belatedly that Harry might have had very valid reasons for not wanting to return to his house just yet.

“We decided to continue therapy here at the hospital for a little while,” Anne replied. “To make transitioning a little easier on him.”

“Physical therapy?” Louis replied with a confused frown.

It was Gemma who answered. “Both kinds,” she said quickly. “His psychiatrist suggested close monitoring for a few weeks.”

Anne gave her a disapproving look, and Louis wondered what exactly she’d let slip that she wasn’t supposed to say. That Harry was still at risk enough that he needed to be babysat? It wasn’t such a big surprise, though it was disheartening, to say the least. Still, it wasn’t like Louis had realistically expected a quick recovery. He knew it would probably be years before Harry was truly okay again.

Before Louis could dwell on Harry’s future much more, the door to Harry’s suite finally opened. Out came Harry in a wheelchair, dressed in something predictably outlandish that Louis wasn’t sure how to describe. Somewhere between a trench coat and a dress, he thought.

The bandages were gone, though, replaced by a bulky scarf that covered up the worst of the slowly-healing wounds. Louis was relieved to see Harry looking more or less like his old self again.

The nurse who had wheeled Harry out passed the reigns on to Anne with a smile and wished Harry good luck before getting out of their way. Harry smiled back at her and then glanced up at Louis, apparently noticing him for the first time. There was a brief flicker of emotion in his face, gone too fast for Louis to properly identify, and then Harry looked away again, tilting his head back to address his mum instead.

“Can we hurry?” he asked her. “I’m absolutely starved.” It was like Louis wasn’t even there.

Louis wasn’t sure if Harry’s reaction was for better or worse in the end. It certainly hadn’t gone as
badly as it could have, but Louis wasn’t sure that being outright ignored—still—was much of an improvement upon an actual confrontation. But Anne and Gemma had gotten what they’d wanted, he supposed, and that would have to be enough.

Getting Harry out of Cedars-Sinai turned out to be a mess in ways that Louis hadn’t even anticipated. Somehow even the people waiting for loved ones downstairs had gotten wind of what was going on, and there was an untameable air of excitement that necessitated taking Harry out to the carpark through unconventional means.

Once outside, however, there was little hospital staff could do for them. Harry was exposed to the world, looking oddly regal in his wheelchair despite everything, and that was the way it had to be.

Louis stayed back while Anne and Gemma helped him up, and then watched as Gemma walked away to get the car started so they could leave as quickly as possible. Louis still wasn’t sure where they were meant to be going yet, but he assumed someone would tell him or Sam in time.

Louis watched as Anne walked Harry to the car, only stepping forward to catch Harry when he tripped upon climbing into the back. Harry glanced up at him, stone-faced, but that was the only ounce of acknowledgment Louis got before Harry ripped his arm out of Louis’s grip and closed the car door, severing the space between them.

Louis stepped back quickly. He could feel his face starting to warm and could only hope it wasn’t noticeable in any of the hundreds of photographs that had no doubt been taken over the course of the past few seconds.

Anne let out a quiet sigh and gestured toward Louis. “I can ride with you, if you’d like,” she offered.

Louis thought that was a good idea even if the prospect of spending any amount of time trapped in a car with Harry’s mum sent a frisson of fear coursing through him. “All right,” he said, nodding. “I assume you know where to go?”

Anne responded in the affirmative and moved away from the car containing her children so that Gemma could pull away from the parking spot. Louis watched them go, waiting until they passed by the paps still crowding the visitor’s entrance before finally turning to lead Anne to his own vehicle.

The sun had nearly gone down by the time all three were buckled into the car and had made it past the photographers lining the sidewalk, at which point Louis finally released a breath he’d been holding for a very long time.

“So,” Louis said a bit stiffly, “do you still think it was a good idea that I showed?” He angled his head to get a glimpse of Anne’s expression, but it revealed nothing.

“Yes,” she said finally, her tone making it clear she wouldn’t be swayed from that answer.

Louis was a bit surprised by that considering Harry’s reaction—or non-reaction, rather—to Louis’s presence, but he’d done what she wanted, and if she was happy about it, he wasn’t going to dissuade her.

“Do you mind if I put on some music?” Louis asked before he had the chance to second-guess himself. This time he didn’t look over at Anne as he waited for her reply.

There was a beat of silence before she responded. “Is it from the playlist Harry made?” she asked.
Louis swiped his tongue over his lips and swallowed. “Yeah.”

“All right,” Anne said, surprising Louis with her quick reply. “Would you like me to do it?”

Louis took one hand off the wheel and reached into his pocket to extract his mobile. “Please,” he said, handing it to her. “Number sixty-seven.”

July 1, 2015
Los Angeles, California

Louis had spent the better part of the morning crouched over his toilet, trying to keep the contents of his stomach where they were meant to be. Now, in the back of a car on the way to a beachside café in Malibu, he wished he’d just thrown up earlier, if only so he could be certain that his breakfast wouldn’t suddenly make an unpleasant re-appearance.

Louis was the first to arrive, but he wasn’t sure how to feel about that fact. As the minutes dragged on with no sign of Harry, his mood shifted slowly from anxiety to anger and then back again. He wanted this over with.

But it would never be over. Ever again.

Eventually, Louis ordered himself an iced tea just to have something to focus on while he sat and waited. He sipped at the drink, wincing a bit at the aftertaste while he stared out at the sea in the distance. The waves were a bright blue, reflecting the cloudless, sunny day above. It felt ill-suited to the rolling storm building inside Louis’s chest.

The chair on the opposite side of the table scraped loudly across the floor. Louis glanced up just as Harry sat himself down. He looked a mixture of drained and elated, like he’d just ran—and won—a marathon.

Louis found himself wishing that Harry had shown up in a worse mood to start, just so he could be absolved of the responsibility of destroying it. Utterly.

“Did you want to order something?” Louis asked, blatantly stalling.

If Harry noticed, he didn’t call him on it. He glanced around the otherwise empty rooftop patio, searching for a waiter. “It can wait,” he said with a shrug.

“You sure?” Louis was fairly certain that if Harry didn’t eat before their discussion, what Louis had to say would likely ruin his appetite.

Harry nodded. His eyes lowered to the glass of iced tea that Louis was clutching between his palms like a lifeline. “What about you?” he asked curiously.

“Oh. I’m not hungry.” It wasn’t a lie. Louis still wasn’t sure how he’d managed to keep from starving these last few weeks with his stomach constantly tied up in knots.

“You okay?” Harry replied, accepting the reply without question. He gestured toward Louis’s glass. “You mind?”

Louis slid it across the table and watched as Harry sipped at it eagerly. It wasn’t much of a loss.
Louis could barely taste it for the bile at the back of his throat, anyway.

“So,” Harry said after downing nearly a third of the oversized glass in one long chug. “You wanted to talk?” His eyes roved over the scenery in the distance, but it didn’t feel like he was avoiding Louis’s eyes on purpose.

Louis was grateful for the slight distraction. He wasn’t sure he could have gotten the words out if Harry’s attention had been solely focused on him instead.

He opened his mouth, steeling himself to make his confession, which was of course when the door to the café opened again to reveal a waitress with a blonde hair and a bright smile, putting an abrupt hold on Louis’s plan.

She bounded over excitedly to Harry to take his order, and Louis couldn’t help but worry that her exuberance was due to the fact that she recognised them. Or Harry, at least. Louis wasn’t stupid enough to think that just because someone in America knew Harry’s face that they would likewise know his, as well.

The girl hurriedly scribbled down Harry’s slow, stuttering request for a salad with a ridiculous name and assured him that she would bring him out another iced tea upon seeing the glass was nearly empty. She didn’t so much as spare Louis a second glance. Louis was fine with that.

Harry released a quiet sigh as soon as she was gone. His eyes flicked up to meet Louis’s. “Sorry,” he said, as if it was his fault they’d been interrupted. “You were saying?”

Louis opened his mouth again and froze. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t seem to make his lips move. His tongue felt like it was made of cement. Suddenly, he couldn’t breathe, though there was nothing around them but fresh, salty, seaside air.

His feet were moving before he’d made the conscious decision to do so, and then he was out of his chair, bracing himself against the waist-high railing that encircled the roof.

Louis stared hard at the tiny figures milling about below him, trying to imagine himself being in one of their places instead. When that didn’t work, he shifted his gaze to the water again and ignored the sound of Harry’s quiet footsteps shuffling toward him.

Harry leaned up against the railing next to him a few seconds later, careful not to let any part of their bodies actually touch. For all intents and purposes, they were alone, but there was no guarantee that the café staff would keep quiet if they got a bit too friendly. Louis was torn between bitterness at not being able to take what he could get from Harry while he still could, and resignation: maybe it was better to start getting used to it now. Because after this, he’d never be able to touch Harry again.

Louis didn’t know how to come to terms with that. Even through all the break-ups they’d had before, there had never been the concrete finality that there was now. Everything was about to change.

“We don’t have to talk until you feel ready,” Harry said in a soft tone. He didn’t look at Louis as he spoke, as if he knew that it would be too much to bear.

But Louis wasn’t ever going to feel ready, not for this. And there was only so much longer he could put it off.

“I’m okay,” he said. He wasn’t. “It’s just—I don’t know really how to say it.” That wasn’t a lie. Louis had gone over this encounter a thousand times in his head, but whenever he got to this part,
actually telling Harry, well…. He’d drawn a blank.

“Can you tell me what it’s about?” Harry questioned, gently probing for an answer.

Louis sucked in a deep breath. “The girl I slept with,” he said. It was both a response and an opener. “You know her. Well—we know her.”

“Okay.”

Louis could feel the tension radiating off of Harry now that he’d brought up such a sore subject. If only he knew just how much worse it was about to get.

Louis turned to the side, facing Harry, and Harry did the same, mirroring his pose exactly. Harry didn’t look like he was angry, which was good, but that didn’t really matter much in the grand scheme of things.

“Who was she?” Harry pushed, when several more seconds had gone by in which Louis failed to elaborate.

“Briana,” Louis told him. When he saw no recognition in Harry’s face, he clarified, saying: “One of the stylists here, in LA. The blonde?”

“Oh,” Harry replied, nodding. Then his eyes narrowed. “Are you trying to tell me that you two are —”

“No,” Louis replied quickly. “God, no.” If there was one thing he’d learned from his subsequent encounters with Briana since their one-night-stand, it was that the two of them together was a disaster waiting to happen. “It’s just—” He looked down at Harry’s navel instead, unable to meet his eyes for even a second longer. “We didn’t use a condom and now she’s pregnant,” he finished all in one breath.

Harry didn’t respond right away. Louis watched as his hands slowly rose to cover his stomach, like he was in pain, or—

“She’s pregnant,” Harry said slowly.

Louis finally dragged his eyes up to meet Harry’s again. He nodded.

“Is she keeping it?” Harry’s voice lowered. His hands still hovered low over his abdomen, not quite touching.

Louis nodded again. “I couldn’t ask—” He couldn’t force the rest of the words out, but Harry seemed to understand.

Harry’s eyes finally drifted away with Louis, back toward the doors leading into the café. “We should sit back down,” he said calmly. “It looks like they’re bringing our food out.”

Louis squinted in confusion but followed Harry’s lead as he slid back into his seat. “Don’t you want to talk about—”

“I’d rather not,” Harry said as the doors opened to reveal the waitstaff carrying their dishes—or well, Harry’s—as he’d predicted.

So they didn’t talk about it.
Louis switched back to the radio as soon as the song was finished and turned the volume down to a quiet hum in the background. It was quiet in the car for a bit, with Louis still on course for their destination: a restaurant somewhere up north of the city that Louis had never heard of.

Finally, Anne spoke up. “I didn’t thank you before,” she said, “for showing up.”

“You shouldn’t thank me,” Louis replied honestly. “Thank Gemma, if anything. She was the one who convinced me to come.”

Anne let out a soft noise of disagreement. “I don’t know,” she replied. “I think you would have ended up coming even if she hadn’t talked you into it.”

Louis looked over, trying to get a glimpse of her expression, but her head was turned toward the window, staring out into the dark. He shifted his attention back to the road and didn’t respond.

Anne was silent for a bit before finally turning around in her seat to speak to Sam instead. Louis drove while half-listening to their conversation, which was mostly comprised of Anne inquiring about Sam’s life and how she’d come to work for Louis, until civilisation gave way to the darkness of the surrounding landscape, at which point Anne jumped in with directions again.

The restaurant itself was so secluded that Louis had to wonder how they attracted any business at all, though if Harry was the type of clientele they usually catered to, he supposed the isolation made sense. The car park wasn’t generous, but they’d gotten lucky; there was an open spot right beside the entrance that had been vacated just as they pulled in. Louis claimed it quickly, and then turned to Anne again.

“Have you been here before?” he asked, curious why they’d chosen this place instead of one of Harry’s oft-favoured eateries closer to both their flats in Beverly Hills.

Anne nodded as she unbuckled herself. “A few times,” she replied, stepping out of the car. She waited for Louis and Sam to join her before continuing. “I never really liked the long drive,” she admitted, “but we’ve never had any photographers bother us, so I thought it’d be a good choice, considering.

Louis looked around at the seemingly endless darkness around them and nodded. “Yeah, I can see
why. Are Gemma and Harry already here?”

Anne glanced down at her phone to check. “Yes,” she replied quickly. “We made reservations for a private room, so I’ll show you where it is.”

Louis felt distinctly uncomfortable as they entered the building and wound their way through a maze of tables filled with mostly older rich couples who probably had never known what it was like to not have money for even a single day in their lives. Louis could practically feel their eyes following him, judging him, as if he wasn’t meant to be there because of his tattoos and his stubble and his jeans. Hell, maybe they could tell he hadn’t grown up with money. Some of the rich people he’d met before—the really rich ones—had always acted like they could smell the Donny upbringing on him, even before Louis ever opened his mouth.

Louis was relieved when they exited the main dining room and slipped into one of the private rooms instead, but then he was tense for an entirely different reason, because Harry was staring directly at him the second he walked in.

Louis pretended not to notice and quickly took a seat next to Gemma, putting himself as far from Harry as possible without sitting on the complete opposite end of the table.

It was a very large table.

“We aren’t expecting more people, are we?” Louis questioned. He quickly counted the empty chairs in his head. “Plenty of room for Niall and all his ‘friends’,” he joked.

Harry clearly didn’t find the comment funny. He shot daggers at Louis with his eyes, mouth pulled down into a deep frown. “Niall wasn’t invited,” he said rather nastily, so much so that even his mum and sister glanced over at him in worry.

Louis wasn’t nearly as alarmed. He knew the pattern of Harry’s moodiness, understood that he had energy he needed to burn out and that avoidance had only made him simmer in whatever bitter feelings he’d been harbouring toward Louis since Louis’s confession. Now that they were stuck with each other, at the same damn table no less, Harry had no choice but to let it out.

But Louis wasn’t worried about the consequences of Harry’s anger either. He was too busy thinking back on Harry’s interactions with Niall, wondering again just what had gone so wrong between the two of them that Harry was still holding a grudge. Niall was harmless. Louis couldn’t imagine him doing anything.

Louis had genuinely intended to keep his mouth shut for the duration of the dinner, but once it came down to it, he couldn’t handle the awkward silence that settled in once everyone began looking over their menus.

“Tweeted anything, yet?” Louis asked casually without glancing up from his own.

There was a long pause that followed, in which Louis had no doubt that the other occupants of the room were trying to determine if he was really addressing Harry.

“What?” Harry asked in a hesitant voice.

Louis lowered his menu and met Harry’s eyes head-on, finding only wary confusion there. “I asked if you’d tweeted anything yet,” Louis repeated. “Since, you know, everyone’s bound to have heard you were released from hospital already. Seems like something that would warrant a bit of acknowledgment.”
Harry’s nostrils flared, his ears going a bit red, like he was trying to suppress some overwhelming fit of emotion. He didn’t answer, but Anne did, her own face flushing a bit in embarrassment as she continued to skim her menu in an attempt at nonchalance.

“Harry’s th—his doctor thought it would be better if he continued to take a little break from social media,” Anne said quickly, without ever once looking up to meet Louis’s inquisitive gaze.

Anne’s answer only sparked more questions for Louis, who was curious now about what people were saying that Harry’s therapist didn’t want him subjected to. He had his guesses, of course, but often expectations didn’t match the sheer insanity of the real thing. Fans had unlimited imaginations, he’d learned.

There were several more attempts at conversation from everyone at the table as dinner progressed, with the exception of Harry, who seemed content to stew in angry silence throughout. Louis was fine with that, because it at least meant they weren’t going to have an argument, but it wasn’t the least bit comfortable for any of them, and by the time they finished, Louis had never been more relieved to go back to his rented condo on Sherbourne.

Which, he suddenly realised, was practically neighbouring the place where Harry would now be staying. Maybe Louis wasn’t as excited to go back as he’d thought.

All thoughts of that were driven from his mind, however, the very moment they stepped out the front entrance to the restaurant and into a maelstrom of flashing lights. It took Louis a few seconds to realise they were cameras, that somehow, word must have gotten out about Harry’s location, and now they were being mobbed. By so-called fans.

Louis reached for Harry instinctively and dragged him to Louis’s car, which was the closest to the doors from what he could tell. He shoved Harry into the passenger seat and crammed Anne and Gemma in the back with Sam, reversing slowly enough out of the spot that he was certain he wasn’t about to accidentally run anyone over, but with enough insistence that they wouldn’t be swarmed.

“What do we do?” Louis asked as he drove them out of the car park before pulling off to idle on the side of the road. He kept his eyes on the rear view, carefully scanning the road behind them for any sign of more fans.

“We can’t just leave the car here,” Gemma argued. “I could go back myself and—”

“No,” Anne said firmly. “We can get it tomorrow morning, Gemma.”

“What about Harry?” Gemma replied.

“What about me?”

Louis ignored Harry and turned to look at Anne in the centre seat. She stared back at him with a vaguely apologetic expression. “Why do I get the feeling you’re about to ask me for a favour?” he asked.

Anne’s mouth pulled up into a tight smile. “Gemma and I will take care of the car,” she reassured him. “Harry just needs someone to take him to his appointment.”

Louis was pretty sure that Harry was an adult who was capable of calling himself a car service to take him a couple blocks, but he could understand why Anne was hesitant to leave him in the hands of a stranger. Still, Louis wasn’t sure he wouldn’t rather be tasked with a two-hour drive to retrieve the car they’d left behind.
“Okay,” Louis told her despite his doubts.

Harry let out a quiet noise of protest, but it seemed to be reflexive. He didn’t say another word for the entire drive back.

Louis was ready to drop by the time he and Sam made it through the door of their shared condo sans Anne, Gemma, and Harry. But there were still things that Louis needed to take care of before bed.

“Can you email Jaime and have her call me as soon as she wakes up?” Louis asked Sam as he toed off his shoes in the entryway.

Sam nodded, looking a bit confused by the request, but she didn’t ask Louis for any additional information, for which he was grateful.

Afterward, Louis headed straight for his room. He was feeling inspired for once. He actually wanted to write.

August 5, 2015
New York City, New York

Harry had come to the party with his…boyfriend. And Louis hated that the word left such a bitter taste in his mouth. He and Harry had never been boyfriends, not officially, but Harry had been flaunting his thing with that American bloke for the better part of nine months, and Louis still wasn’t used it. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever be used to it, honestly.

Liam was there too as a welcome distraction when the birthday girl wasn’t around. Louis stuck close to his side for most of the night, all the while keeping a watchful eye on Harry as things progressed.

Then Lottie demanded his attention once again and Louis lost track of Harry. By the time his sister released Louis from her clutches, Harry was long gone.

Louis hung out with Lottie for as long as he was required as a dutiful older sibling before immediately retiring to bed, with Liam right behind him. Liam stopped him in the doorway to the bedroom Louis had claimed in the multi-story flat they’d rented out, a gentle hand on his forearm.

“You okay?” Liam asked. His eyebrows met in the middle of his forehead in an expression of genuine concern, and as much as Louis wanted to tell Liam to do one so he could be alone, he couldn’t bear knowing he’d put that wounded puppy look on Liam’s face.

“Just tired,” Louis lied, hoping Liam would be satisfied with that and let him go.

He didn’t. “Is this about Harry and—”

“No,” Louis interrupted roughly. It was clear from the look in Liam’s eyes that he hadn’t been the least bit convincing. “Look,” Louis continued, “it’s fine. I’ll get over it.”

Liam’s frown deepened. “Louis, you know if you want to talk about things—”

“I’m fine,” Louis repeated curtly. “Really, it’s fine.”
Louis was still telling himself that nearly an hour later as he laid flat on his back in bed, staring up at a pitch-black ceiling and waiting for something that remotely resembled sleep. He was no closer to it when he saw his phone light up next to him on the nightstand, so he picked it up and sat up to read the notification.

Louis’s heart stopped beating for a moment. It was a text. From Harry.

Are you awake?

Louis had barely sent back his yes before his phone lit up again, Harry’s name flashing across the screen. He picked up the phone cautiously, not sure what to expect.

“Hello?” he inquired hesitantly.

Harry’s voice came across the line in bits and pieces. “Louis? I’m…can you hear me?”

“The reception’s not great,” Louis replied honestly. He rubbed at his eyes, suddenly tired even though he’d been trying to fall asleep for ages with no luck.

There was more static, and then Harry’s voice came through again, clearer this time. “How’s that?” he asked.

There was a strange echo to it though, that Louis couldn’t help but comment on. “Are you in a bog?” he asked.

Harry chuckled softly. “No,” he replied. “No, I’m…it’s complicated.” His voice still sounded strange, and it took Louis another moment to realise it was the same sort of nasally tone he always got after crying.

Suddenly, Louis was worried about Harry, even though it wasn’t like he had any right to be. Though, Harry had been the one who called him, so. “What happened to what’s-his-name?” Louis wondered, putting a stop to the rapidly spiralling paranoid thoughts. “Xander,” he clarified, like Harry wouldn’t have been able to figure it out on his own.

It was a few more seconds before Harry answered. “He’s asleep,” he replied quietly. “Or he was when I left. I…” He paused. “Look, can you come meet me?” he asked. It was about the last request Louis had expected. “I need to talk to someone and you’re the only one who—please.” Harry sounded near tears again, but even if he hadn’t been so plainly overcome, Louis still wouldn’t have been able to say no.

“Okay,” Louis told him, already halfway out of bed. “Yeah. I’ll be there.”

He didn’t have much option other than to call a car service to take him to the address Harry had sent, so by the time he arrived at his destination—a gym somewhere in Brooklyn—nearly forty-five minutes had passed since Harry had called.

Louis tried the doors at the front of the darkened façade, not expecting much, but to his surprise, they opened easily. He’d paid the driver to wait around back for him, so he wasn’t too worried about getting back if Harry had given him the wrong address for some reason.

Louis wasn’t expecting anything like that now that he’d been able to get inside the building, but that still left the matter of just where Harry was exactly. He glanced around a bit, not willing to get arrested for poking around aimlessly, and then shot him another text.

The response came just a few seconds later. Pool.
Louis squinted into the darkness for a few seconds before remembering the flashlight on his phone existed for a reason. He located the sign for the pool shortly after that and approached cautiously, not sure what to expect when he finally found Harry.

The pool was indoors, but shielded by a massive skylight overhead, casting a gloomy blue illumination down toward the silhouette seated on the edge, their back facing Louis. It was Harry, of course, dressed in an oversized hoodie for an American lacrosse team, and Louis realised with a pang deep in his gut that it must have been Xander’s. Which begged the question: why had Harry asked him to come here?

“Didn’t peg you for the breaking and entering type,” Louis said conversationally as he sat down beside Harry on the edge of the empty swimming pool.

“A friend of mine owns the place,” Harry replied. He sniffled loudly, the sound echoing off of the tiled walls. “He used to let me come in after closing to just…swim for a bit.”

“Was that what you were planning on doing?” Louis asked. He gazed out at the expanse of the pool in front of them. They were at the deepest end, the bottom a good six metres below.

“I don’t really know what I was planning,” Harry admitted. “I just…. He swallowed thickly and turned to finally look at Louis. “My mum called,” he said, “before I called you. She said…. He paused again, eyes filling up with tears. “Robin has cancer,” he finally managed, and Louis’s heart sank before Harry even got the rest of it out. “They don’t think…. They aren’t optimistic.”

Louis could tell that Harry was just barely holding himself together, so he reached over and wound his arms around the other boy, communicating silently that he understood. Because he did, better than anyone else Harry knew. And it made sense now, why Harry had called him instead of seeking help elsewhere.

“You can cry,” Louis told him. “I’m not going anywhere.”

February 14, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis kept writing for a bit after the song concluded. He was overwhelmingly grateful it hadn’t been a reworked version of Ever Since New York, the song he knew as soon as he’d heard it had been written about that same night. Louis wouldn’t have been able to touch the damn thing if that had been the case. That belonged to Harry, and it would stay that way.

Louis didn’t try to pretend as if he could understand Harry’s feelings, instead writing about the tragedies they’d gone through back-to-back in the middle of everything else in their lives that seemed to be going wrong all at the same time.

This time he set his pen down with a set of lyrics that were nearly finished. It was surprisingly easy to write while listening now, easier even than it had been before Louis had thought to do it in the first place. Or well, until Sam had bullied him into realising that was what Harry wanted.

Still, writing took a lot out of him, and the day had already been exhausting to start with. Louis stripped down quickly and flopped into bed, setting his mobile off to the side as he laid down to wait for Jaime to call.
He was out like a light within minutes of his head hitting the pillow.
Louis woke up wondering if the events of the previous day had all been just a dream. Once he realised that they were, in fact, real, he sat up and started to take stock of things.

Harry hated him. And Louis deserved it.

That was the first coherent thought that sprang to Louis’s mind, and it was one he couldn’t escape. Complicating that further was the fact that he and Harry simply couldn’t avoid each other any longer. Anne expected him to make sure Harry made it to his therapy appointment in less than an hour, and regardless of how short their time together was, it was still time spent in each other’s company—alone.

Louis wasn’t sure either of them were ready for that yet.

Louis rolled over in bed with a sigh and picked his mobile up off the dresser. Seven missed calls, he realised, all from Jaime. And a voicemail, to boot.

He didn’t bother with the voicemail, already certain it would be a lengthy lecture he was sure to receive anyway when he called Jaime back. That was the first thing he did instead. He waited impatiently as the phone rang, checking the time and trying to figure out what was taking Jaime so long.

“Thought I’d make you sweat a bit,” she said when she finally answered in the middle of her own personalised answering machine message.

“Ha-ha,” Louis replied dryly. “Had your fun, then?”

“Quite. You know, generally, when you ask someone to call you first thing in the morning, you should probably be prepared to take that call.”


“How old are you?” Jaime demanded. “Eighty?”

Louis sighed and flopped down on his back with the phone still pressed to his ear. “The last few days have been stressful,” he argued in a weak attempt to defend himself.

“As opposed to what?” Jaime replied. “With that attitude, you might as well have slept through the
past two weeks.”

Louis pretty much had, but there was no use in telling Jaime that. He could tell she was blustering because she was worried, and he appreciated her concern, but he hadn’t called to talk about his mental health—or lack thereof.

“Look,” he said, trying to shift the conversation back on track, “there is something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Work-related, I’d hope,” she replied in a lofty tone. Apparently, she really wasn’t over Louis missing her calls. “I still haven’t forgotten the last time you tried to make me play therapist for you.”

Louis winced at the reminder. “Yes, it’s work-related,” he assured her. “But it’s not—I will need your advice, I think.”

“Well, this ought to be good,” she muttered. He could hear her shuffling through the papers on her desk, the way she did when she was well and truly anxious about something.

But Louis didn’t want her to worry. That was his job. Right now, he was doing more than enough worrying for them both.

“Well?” Jaime prompted after several long moments of silence in which Louis attempted to steel himself for what he needed to say next. “Out with it, then. I don’t have all day to sit and chat.”

“I was wondering what it would take for me to come out,” Louis said quickly, the words pouring out of him in a jumbled rush as soon as he opened his mouth to speak. “Like, publicly, I mean.”

There was an unbearably long pause before Jaime replied. Her voice was carefully neutral, betraying nothing. “You want to come out to the public?” she asked.

“If it’s possible,” Louis replied. He tried not to let the churning nausea in his belly seep into his words. He didn’t want Jaime to know that he was still second-guessing this (impulse) decision, because if there was any indication he wasn’t one-hundred-percent sure of himself, she would never agree to back his play.

“There’s always a risk, you know,” Jaime said carefully, “with this sort of thing.”

“I know.”

“Particularly given your history.” The denials, she meant. The fact that he’d never left his sexuality open to interpretation, even. And all the rumours about him and Harry, of course, the ones he’d lied for years about there being no truth to. “The fans won’t like feeling that you’ve duped them. And the girls—”

“Jaime, I know,” Louis replied in a patient tone. He flipped over onto his side and closed his eyes. He’d known this wouldn’t be easy, but…. “I just want to know what we would have to do.”

Several seconds ticked by as Jaime struggled to formulate a coherent response. “It won’t be easy,” she finally said. “I’m not willing to let you do it without a solid plan for handling the press. And we aren’t breathing a word of this until after tour’s finished.”

“Okay,” Louis agreed, though he felt a little disappointed by that. A part of him—a big part—just wanted to get it all over with now. “So what’s next?”
“Talking to Harry, most likely.”

“What?” Louis sat up straight, immediately panicking. “What d’you mean?”

“Well,” Jaime said slowly, “it would help if we had his cooperation. Assuming you want to be fully honest about things.”

“Right.” Louis hadn’t really considered the fact that Harry would actually have to be involved in his hare-brained plan to come out, but Jaime was right. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Good. Let me know when you do. Is that everything, then?”

No, Louis thought. There was one more thing. “I need three days in England before the next leg.”

Jaime sounded surprised when she replied, and Louis wondered if she’d thought he would end up staying in California till the very last minute. Maybe she’d already booked him a ticket through LAX. “You’re sure?” she asked. “That only gives you another—”

“I’m aware,” Louis said curtly. He didn’t need the reminder of how little time he had left, especially with how much still needed to be fixed before he was gone. But then again, maybe Louis wouldn’t be able to fix it after all. Maybe he needed to accept that finally.

“All right,” Jaime replied. There was no judgment in her tone. “I’ll make arrangements and forward the itinerary to you and Sam.”

“Thank you.”

With that taken care of, Louis said his goodbyes and hung up before getting up to take a shower in preparation for seeing Harry in a bit.

And just to really set the mood, and partially because Louis didn’t want to still be working through the remainder of Harry’s playlist on the flight back to England, he set his mobile down on the counter as he waited for the water to heat up and pressed play on the next song.

December 13, 2015

London, England

Harry had downed three shots of tequila as soon as they’d stepped foot on the premises, despite his bodyguard’s warnings against it, and Louis could see that the alcohol was quickly catching up to him. Harry’s blazer was long gone, discarded almost the second they walked into the VIP area, and his shirt was unbuttoned to his belly button, although for Harry that wasn’t that unusual.

What was unusual was the way Harry seemed to only have eyes for Louis despite the fact that they’d barely been speaking lately.

Louis had snuck in his touches at the end of their performance and married himself to the idea that it was all he would get. Apparently, Harry (or rather, Drunk Harry) had made other plans.

There was a pole in the centre of the dance floor, an invitation for bad ideas to make themselves into reality. Harry had latched onto it right away, but he hadn’t done more than just sway around it in circles like a kid at a May Day festival, just going around and around and around and around till Louis was
worried he’d get dizzy and throw up.

That didn’t happen, but Harry’s behaviour didn’t improve much as the night wore on. And Liam just kept bloody encouraging him, coaxing him into more outrageous positions, practically grinding on him at some points, and Louis just couldn’t take much more of it.

Which was of course right when Harry decided to put an end to his pole-dancing antics and dropped himself neatly in Louis’s lap instead.

“Fuck,” Louis said, wincing at the stench of alcohol on Harry’s lips. “Feel like I’m gonna get a contact high from your mouth.”

“That can be arranged,” Harry slurred.

Louis couldn’t help the flash of heat that sparked low in his belly, or the way his dick twitched in his pants right underneath where Harry’s arse was pressed close against his groin. Harry could clearly feel it, too, because he rocked back even harder in response. Louis’s hands tightened around Harry’s hips, but he wasn’t sure if he wanted to push Harry away or pull him even closer.

Louis settled for holding Harry firmly in place, only to realise too late that Harry still had a full range of motion in his hips, and that he intended to put them to good use.

“Harry,” Louis tried, “we can’t.” They were in public and Harry was drunk. Even compared to the rest of their bad ideas, this ranked pretty high.

But Harry refused to let go.

It had to have been noticeable, the way Harry was grinding down in Louis’s lap, but it was dark, and from what Louis could see around the mess of Harry’s curls, nobody was paying an ounce of attention to them, too focussed on the booze and the girls.

And Louis couldn’t make himself push Harry away, didn’t want to, and he was so close—

With a sharp cry muffled against the soft skin at Harry’s throat, Louis came hard, spilling into his pants right there in the booth where Harry had taken up residence in his lap.

Louis shoved Harry away hard as soon as he realised what had happened, staring down at his now-damp crotch in horror as Harry went arse over teakettle onto the lounge floor. Louis’s mind raced as the others started to notice something was amiss.

“I’m sorry,” Harry was saying as he picked himself up off the floor. “I’m sorry, Lou, I shouldn’t have—”

Louis tuned him out without trying. His brain was going a mile a minute, wondering what would happen if he ran into paps with a fucking wet spot on his trousers, or worse, if someone in the VIP area had seen what he and Harry were up to and decided to phone the bloody Sun with a late-night scoop.

This couldn’t happen anymore, Louis reminded himself. He had a baby coming, and Louis’s only shot at relevance in the music industry had just slipped out of his fingers earlier that evening. He needed to think about things bigger than himself, bigger than Harry.

Harry was still trying to apologise; Louis stood and pushed him away.

“Liam, could you—?” Louis tugged the aforementioned man closer in a bid for his attention. “Can
you keep an eye on him? Make sure he doesn’t get into any trouble?”

“Yeah, sure,” Liam replied. He looked confused, but Louis knew that he knew what Louis was really asking. To keep Harry away from him.

February 15, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis felt moderately refreshed when he emerged from the shower, but his optimism didn’t last long. It faded as soon as he walked out and saw Sam already in the middle of preparing a healthy breakfast of oatmeal and fresh fruit with a look of concern on her face, and suddenly Louis didn’t have an appetite anymore.

She made him eat anyway, and he did so begrudgingly, dodging her questions at every turn. “Yes, I talked to Jaime already,” he told her. “No, I don’t want to have a discussion about it. She’ll email you with anything you need to know, but it’s nothing particularly time-sensitive.” He shovelled another heaping spoonful of oatmeal into his mouth and winced at the heat. “Well, we are heading back to England for a few days before South America,” he added, the words muffled through his chewing.

Sam looked more annoyed than disgusted. “That seems time-sensitive in my opinion.”

Louis nodded. “No, no, you’re right,” he said. “Sorry. I’m just—” He made a vague motion around his head to indicate the level of scatter-brain he was currently experiencing and then glanced up to check the time. He needed to get going. “So, I’m not sure how long this is going to take,” Louis told Sam as he got up to put his bowl in the sink with the rest of the dishes that direly needed a wash, “but I assume I’ll be back within a couple hours.”

“I can get on without you, you know,” Sam replied with a wry smile.

“I know, I know. See you in a bit.” Louis fussed over his coat and shoes purely for the sake of wasting time before heading out the door to start the short walk over to the condo Harry and his family were now staying in.

It was freezing outside for some reason, colder even than when he’d arrived at the beginning of the month, and Louis found himself hastening down the street just to get out of the biting wind. He knocked frantically when he arrived, shivering, and waited.

No one showed up at the door.

Louis counted to thirty in his head before trying again, pressing the doorbell this time before giving it another loud set of firm knocks against the wood. But still, nothing.

Louis was starting to worry now. Presumably Gemma and Anne had left already, which meant Harry was home alone. Louis was trying not to allow that knowledge to overpower rational thought, but he could feel his heart rate accelerating in increments as he continued to wait on the doorstep with no response to increasingly frantic knocks.

Finally, he broke and called Gemma. Only it wasn’t Gemma who answered. It was Anne.
“Louis? What’s wrong?”

Louis felt a bit bad that he couldn’t even attempt to obfuscate the fact that something had gone awry already, but he supposed transparency was for the best. “I’m at the condo,” he told her. “I need the code to get in.”

“Why? Where’s Harry?”

“Inside I’m guessing?” Louis replied as he glanced around at the street, searching for any evidence that Harry might have gone for an early morning stroll for some reason, despite the bitter weather. “I’ve been knocking, but he hasn’t answered.”

He could hear Gemma saying something in the background but couldn’t quite make it out. Anne’s reply was muffled, like she’d placed a hand over the mic on Gemma’s mobile to keep from being overheard. When she replied again, her voice was unnaturally level. “Seven-seven-two-four-one-five-one-six.”

Louis plugged the code into the keypad and breathed out a quiet little hiss of triumph when the light on the door flashed blue just as the lock clicked open. “It worked, thanks.”

“Do you want me to stay on?” Anne asked. It sounded like she was asking more for her own reassurance than Louis’s, but he wasn’t about to draw attention to it.

He opened his mouth to tell her ‘yes’ but let out a sigh of relief instead as he stepped further into the condo to hear the sound of water rushing through the pipes on just the other side of the wall at his left. “It’s fine,” he told Anne. “He’s just in the shower.”

“Thank god,” she said so quietly that Louis wasn’t sure he was even meant to hear. “Well, give me a ring if you have any other problems, all right?”

“Yeah, of course.” Louis hung up and took a few deep breaths as he steadied himself against the wall, where he could feel the vibrations of Harry’s shower emanating through the drywall. Bloody Americans and their flimsy houses. It was a wonder they could ever get any sleep.

Louis checked the time again. They were behind schedule. Not good. And Harry was still luxuriating in the fucking shower like he used to do when they lived together in Princess Park and he insisted on using all the hot water in December. Louis had had enough of that, he’d decided.

He barged into the bedroom with considerably more confidence than the situation deserved, intending only on banging on the bathroom door to put the fear of god in Harry so he would hurry up. Only the bathroom door wasn’t closed when Louis walked in. It was wide open, and Harry was standing completely naked behind a transparent wall of glass with the shower spray cascading over him.

Louis stood silhouetted in the doorway, frozen as Harry glanced up at him in shock. He still hadn’t moved by the time Harry turned the water off, and it wasn’t until Harry opened the door to step out and grab a towel that Louis realised he was being a proper pervert.

“Sorry,” Louis called out as he spun around, face burning. He wasn’t quite sure what to do now.

“It’s not like you haven’t seen me naked before,” Harry pointed out from behind him.

Louis could hear him shuffling about, but he was afraid still to turn around. And Harry may have been technically correct, but context mattered, and the way Louis had felt when he’d helped Harry bathe at Cedars-Sinai was worlds away from how he’d felt just now, staring at Harry through the
shower partition like the worst kind of voyeur.

“I’m decent now,” Harry said several seconds later in a tone that seemed vaguely annoyed.

Louis slowly spun around to confirm that Harry was indeed dressed. “Erm, ready to go?” he asked, wincing at himself over the awkwardness of the situation.

“Not that I’m thrilled about it, but yes,” Harry muttered under his breath as he leaned down to pull on his boots.

Louis had to bite his tongue to keep from offering to help. “Well, it is for the best,” he remarked with just a tad too much condescension.

Harry stopped mid-motion to glance up at him sharply. “Louis?” Harry said, both eyebrows raised.

Louis nodded. “Yeah?”

“Just shut up.”
There wasn’t much to be said during the drive to the hospital.

Well, no, that wasn’t true. There was everything in the world to be said; Louis just didn’t know how to put any of it into words.

Louis needed to apologise, he did. Not that it would do any good. But every time he so much as opened his mouth, it was like there was a phantom hand that had wrapped itself around his throat and squeeze tight, preventing a single sound from emerging.

Harry just stared broodingly out the window and pretended Louis wasn’t there. Louis supposed that was better than the alternative.

The block around Cedars-Sinai was clear of photographers when they arrived. Either the paps had cleared out after getting their money shots of Harry’s discharge, assuming there would be no reason for him to return, or the hospital had beefed up its security in the wake of the incident.

Louis didn’t really care which option was true so long as it meant he didn’t have to worry about himself and Harry being spotted as they crossed the short distance between their spot in the car park and the entrance of the hospital-adjacent building where Harry was meant to meet with his psychiatrist.

Louis hadn’t noticed it before, but under the fluorescent lights in the main reception area, he could see that Harry was visibly trembling. Louis stepped away from him uncertainly, wondering for a second if Harry would take the opportunity to bolt before realising just how ridiculous that was.

Louis wandered over to the front desk to ask about where they were meant to be, since apparently Harry’s first appointment had taken place privately inside his suite and he’d never even been to this part of the hospital complex before.

Louis gave the receptionist the doctor’s name: Claudia Strauss. In return, he was directed toward a door at the very end of the corridor. He turned and caught Harry’s eye, nodding to indicate he should follow.

They walked with a half-metre’s distance between their bodies, a preventative measure to keep their hands from colliding as they walked. Every fibre of Louis’s being ached to close that distance, to wrap his fingers around Harry’s. He moved a few centimetres farther away instead, hoping to squash the urge, but it didn’t seem to help.
Harry was several shades paler than he’d been in the car when they finally walked into Dr Strauss’s waiting room together and sat down.

Louis wanted to reach over and sling an arm around Harry’s hunched shoulders to provide a little bit of tangible comfort, but he knew the consequences of doing so likely wouldn’t be pretty. It would probably only make things worse.

“Are you all right?” Louis asked instead in a low voice, not wanting to draw too much attention to the two of them in their relatively isolated corner of the waiting room.

“I feel like I’m gonna throw up,” Harry revealed with an unexpected amount of candour.

Louis assessed him anxiously, wondering if Harry really might make good on that promise. “Do you want some water?”

“Please.”

Louis slowly got up and walked over to the mini-fridge in the opposite corner of the room to grab a water bottle out, pre-emptively casting dirty looks all around just in case someone tried to take issue with the fact that he was helping himself. He carefully deposited the chill bottle in Harry’s lap and watched as Harry took a few grateful sips before setting it back down again.

“Any better?” Louis asked.

Harry gave a hesitant nod. “Sorry for being…like this,” he said between shakily drawn-in breaths.

“You don’t have to apologise.”

Harry glanced sideways at Louis, looking like he wasn’t sure if he should believe him.

“I always get nervous before my therapy appointments,” Louis confided in a quiet voice as he settled back in his seat with his arms crossed neatly over his chest.

Harry’s eyes widened like a child seeing snow for the very first time. “You go to therapy?” he said disbelievingly.

“Well, I haven’t been in a while with the tour and all,” Louis admitted. “But when I’m home, I try to pop in every now and again.”

Harry’s face softened and for a moment, it seemed like he was getting ready to say something, but before he had a chance, the door opposite them opened, and Harry’s face dropped.

Louis turned to see a tall brunette standing in the doorway. She looked to be a few years older than Anne, thin, with pointed features. Louis immediately disliked her even though there was nothing tangible to base that decision on, and he felt his hackles raise in response to her presence.

“Mr Styles?” she said, nodding toward Harry.

Louis had to force himself to stay seated to keep from yanking Harry back out the door and driving him as far away from this woman as he could get. There was just something about the way he eyes seemed to drill right through to the centre of him as her gaze drifted from Harry to Louis that made him deeply uncomfortable.

“You gonna be okay?” Louis asked Harry.

Harry nodded, but his first step after getting out of his chair was a near thing; he stumbled, and
Louis shot up reflexively to catch him.

“Thanks,” Harry murmured.

Louis just nodded, suddenly unable to speak. It didn’t escape his notice the way Dr Strauss’s eyes lingered on the places where his fingers clung to Harry’s arm and waist, holding on just a bit too long to be considered perfectly platonic before Louis finally coaxed his brain into letting go.

“Um, good luck,” Louis managed to grit out as he finally released Harry, who looked as helpless as a new-born fawn as he drifted towards Dr Strauss. Louis waved at him, registering the slight narrowing of Dr Strauss’s hawkish eyes as he did so, and then they both disappeared.

It only took a few minutes after sitting back down again once they were gone for Louis to tug his phone out of his coat pocket, but it was considerably longer after seeing the date before he decided to listen. It wasn’t a sad memory, but it was one Louis wasn’t sure he could recall without shedding a tear or two, and there were still a few scattered strangers sat throughout the waiting room.

Louis stared down at his screen a few moments longer and then decided: to hell with it.

January 22, 2016

Los Angeles, California

Louis wasn’t ready.

Plain and simple, that was the truth of it. He just hadn’t had the chance to be there every step of the way like Briana had been forced to, like he should have been. It wasn’t Louis’s fault that he hadn’t been around for every doctor’s appointment and pregnancy milestone; and it wasn’t Briana’s either. But they were both suffering the consequences of his absence now.

Louis paced the corridor outside the hospital room where Briana was currently in labour and tried not to self-combust. He was worried that if he so much as paused to catch his breath that he would go insane. He wasn’t ready to have a baby, but a baby was coming whether he liked it or not.

The problem was that none of this had seemed quite real up until the very moment Louis had gotten the call to inform him that Briana had gone into labour. It was like the solar system had crashed down around his ears with just that one phone call, and suddenly Louis’s life wasn’t his anymore. It was his kid’s.

Fuck, he was really about to have a baby.

Louis was under no illusions that his experience with his younger siblings had prepared him in any way for the reality of actually having a son, even though it was unlikely that Briana would let him be particularly hands-on as a parent if the discussions they’d had toward the end of her pregnancy were any indication of her feelings toward Louis retaining custody.

But Louis had grown up without his father, and he wasn’t prepared to put his child through the same, even if the circumstances were completely different, even if his child would have the best life anyone could ask for. Louis knew the money wouldn’t matter ten years from now when his son wondered to himself why other kids had a mum and a dad and he didn’t. Louis refused to let history repeat itself.
Louis had almost imploded from stress by the time he was finally brought back into the delivery room for the birth. What followed was a dizzingly vibrant experience that Louis wasn’t quite capable of putting into words, but once it was over, he was holding in his arms a human being that he had helped to create, and Louis had never been happier.

Not even with Harry.

Even after the relatively easy labour and delivery—Briana would rip his tongue out if she ever heard Louis calling anything about it ‘easy’, but that is what the doctors had said—it was still a few more hours before they were able to go home.

Home being Louis’s place in LA, since there were still a few hiccups regarding the place Briana was meant to move into now that the baby was born. There were a lot of hiccups, honestly, with almost everything. But for now, there were more important things to focus on.

Louis wasn’t the least bit surprised when he walked into his sitting room with Freddie’s car-seat in one hand and Briana following behind to find Harry of all people sat on his sofa, watching a footie game on the big screen with flat eyes and a tired frown. Louis had noticed the black Range Rover stationed across the street as soon as they pulled up, had recognised the stoic face of the bodyguard behind the wheel and made the obvious connection.

Louis hadn’t asked Harry to come, but Harry had come anyway.

“Do you mind giving us a few minutes?” Louis asked quietly as he turned to look at Briana, who just stared blankly back.

Finally, she nodded. “I need a nap anyway,” she said, already starting toward the stairs. She paused with her hand on the banister, eyes flicking from Louis to Harry to Freddie and then back again. “Could you order in some take-out or something for dinner?”

“Mexican?” Louis asked hopefully, all-too cognisant of the fact that Harry was still sat a few metres behind him as he conversed with the mother of his new-born child. Harry liked Mexican.

Briana winced and shook her head. “Nothing spicy,” she said, putting a hand over her stomach as if to provide Louis with a visual reminder that she’d just pushed out a baby and perhaps didn’t want to strain any of her other internal organs just yet.

“Right, yeah. Sorry. Italian, then?”

Briana seemed more amenable with that suggestion and went up to bed, finally leaving Harry and Louis alone. Well, with the exception of the baby still fast asleep in his car-seat, of course.

Louis turned apprehensively to face Harry once again and was surprised to find a soft smile spreading across his face. Harry reached up with the remote to turn down the volume on the telly and nodded toward the baby.

“Can I see him?” Harry asked.

Louis nodded without an ounce of hesitation. He went through the motions of unbuckling the tiny bundle and lifting him carefully out of the seat in utter silence, and then cradled him for just a moment longer before offering the baby for Harry to take.

“Careful with the—” Louis started to say, but Harry had already relieved Louis of his burden with a practiced hand supporting the baby’s head and neck. “Right,” Louis continued dumbly. “I forgot about your natural-born maternal instincts or whatever.”
There was a flash of something across Harry’s face, but it was gone too quick for Louis to properly identify. He forced a smile and then looked down at the baby in his arms, the smile quickly turning genuine the longer he stared down at the baby’s sleeping face.

“What’s his name?” Harry asked.

“Freddie Reign.” Louis half-expected to be mocked for his choice, but there was no such reaction.

Harry laughed, but it was soft—fond. “Cute. You picked it, I’m assuming.”

“I wanted him to have an English legacy, I guess,” Louis admitted. “Since he’ll grow up in America.”

“Well, you couldn’t have picked a better inspiration.”

Louis wanted to reply that he could have, that he could have given Freddie Harry’s namesake instead, but the more sensible part of him knew that knowledge would only make Harry sadder.

“I didn’t think you would come,” Louis admitted a few minutes later.

Harry glanced up, looking suddenly defensive. “As if I would miss this,” he said, sounding like he’d assumed Louis was accusing him of not caring enough to show. He couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Louis hadn’t asked because he hadn’t wanted to give Harry the chance to tell him ‘no’.

“Can I take a picture?” Louis said in an uncharacteristic moment of bravery.

Harry looked up again, surprised. “You want to?”

Of course Louis wanted to.

He nodded. “I won’t post it anywhere,” he added unnecessarily. It wasn’t like Harry had any reason to worry about that.

“Okay,” Harry said anyway, even though he had every reason—every right to refuse.

Louis snapped the photo just as Harry’s eyes drifted back down to Freddie’s serenely slumbering expression. He had it printed a week later, framed it, and then tucked it away in his bedroom drawer. He hadn’t taken it with him back to London; he hadn’t even looked at it since.

February 15, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis’s eyes were a bit teary when he finished, but he thought he was keeping himself together remarkably well, considering. He didn’t look up to find out what the other people around him thought, instead continuing to stare down at the screen of his mobile until nothing made sense to his eyes anymore.
Louis blinked, clearing away the moisture that had collected, and exited out of the playlist to his home screen.

He had a good hour of waiting ahead of him, maybe more, and little to do with it except think. Thinking was about the worst thing Louis could imagine doing, so he found himself compulsively searching for other options instead: checking his email, then his most pertinent social media notifications, then looking at the news.

Nearly every top story was about Harry, of course. He’d accumulated enough mainstream fame in 2019 that even with his year of silence afterward, he was a household name in nearly every home, not just the ones who’d had girls born sometime between 1995 and 2007.

When Harry had gone off the map, people had talked about it, and they hadn’t ever stopped. It made sense that the conversation had gone into hyperdrive now that Harry was finally back.

Louis managed to hold out a few more minutes before finally giving into temptation and opening Twitter to find out what the more hardcore fans were saying. There were the cringy hashtags Louis had expected, of course. He didn’t spare those more than half a glance.

More interesting were the theories, and after reading an entire thread of them, Louis felt absolutely sick to his core.

Drugs seemed to be the most popular guess. There was a general consensus that cocaine was the likely culprit, though a few more adventurous souls had posited a shift toward heroin in lieu of Harry’s formerly-infamous partying behaviour.

The dialogue regarding overdose wasn’t kind, for the most part. Some people seemed to be on Harry’s side—even though they were still betting on the wrong horse—arguing that addiction was a disease, and that Harry deserved their sympathy, not a public shaming. The majority didn’t agree.

Louis got away from that theory fast.

The runner-up was a relatively simple explanation. Harry was sick, obviously, maybe dying, of cancer or some other horrible disease. There seemed to be a competition of sorts in the ecosystem of that conspiracy for who could come up with the most harrowing illness that Harry could possibly be suffering from without showing any actual symptoms. Louis rolled his eyes and moved on.

There were a few scattered voices here and there whispering the truth, or something close to it. Not everyone had filed away Harry’s isolation as the eccentricities of a creative mind. Some people had noticed it for what it was, or had gotten lucky with their guess, at least. Their tweets were by far the most self-aware in their shame, wording rumours of suicide in twisted metaphors and vague self-deprecation, leaving things open-ended to avoid accusations of overstepping their bounds.

Louis couldn’t bear to read more than a few before he felt his fists clenching up with some awful combination of anger and sadness, coursing through him like a rising tide. The only consolation is that no one who believed Harry had tried to kill himself seemed to blame him for it, which was more than Louis had expected from the typically unsympathetic masses online.

Louis’s favourite theory was by far the strangest: that Harry was having some experimental surgery done so he could naturally birth his own children. Louis wasn’t sure if it was meant to be taken seriously, but he huffed out a quiet laugh at it anyway before continuing to scroll.

Intertwined with it all was the speculation about Louis himself. Why had he been the only member
of One Direction present when Harry was released from hospital despite the purported distance between them?

Few strayed anywhere close to the truth. Most were convinced, as ever, that Harry and he had been quietly living in domestic bliss all this time and that Harry’s hospitalisation had been a wake-up call compelling them to announce to the world their undying love.

Louis let out a snort at that one. If only. Life was never that simple—for anyone.
“Louis?”

Louis blinked his eyes open to find Harry staring down at him, face only a few centimetres away from his own. It took him a moment to remember where he was and then another to realise that he must have fallen asleep right there in his chair in the middle of Dr Strauss’s waiting room.

Louis jerked his head up suddenly, nearly bashing his forehead into Harry’s nose in the process. “Sorry,” he said, feeling his face flush in embarrassment.

Harry didn’t seem too fazed, but he frowned as he continued to stare at Louis. “Did you get enough sleep last night?” he asked, reverting to his patented brand of concern despite the fact that he was still supposed to be holding a grudge.

“Full eight hours, actually,” Louis informed him as he rubbed at his eyes. “God, I’m getting old.”

“You’re twenty-nine,” Harry pointed out with a half-smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Louis crooked an eyebrow. “What twenty-nine-year-olds do you know that fall asleep in waiting rooms?”

“Fair point,” Harry replied. “Can you take me back now? People are starting to stare.”

Staring they were, Louis realised as he stood up and rifled through his coat for his keys, only for his mobile to shoot out of his pocket and go plummeting toward the ground. “Fuck,” he muttered, bending down to pick it up—but Harry beat him to it.

There was a strange expression on Harry’s face as he examined the now lit-up screen for a moment before handing it back to Louis, but Louis didn’t find out what had caused it until they’d gotten back in the car, Harry’s face quietly contemplative as he buckled himself into the passenger seat.

“Were you listening to the playlist while I was in there?” Harry asked without glancing up.

Louis scanned his face quickly, wondering if there was a right answer to the question. “Yes,” he said, deciding after a few seconds that it would be overwhelmingly stupid to start lying to Harry again now. “I usually listen to it a few times a day.”

He didn’t mention the part where now, some of those times, he sat and wrote along with it. He felt
like if he mentioned it now it might feel like he was pressuring Harry to forgive him before he was ready, and Louis didn’t want that.

He quickly changed the subject. “Do you want to grab something to eat before we head back?”

Harry eyed him suspiciously for a moment before answering. “Maybe just something quick.” He was silent again for a moment while Louis scrolled through a list of nearby restaurants on his phone for something that would fit Harry’s parameters. “We can listen to it,” Harry added in a much softer voice, “if you want.”

He’d phrased it like he was doing Louis a favour despite the fact that Louis hadn’t asked and hadn’t planned on putting on one of the songs with Harry in the car. Louis glanced over at him, trying to keep the surprise from showing on his face. “Sure,” he said lightly. “Thanks. How do you feel about Taco Bell?”

Harry felt very positively about Taco Bell as it turned out, so after selecting the nearest location on his GPS, Louis queued up the next song and set the phone in his cupholder, trying not to white-knuckle the steering wheel as he pulled out of the car park.

February 2, 2016
Los Angeles, California

Louis wasn’t quite sure how he’d ended up in front of Harry’s gate at well past midnight. He wasn’t drunk, and he wasn’t high, but he’d had a few Xanax earlier in the day and after waking up from his anxiety-induced nap, he’d decided for some reason to drive straight to Harry’s door, no second thoughts about it.

It was Harry’s birthday, Louis remembered belatedly. Or it had been, but the calendar had ticked over to the next day now, and Louis had missed the anniversary of Harry’s birth entirely.

Louis couldn’t remember anymore what had sent him spiralling into a panic earlier in the day, couldn’t remember if the reason had anything to do with why he was buzzing Harry’s intercom now, shivering in the cold as he waited to be let in.

After a few minutes, he started to worry that maybe Harry wouldn’t let him in after all. Louis wondered if he should try to save face and turn back now, or if—

The gate separating Harry’s home from the rest of the world slowly began to slide open.

Louis quickly jumped back into his car and pulled into the driveway once the gap allowed for him to pass and tried not to overthink things, which was already a bit of a hopeless endeavour. He kept an eye on the front door as he parked and exited the vehicle, watching for Harry in case he decided to come out and meet Louis on the front drive, but the door remained stubbornly closed and the lights dark, even as he approached the porch.

Louis briefly wondered with a touch of incredulity whether Harry expected him to ring the doorbell, but no sooner did his feet alight on the front steps did the door finally swing open to reveal Harry.

He was dressed in nothing but a light-coloured silk kimono, hanging open far enough that Louis
could see a trail of mottled bruising snaking up his torso toward his neck. Louis tried not to stare, and abruptly failed.

“I—” Louis didn’t get more than the first word out before Harry started in on him.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Harry demanded in a furious whisper. He was clutching tightly at the waist of his kimono, like he’d just thrown it on and hadn’t had time to tie it properly.

That was probably the case, Louis realised with a flash of nausea. His eyes flicked upwards toward the darkened windows of Harry’s second storey, wondering just who it was that he’d decided to bring home after the party.

“Louis!” Harry hissed impatiently. “What the fuck are you doing at my house? Are you drunk again? You drove here.”

Louis shook his head uncertainly, trying to communicate to Harry that he wasn’t under the influence of anything but his own turbulent thoughts. He couldn’t quite find any of the words that had been racing through his head on the way here now that he and Harry were face to face, all the rehearsed conversations gone from his mind as surely as if he’d hit delete the second the door opened.

“I miss you,” Louis finally managed to eke out. It wasn’t even a fraction of what he wanted to say, but it wasn’t a lie, at least. He missed Harry so much it felt like he would die from it sometimes.

Harry shook his head, looking dumbfounded. “You don’t get to miss me,” he said, and though he hadn’t raised his voice, Louis could feel the words echoing in his skull as if Harry had screamed them instead.

It took Louis nearly a minute to recover, a minute in which Harry just stared at him, still clutching his kimono closed, his face filled with something perilously close to revulsion, and Louis couldn’t figure out how to cope.

“I just wanted you to—” Louis started, trying to get out his half-baked plan about attending the Brits together in some attempt at showing solidarity despite the hiatus, but now…. He stopped short, the words frozen solid in the back of his throat, heavy as a rock.

Harry finally took a step back, shielding part of his body with the door. “I don’t care what you want,” he said coldly. “You have a son now. Don’t you get that? Just because it’s not the picture-perfect little nuclear family you wanted doesn’t mean you get to keep dragging me into your shit.”

Louis stared back at him, slack-jawed and silent. He didn’t know what to say, because there wasn’t an ounce of it that wasn’t true.

There was a muffled voice emanating from deeper within the house. Male. American. Vaguely familiar, though Louis couldn’t quite place it. “Babe? What’s going on?”

Harry’s whole expression changed as he turned to address whoever it was. “I’ll be back up in a minute,” he called out. The look on his face when he turned around again to face Louis was nothing less than forbidding. “You should go,” Harry said, before abruptly deciding he hadn’t been harsh enough. “You need to go,” he amended.

But Louis couldn’t make his feet move, even though he knew he was only setting himself up for more hurt the longer he stayed. “Why can’t we at least be friends?” he asked desperately, a last resort. He didn’t want to be Harry’s friend, he wanted—
“Don’t you get it?” Harry replied with a bitter laugh. “I don’t want to be friends with you. I can’t be friends with you. It hurts too fucking much to even look at you.” The last part came out in barely more than a whisper, but it cut even deeper than the rest of it combined. “You need to leave,” he said.

“But—”

Harry silenced him with a look. “You can’t fix things between us,” he said. “And I don’t want you to. Goodnight, Louis.”

The door slammed shut before Louis could come up with a response, but maybe it was better that way. He’d been humiliated enough for one night. It was time for him to go home.

February 15, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis didn’t dare look at Harry as the song came to a close, too afraid of what he would find on Harry’s face to spare a searching glance. There was a tangible tension between them, but it felt different than the taut anger Louis had been keenly aware of before. This was harder to put a name to, and frankly, Louis was afraid to do just that.

“What do you want?” Louis blurted out suddenly.

Harry made a questioning sound, and Louis realised the meaning of his words hadn’t been clear in the slightest.

“From Taco Bell,” he clarified, face going a bit hot. He clenched his hands tighter on the steering wheel. “We’re almost there, and I figured you wouldn’t want to go inside to order, so….”

“Oh.” Harry’s voice was soft and a bit disappointed, almost like he’d been expecting something else. “A salad, please.”

“What about those cinnamon things?” Louis asked. This time he couldn’t help but look over to evaluate Harry’s expression, scanning his sombre face for less than a second before Louis turned his attention back to the road. “You always liked them.” Louis was striving for a nonchalant tone, trying to play it off as if he didn’t still have every one of Harry’s likes and dislikes catalogued in his brain even after all this time. He wasn’t sure he’d succeeded, but Harry didn’t call him out on it.

“Yeah, okay,” Harry replied instead. “That would be nice, thank you.”

“You sure?” Louis double-checked. “You don’t have to get them if you don’t want them.”

“Louis.” It was soft, but clearly a warning.

“Right. Sorry.” Louis felt himself blushing hard for the third time in less than thirty minutes and wondered how it could be that Harry had him just as frazzled as when they’d been teenagers more than a decade ago.

“I know you’re trying to make an effort and all…” Harry said slowly a few minutes later, and Louis cringed, half-wishing Harry had decided to leave him to his embarrassment and said nothing
at all. “I appreciate it, but I’m just—”

“Yeah,” Louis said, cutting him off. His foot stuttered on the brake a little, causing the car to judder as they approached the traffic light ahead. “Yeah, I’m sorry. I get it.”

“I don’t think you do,” Harry muttered to himself under his breath, but he didn’t explain what he’d meant, and Louis didn’t ask.

Silence stretched on between them for the next few minutes while Louis focussed on getting them to the Taco Bell just around the corner without getting into an accident with one of the myriad cars on the road who didn’t seem to have any concept of traffic laws—or maybe they just didn’t care.

Both were equally likely considering Louis’s many encounters with California drivers. Harry truly fit right in. Louis let out a stifled snort at that thought, not considering the fact that the subject of his amusement was still sat in his passenger seat until it was too late.

“What?” Harry questioned.

Louis struggled to find an answer. “It’s nothing,” he replied automatically. “Well, I was just thinking about something,” he amended.

“What?”

Apparently, Harry wasn’t going to let it go.

“Remember that time you tried to go in the drive-thru the wrong way around?” Louis replied with a fond smile at the memory. He didn’t have to look over to know that Harry was likely beet-red at the reminder.

“It was my first time,” Harry said in defence of his past self.

“I know,” Louis told him, still grinning even as they finally pulled into the Taco Bell drive-through and got behind the car at the intercom. “It was cute, Haz, it’s okay.”

Harry didn’t acknowledge the nickname. He didn’t reply at all. When Louis mustered up the guts to look over at him, he was staring out the window at the wall separating the car park from the building next door, his face safely obscured from view.

Louis sighed and faced forward again, waiting for the car in front of them to move so he could order. Once at the intercom, he tacked on a large lemonade for Harry and a Coke for himself, deciding they could both do with a shot of sugar to get them through the rest of the morning.

After ordering, Louis took note of the total only to marvel at how much cheaper American fast food was in America before inching forward in line toward the first window to pay.

The woman behind the window was young, blonde and reminded Louis overwhelmingly of Lottie. She didn’t bat an eye when she looked up at him to pluck the credit card from his fingers, but when she turned back around again to return it, she suddenly did a double take.

“Oh my god,” she exclaimed, “are you Harry Styles?”

Louis instinctively leaned forward to cover Harry as much as possible, wishing in that second that he had the bulk of someone twice his size if only so he could do a better job of it. But now that the girl had spotted Harry, her attention had turned to Louis again, and he could see the cogs slowly starting to turn in her brain.
“Thank you,” Louis replied shortly, snatching the card and his receipt out of her hand before shooting forward into the gap the car ahead had just created. He breathed out a sigh of relief and prayed they wouldn’t have a repeat encounter at the next window when they retrieved their food.

“Well, that was—” Louis started to say as he angled his head to address Harry, only to stop cold in his tracks at the sight of Harry’s face. “Are you okay?”

Harry was paler than Louis had ever seen him, a fine sheen of sweat blossoming on his face as he curled in on himself as much as the seatbelt over his torso would allow. He was having a panic attack, Louis realised.

Louis reached over and gently cupped a hand around Harry’s elbow, reminding himself not to take offence when Harry automatically jerked away from the touch. “You still with me?” Louis asked in a low tone, trying to evaluate just how serious of a situation this really was. He didn’t want to take Harry back to hospital if he could help it, but he would do it if it seemed necessary.

“Yeah,” Harry said shakily. “I’m just—” He swallowed hard.

“It’s okay,” Louis told him. “Just try to breathe. Can you give me your hand?” He laid his own palm out for Harry to take and was surprised when Harry reached for it without hesitation. “We’re stuck here for just a minute,” Louis reminded him, “but you’re safe. Breathe in when I squeeze and out when I let go, okay? You can close your eyes if it helps.”

Harry did close his eyes, and Louis watched for a moment as he timed his breathing to the pace Louis had set with his hands. Louis kept it up even as he pulled forward again to grab their food, and spared only a second at the window to grab it before quickly speeding back into the car park to assess things.

“You feeling okay to eat?” Louis asked.

Harry paused for a second and then nodded.

Louis handed over Harry’s food and drink and watched carefully as he picked at everything in turns, switching from the salad to the cinnamon rolls to the lemonade as if trying to portion out each bit individually.

“Any better?” Louis asked once Harry had made it through most of his food.

Harry nodded without looking up. “Yeah,” he said quietly.

They didn’t talk about it on the way home.

Gemma’s rental car was parked outside when they got back to the condo, but Louis wasn’t sure whether to be relieved by that or not. If she and Anne had still been gone, Louis might have felt obligated to hang around as a glorified babysitter of sorts, but with Gemma there was no guarantee that Louis wouldn’t be pulled inside for a debriefing, and Louis knew that he really wasn’t in the mood for that.

Gemma seemed to sense those feelings right off the bat. Either that, or it was simply that the mental exhaustion Louis felt was plain as day on his face, and she’d rightly chosen not to push him.

“Thanks for doing this,” Gemma said as she carefully steered Harry—who was still trembling a bit, but only slightly—inside.

“No problem,” Louis lied. He started to turn to go, but then stopped. When he spun around again,
Gemma was still stood there in the open doorway, gazing back at him. “Make sure he takes it easy today, okay?” he told her, and the worry in his voice was clearly audible.

“How did it go?”

It was the first thing Sam said when Louis slipped back into the condo after depositing Harry back into the care of his mum and sister.

Louis slumped back against the front door with a sigh and glanced up to meet her innocently inquisitive gaze with a look of resignation. “About as well as could be expected,” he admitted wearily. Which was to say, not well at all. Though the format of the morning’s disaster certainly hadn’t matched up to Louis’s expectations.

Sam lowered her eyes, evidently not wanting to pressure Louis into providing an explanation. But suddenly, he couldn’t think of a single thing more satisfying than having a proper vent and knowing that the person he was ranting to wouldn’t even think to judge him for it.

Even Liam, who was always willing to listen if Louis needed a chat, sometimes couldn’t help himself from trying to give a bit of fatherly advice. Louis didn’t really want that right now. He just wanted a bit of sympathy.

“I’m worried,” Louis said as he flopped down on the sofa next to Sam.

She looked up from her iPad again, eyes wide. “About?”

Louis shrugged even though the answer was already on the tip of his tongue. “I feel like I might have broken him,” he confessed.

“How?” Sam asked simply. There wasn’t an ounce of judgment in her voice. She just wanted to know why Louis felt that way.

“After we left hospital,” he told her, struggling to explain exactly why he was so worried, “we ran into someone who recognised him, and Harry just freaked.”

“And you think that’s your fault?”

“Why shouldn’t it be?” Louis countered. He swivelled to face Sam, trying to make her understand. “I tipped over the dominoes that led to this.”

Sam set her iPad down and curled her knees up under herself. She stared at Louis as if trying to
decode something behind his words, but Louis didn’t feel discomforted by it. He knew that she was just trying to understand how he was actually feeling before she attempted to respond.

“You shouldn’t hold yourself responsible for everything,” she told him.

“Why not?” Logically, Louis knew she was right, but it was hard to see that now after witnessing Harry go to pieces while in his car and being unable to do anything to stop it.

“You know why,” Sam said softly. “Maybe you did tip a domino, but your choices aren’t the only ones that matter, Lou. It’s a big world out there.”

Maybe in another context her words would have seemed patronising, but right now all Louis felt was relief. It was that older sibling mentality, he supposed, come back to bite him in the ass again. It was hard not to take responsibility—blame—for the bad shit that happened to anyone he cared about. What if, what if, what if; it had a tendency to consume him even at the best of times.

“You’re right,” he finally told her. “Sorry for this.”

“You don’t have to apologise,” Sam replied with a half-smile. “I wouldn’t have tried that line if I wasn’t sure you already knew it was true.”

Louis huffed out a laugh. “Maybe you should get a degree in psychology so I can hire you on as a travelling therapist, too,” he joked.

Sam just rolled her eyes and leaned forward to pick the iPad back up. “I think I’ve got enough on my plate already, thank you very much.”

Louis ended up hanging out on the sofa with her for a bit longer after that before he finally grew too restless to relax anymore. “I think I’m gonna get a bit of writing done,” he told her, finally standing up from the sofa with a quiet groan. “Let me know when you want to grab lunch.”

Sam acknowledged the statement with an affirmative hum, too engrossed in her work to muster up anything more eloquent.

Louis left her to it and returned to the quiet and solitude of the master bedroom. He slumped down into the desk chair and turned to a blank page in his journal, staring down at it for a long moment before finally procuring his mobile to listen to another song.

May 12, 2016
Cabo San Lucas, Mexico

Louis had just wanted a nice, relaxing vacation for once. But apparently even that was too much to ask.

Generally speaking, hanging out with Danielle was easy. They’d gotten on well as soon as they’d met (thanks to some PR arrangement that Louis really didn’t care to analyse the details of), and after that it had been easy to continue the relationship as if it were real, more or less.

They had an odd arrangement worked out. Louis had come out—it still felt weird to use the term, but it fit—to Danielle right off the bat. She’d taken it well and then immediately asked if that
meant anything physical was off the table.

Louis had been taken aback by the question and wondered if that sort of thing was typical for people paired together in the name of publicity. Danielle had just laughed at him.

Long story short, they were comfortable together. They were friends. Louis hadn’t thought twice about helping her take off her bikini beachside so she could get a more even tan; he may not have seen the appeal of boobs, but it wasn’t like he was afraid of them. A nipple was a nipple, after all.

And then everything had just exploded.

Danielle rolled over to face him in bed, her head propped up by her elbow as she stared at Louis while he continued scrolling Twitter on his phone. “You can stop beating yourself up,” she told him.

Louis ignored her. Not in a nasty way, but—he just didn’t want to have an argument. Nothing she had to say was going to make him feel less guilty. End of.

“You can stop beating yourself up,” she told him, stroking a thumb over his knuckles softly. It should have been soothing, but under the wave of guilt that Louis felt like he was drowning in, it only made him feel that much worse. It wasn’t her job to make him feel better when she was the victim here, not him. “It just would have been a different headline,” she continued, oblivious to Louis’s inner turmoil. “Former Disney star goes wild in Cabo or something. It’s not a big deal.”

“There wouldn’t have been any photographers at all if I hadn’t been there,” Louis blurted out without thinking.

Danielle quirked an eyebrow, more amused than offended by the implication. “Oh, so you don’t think I’m famous enough to attract the paps on my own?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Louis replied with a frustrated sigh.

“I know, baby, I know. But what’s done is done. I’ll live.”

That didn’t make Louis feel much better about the situation, especially since now that the pictures of her were plastered all over the internet, there was no taking them back. But he didn’t have much longer to agonise over the recent past; his phone jolted suddenly in his hands, buzzing with an incoming text message.

Danielle released her grip on his hands, allowing him to lift the device so he could see the name
attached to the notification.

Louis went cold at the sight. He stiffened in Danielle’s arms, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“I thought you and Harry weren’t talking,” she remarked curiously.

“We aren’t,” Louis replied. The discomfort in his tone was almost tangible, and Danielle drew back, giving him some space.

“If you want a minute…” she started to say, but Louis shook his head.

“It’s fine,” he told her. “It’s probably nothing."

It wasn’t nothing.

It was a picture of Harry—a fucking selfie, of all things—but that wasn’t the worst of it. No, because this was a photo in which Harry was clearly pissed and half-dressed, and Danielle was at his shoulder looking right at it.

Louis slammed the phone down against his stomach and tried to level out his breathing as Danielle struggled to come up with an adequate response.

“I didn’t realise it was—” she started to say before quickly switching gears. “Sorry.”

Louis didn’t reply. He didn’t need an apology; he needed to forget any of this had ever happened.

He didn’t touch his phone again until much later, after he was certain Danielle had fallen asleep. Turning away from her, he opened the text message again, shrouding the brightness of the screen with the corner of the duvet.

*sometimes I miss you too*

It was the only message attached to the photo, clearly typed out in a fit of drunken melancholy. It didn’t mean anything.

Louis couldn’t stop looking at it. He wasn’t sure how to cope with the picture either, only a sliver of Harry visible, but it was enough. Louis’s eyes homed in on the three-quarter sleeve of the clearly ill-fitting blouse, the ruffles hanging just above the eagle Harry had inked over his ‘Things I can’ tattoo.

Louis hated the damn eagle.

Now that he was staring at the photo, he couldn’t stop, couldn’t help himself from obsessing why Harry had chosen now of all times to do this. Had he seen the article? Was this meant to be a response? Would Harry really be that petty?

Maybe he’d done it because he was dared to, maybe he’d done it for a laugh, or—least likely of all, in Louis’s opinion—maybe he’d done it purely because he wanted to.

Maybe this was Harry without Louis, free, unfettered. Alive.

Maybe that’s why Louis hated the eagle tattoo so fucking much. Because Louis had always been the one thing Harry couldn’t change. And now Harry didn’t want to.
Louis set his pen down with a sigh and quickly stood up out of his chair. That one was going to need a bit of work after, he decided. Most of what he’d written down was jumbled, ideas for lyrics without any form or structure to hold them together. It was, plain and simply: a mess.

Louis put it aside for the time being. He had enough experience to know that nit-picking at a first attempt was by far the worst way to get things done. He paced around the room a bit, trying to figure out how to occupy his mind before settling on a quick workout, something he’d unfortunately been neglecting since he’d arrived in Los Angeles.

Louis was winded less than halfway through, and by the time he finished the simple routine, his muscles felt like they’d been flattened with a meat tenderizer. He wasn’t even thirty yet and a couple weeks off was all it had taken for his body to completely forget how to respond to exercise, apparently. It was good that he was getting back into the habit now, he supposed, before he was due back on tour.

Louis had managed to sweat through his t-shirt in the process of getting through the hundred or so press-ups that he’d once been accustomed to, so he showered and cleaned himself up again before heading back out into the sitting room to propose lunch.

Sam glanced up at him, eyebrows raised as she took in his change of clothing and newly-damp hair. “Going somewhere?” she asked.

Louis didn’t feel like explaining himself, so he just nodded. “Lunch, if you’re up for it. Or we can wait a bit longer if you’re in the middle of something.”

Sam shook her head and set her iPad down. “Now’s fine. What are you feeling?”

Louis was feeling like he needed to get out of the house, so to speak, but there was that pesky little detail of the whole world knowing his and Harry’s location, rendering pretty much every restaurant and café within a thirty-mile radius completely out of the question.

They ended up at a little Chinese place that Louis probably wouldn’t have thought to step foot in otherwise, but the food was good, and it was nice to be outside. Or close enough to it. Sometimes Louis thought that people really didn’t understand how isolating it was to feel like you couldn’t step outside your front door without risking being accosted by fans.

That train of thought, of course, led Louis right back to the events of that morning. He couldn’t say why it was troubling him so much. It wasn’t like it was actually his fault that Harry had been recognised, and there wasn’t anything else that he could have done to get Harry out of the situation in that moment. So why did thinking about it feel so damn bad?

Louis wasn’t any closer to an answer when they left the restaurant and began their long drive back to Beverly Hills.

“You okay?” Sam asked as they drove. “You seem…I don’t know.”

“I’m fine,” Louis said. There was more hanging on the tip of his tongue, the unspoken thoughts nearly audible in the silence that stretched on between them, but he swallowed the words back, unsure of how to give voice to the swirling maelstrom of thoughts going round his head. “Yeah,”
he continued. “I’m fine.”

He was decidedly less fine when they made it back to the condo around mid-afternoon. Louis couldn’t help but allow his eyes to linger on the front door of the building in which Harry was staying, causing him to nearly run over one of the bins stood out on the kerb. Sam gave him a well-deserved death-glare for that one.

“Seriously,” Sam said as they walked inside. “What’s with you?”

“Nothing,” Louis tried again, but she wasn’t having it. “Harry,” he finally admitted. “I don’t know, I just…something’s bothering me. I’m not sure what it is exactly.”

“You know you could try talking to him,” Sam remarked as she toed off her shoes and tip-toed back into the sitting room to take up her place curled up in the corner of the sofa.

Louis stared at her from the entryway, unmoving. “He doesn’t want to talk to me,” Louis pointed out.

“He didn’t want to talk to you then,” Sam retorted. “You got on well enough this morning, right? It might be worth giving it another shot.”

And the thing was that she was probably right. And Louis knew it. And he wished he didn’t know it. And there was the pesky, nagging clock in the back of his brain ticking down the days until he’d be leaving the country and wouldn’t have the chance to say any of the things he wanted to say to Harry in person.

“Okay,” he said a few minutes later.

Sam blinked at him in surprise. “Okay?” she questioned.

“Okay,” Louis said again, unhelpfully, before adding, “Yeah, I’ll go talk to him.”

Sam still looked stunned, like she’d been expecting a full-fledged argument before Louis agreed to even consider it, but he was putting his coat on and walking back out the door again before she had the chance to formulate a response.

The walk to Harry’s condo was short. Too short, in Louis’s opinion. He still wasn’t sure what he was planning to say once he ended up on the front porch a few minutes later, hand extended to knock.

Gemma opened the door before he gathered up the courage to rap his knuckles against the wood. “Security camera,” she explained. Louis hadn’t even bothered to set his up when he’d moved in, but apparently the Styles-Twist clan was making full use of the available technology.

“Can I come in?” Louis asked, feeling a bit awkward at having to make the request.

Gemma nodded, her expression perfectly neutral as she moved aside to let him past. “Please tell me you’re here to talk to Harry,” she said in a low voice as she closed the door behind him.

“What?”

“You’re here to talk to Harry, right?” she repeated, her expression going severe, like if Louis said otherwise she would throw him right back out onto the street. “I don’t know what happened between you two, but he’s been a misery to us ever since. He made Mum cry, for Christ’s sake.”
That didn’t sound like the Harry Louis knew at all, and now he was more worried than ever about how Harry had acted this morning after being recognised.

Louis frowned. “Nothing happened between us,” he told her. “Well, not anything new anyway.” He briefly explained the encounter with the girl at the drive-through, but judging from Gemma’s face, it didn’t seem to clear things up any. “I did want to talk to him,” Louis offered. It was the reason he’d come in the first place.

Gemma gestured exasperatedly toward the door to the second bedroom. “Help yourself,” she told him. “I’ll be in here if you need anything.” With that, she climbed onto the sectional and tucked herself into a burrito blanket with a book in hand, leaving Louis to brave entry into Harry’s bedroom on his own.
Louis put his hand on the doorknob and sucked in a deep breath before turning it slowly to let himself in.

Harry was curled up on his side in bed, his back to Louis. He didn’t stir when Louis walked into the room, nor when the door closed with a loud click. He wasn’t asleep; Louis could tell that from the tense line of his shoulders.

Louis leaned against the far wall and crossed his arms over his chest, waiting. Several minutes went by in which neither gave in to the silence, then Harry finally stirred and turned over onto his other side to face Louis, his eyes dark and wary.

“What do you want?” Harry demanded, his tone a low growl more suited to a feral cat than the waif of a person huddled beneath the blankets, though both creatures were pitiful in their own ways.

Louis felt sorry for him and angry all at once, because it seemed yet again that Harry was unwilling to put himself through anything even remotely difficult in the process of getting better. Was it fair to feel that way? Louis wasn’t certain he cared much for fairness anymore.

“I’m leaving soon,” Louis said boldly. He refused to let his voice so much as falter, not wanting to give Harry a chink in the armour to poke and prod at should this turn into an actual argument.

Harry stares at him like he doesn’t want to ask, but he does anyway. “How soon?” he replies, voice still gruff.

“A few days,” Louis told him. He carefully examined Harry’s face for a hint at his feelings over the imminent departure but couldn’t find any trace of emotion. “I thought I’d see the girls—well, and Ernie—before I head out again.”

Harry glanced away from him, toward the ceiling instead. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me,” he said contentiously.

“I’m just trying to make conversation.” Louis wanted to ease Harry into this (whatever this was) as much as possible.

“You don’t have to,” Harry said again.
Louis huffed out a tiny sigh. “Harry,” he replied, unable to keep the exasperation out of his voice this time.

Harry’s eyes flicked back over to him, but they were watery now. “Why can’t you just leave me alone?” he demanded.

Louis finally decided to take his chances and slowly made his way over to the bed. He perched delicately on the very edge, near Harry’s feet, and was careful not to actually touch him. Louis was surprised even so when Harry didn’t immediately shy away from Louis’s sudden proximity.

“I don’t want to leave things the way they are when I go,” Louis confessed. “It wouldn’t be fair to either of us. And I’m not—I don’t deserve your forgiveness, and I won’t ask for it, but I need to know where we stand before I leave. You get that, right?”

Harry stared at him, only his eyes visible from under the duvet, and then without warning, he popped up into a sitting position, putting them even closer. “I want to know why you lied to me,” he said in an unsteady voice. “About the—the video. I want the truth.”

Louis’s mouth went dry. He wasn’t sure why this part was so hard. It felt a little like carving out a bit of his soul and giving it to Harry to do with whatever he pleased.

“I didn’t want…” Louis said slowly before losing the thread of it. He kept his eyes fixed on Harry the whole time, afraid to look away. “I thought it would hurt you less,” he said, “if you could put the blame on me.”

Harry let out a shaky breath as the tears welling up in his eyes finally spilled over. “It didn’t,” he said. “It didn’t.”

“I know,” Louis replied. “I’m sorry for that.”

He wished yet again that he could reach over and just grab Harry’s hand, but he knew he shouldn’t. The urge only seemed to get stronger each time they encountered each other. Louis wondered if the time apart would make the urge dissipate, or if the need for physical connection would only grow stronger in counterpoint to the distance between them. He felt his fingers twitch, an involuntary reaction, and he curled them into a fist on top of the bedspread in response.

“Is that all you’re sorry for?” Harry asked, and from the look on his face, he might not have even meant for the words to come out.

Louis answered him anyway. “Well,” he joked a bit dryly, “I could make a list, but we might be here a while.”

For a moment, it seemed like Harry might actually crack a smile, but then the moment passed, and the sombre atmosphere settled in heavy around them once again.

“I don’t want to be mad at you anymore,” Harry said finally.

He wasn’t looking at Louis anymore, instead staring down at his fingers, bare without the trademark rings he used to wear. Louis liked them better like that, liked how small and delicate they seemed without the heavy metal adornments.

Louis had never gotten Harry a ring, he realised. Even the rose, which Louis had once been certain was meant for him, had been Harry’s choice and Harry’s prerogative. It seemed silly now that Louis had never even though to give him one, even though exchanging rings was one of the most basic symbols of romantic commitment. But then again, Louis had never really committed himself
to Harry, had he?

“I don’t want you to be mad at me either,” Louis replied in kind. “But I’m not sure where we go from here.”

“Start over?” Harry suggested.

“Is that even possible?”

Even if it was, Louis wasn’t quite sure that was the answer for them. A fresh start would be easier, sure, but Louis couldn’t imagine that it would be worth it. They could each go on and live their lives free of the guilt and the pain that had burdened them both for the past decade, but they would be doing it alone. And Louis didn’t want that. Not anymore.

Louis was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn’t notice Harry moving until he was practically in Louis’s lap, and then Harry’s lips were on his, pressing hard and opening against his mouth. Louis responded in kind, muscle memory taking over in the absence of coherent thought.

Louis wasn’t certain how they ended up horizontal, but their mouths were still connected, tongues intertwined, when he felt Harry buck up against his thigh, and that was enough to jolt him back into reality.

Louis flew backward, leaving Harry lying flat on his back with his legs spread and lips red, looking like the debauched damsel on the cover of a tawdry romance novel.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have done that,” Harry said a bit breathlessly.

Louis just gaped at him. He didn’t know what to say in response, sure that any of the options currently rattling around in his skull would be the wrong one.

“I have to go,” Louis finally replied. It was clear from the look on Harry’s face that he’d managed to pick the worst choice out of them all.

“You don’t,” Harry said softly, sounding hurt. He started to pull himself back up into a sitting position, but Louis was already moving away.


Harry didn’t say anything after that, just watched as Louis made a cursory attempt at making himself presentable on his way out. Harry stared after him with sad eyes that made Louis want nothing more than to take everything back so he could curl up in bed with him again for the rest of forever.

But that wasn’t the right thing to do. And Louis already knew that Gemma would murder him with her own bare hands if she ever found out what he and Harry had just done.

Luckily for Louis, she didn’t seem to suspect anything untoward as she glanced up at him from the sofa when he passed by her.

“How’d it go?” Gemma asked in a tone that would have seemed bored if one didn’t know to listen for the anxiety underlying it.

“Good,” Louis replied, nodding. “I told him I’d stop by again before I fly out, if that’s all right.”

Louis just nodded and made a beeline for the door. He could only keep up the deception for so long. Louis was well-acquainted with Gemma’s ability to see through anyone’s bullshit, but he hadn’t had the misfortune to be on the other side of her wrath—yet, anyway.

A thick layer of clouds had moved in during the brief time Louis had been gone, and he glanced up at the sky while he walked, wondering how much longer it would be before it rained again. It was like the weather knew Louis only had a few more days of potential sunshine under his belt before he was due back in England and was determined to deprive him of that as much as possible.

If Fizzy were here, Louis thought, she probably would have said it was some sort of sign. Of what, Louis couldn’t even hazard a guess. He just had to hope that whatever the consequences, he was making the right decision with Harry.

When Louis returned to the condo, he bypassed Sam without uttering a single word and headed straight for the master bedroom. He closed it securely behind him and then locked it for good measure, even though Sam would never dare to barge in on him unless she thought it was literally life-or-death. Louis needed privacy. And he needed to deprive himself of the ability to think—and thus overthink. And there was one good way to accomplish that short of getting blackout drunk again.

Louis hadn’t made much progress so far, but he didn’t want to leave for tour with the lyrics to Harry’s songs unfinished. He knew it would just hang over him the whole time, ruining any chance of getting a good night’s sleep at the very least. He was determined to finish the project in some capacity before he left, despite the fact that he didn’t have much time left. They didn’t have to be good, he reminded himself; they just needed to be written.

Louis started off with the next on the list first, deciding to tackle the others in order afterward, providing this one didn’t manage to knock him completely out of commission on the first go. Louis glanced at the date and decided there was a high chance it just might.

December 10, 2016

London, England

Louis hadn’t spoken to Harry in nearly a year.

It had been hard at first, but then easier all at once. Because Louis had plenty enough to worry about without throwing Harry into the mix. It had almost been a relief, knowing that Louis could move on with his life without worrying about making a space for Harry in it any longer, but it hadn’t been all sunshine and roses.

And now everything was different. And suddenly, Louis felt the weight of the past year hanging heavily on his shoulders. After tonight, he was going to have to learn how to be a person again—a different person than the one he’d been before. Someone his siblings could rely on.

It felt like he’d gone from having one child to having seven, all in the span of a single day.

Louis was exhausted by the time the performance was through, and then there was the crowd of well-wishers to deal with. He just wanted to go home.

He’d known Harry was planning to be there thanks to Niall, but that didn’t prepare Louis any for
the sight of him backstage as the green room started to clear out, finally leaving just Liam, Niall, and Harry alone with Louis at last.

Harry looked every bit as worn as Louis felt, and Louis couldn’t help but remember how close Harry and Jay had been once, when things were different. He’d had a hell of a time explaining to his mum just why Harry wouldn’t come see her, and Louis regretted putting any of them in that position now.

“How are you?” Louis asked Harry lamely, his voice dry from the strain of the performance in addition to the choking nerves that had followed in preparation for being face to face with the man who’d broken his heart. Or maybe it was the other way around.

“Been better,” Harry replied, and it didn’t take long for Louis to remember that Harry was going through his own share of hell right now.

“Yeah,” Louis said. He lifted his arms a bit, a half-hearted suggestion. He was surprised when Harry didn’t move a centimetre toward him, instead just glancing away, like he was embarrassed—or ashamed. Louis slowly lowered his arms back down to his sides and tried not to let the stinging tears building behind his eyes spring forth.

Louis was acutely aware of Liam and Niall stood off to the side, watching the encounter. He spun toward them, looking for help, and found it in the form of Niall, ever ready to give out a hug. Liam followed suit shortly after, his grip just a bit looser than Niall’s, hardly enough to be noticeable.

Louis stared at Harry from within the cuddle, their eyes locking for a brief moment before Harry looked down again. Harry shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and didn’t make a move toward the others.

The rational part of Louis supposed that it made sense. Maintaining boundaries and that. Louis’s emotional centre demanded that he march straight up to Harry and clock him in the face.

Niall was the first to pull away, trending over to Harry to embrace him in turn, and then Liam did the same, leaving Louis stood there for nearly half a minute before Liam gestured for him to join.

Louis did so, reluctantly. He placed a careful hand against Harry’s back, feeling a bolt of electricity race through his fingertips at the hesitant touch. He knew he’d be replaying the moment in his head months from now. Years maybe.

Louis wondered if this was the last time they’d ever really touch, coerced into it by grief and expectation, the whole situation feeling like a veritable nightmare.

Louis wanted to go home. He wanted to turn back the clock six years and go back to his cramped childhood home in Donny and crawl into bed with Harry again and wake up knowing that his mum would be in the kitchen making breakfast for them both. He wanted to remember what it felt like to love Harry without feeling like it would kill him.

Louis messaged Eleanor that night, grasping for any piece of their past that he could still have, no matter how much it hurt to give in.

February 15, 2021

Los Angeles, California
Louis made it through that song and another five from the beginning of the playlist (and thank god it didn’t wound him so much to hear Harry’s voice anymore) before the aftermath of his earlier encounter with Harry caught up to him again.

They’d kissed. But it was more than that. This was worlds beyond a brief peck given in a moment of weakness, like when Louis had helped Harry shower back at hospital. When Harry had kissed him that first time, he’d claimed not to know why he’d done it. Had that changed? Or was this just another impulsive mistake?

Louis was too terrified of the answer to even consider going back over and asking Harry what he’d meant by it.

And of course, there was the fact that Harry was clearly in no state to start a romantic…anything, especially not with someone who had been so thoroughly entangled in his trauma.

Louis stared down at the journal, which was quickly filling up with a decade’s worth of confessions and wondered if this whole plan was a mistake. Maybe dredging up old memories would just make it even harder for Harry to get better.

Louis needed to talk to someone. Not Harry, not Sam—definitely not Liam, though it wasn’t like he would be awake to take a call anyway. No, Louis needed someone who could meet him halfway when it came to Harry. Someone like…Niall.

Louis hadn’t forgotten the odd nature of Niall’s meetings with Harry. Maybe having a chat with Niall was the key to clearing up just what exactly had happened to Harry in the last two and a half years that had resulted in all of this.

Louis had Niall’s phone ringing within the minute. He tapped the edge of the desk impatiently, praying it wouldn’t go to voicemail. He wasn’t sure he could muster up the courage to call a second time.

Finally, just as Louis was getting ready to give up on his whole plan, Niall picked up with a cautious, “Hello?”

“Hey,” Louis managed. “Um, are you free tonight by any chance?”

There was an extended pause before Niall replied. “Yeah, I’m just wrapping up at the studio, but I should be done in less than an hour or so. D’you want to meet here or somewhere else?”

Louis was so grateful for Niall’s ability to know when he shouldn’t ask too many questions. “I can swing by there,” he decided. If Niall was finishing up recording, presumably his team would be clearing out for the night, giving them a bit of breathing room while they talked.

“Well, head on over any time,” Niall replied breezily. “If we’re not done by the time you get here, you’re welcome to just hang about and watch.

Louis wasn’t too keen on having to chat up Hailee or Shawn in the event that he got there early, but he also couldn’t force himself to sit around and wait while the memory of Harry’s lips pressed against his slowly chewed him to pieces. “Cool,” he said, already getting up from his desk to grab his keys and jacket. “I’ll see you in a bit.”
Traffic on the way to Niall’s studio was even more of a bitch than usual, so Louis wasn’t surprised when he pulled up to find the lights off and the car park empty. He supposed Niall must have sent his cohorts home and was waiting on Louis to give him a ride home; something he was glad to do in return for Niall’s services in lending Louis his ear for the evening.

Niall was waiting just inside the reception area on the long sofa. He got up as soon as Louis approached the doors to let him in.

“I saw that accident on the 405 and figured you’d be stuck for a while,” Niall said.

Louis nodded tiredly. “You know, you could have picked somewhere closer to build a studio,” he remarked, even as he glanced around to marvel at the elegantly simple interior.

Niall shrugged. “Like living here. It’s a bit out of the way, but I like that. Plus, living a few minutes away from a theme park has its perks, you know?”

“And when was the last time you went to Six Flags?” Louis asked, arching an eyebrow in response.

Niall had to think about it for a moment as he led the two of them into the kitchen. “Well, I suppose it’s been a moment, then, but I’ve been pretty busy with the album.” He opened the fridge, procuring two beers and handing one to Louis.

They were twist-offs. Louis scoffed a little in disgust but took a drink anyway. He could do with a bit of a buzz. “How’s that going anyway?” he asked, gulping down the icy liquid with only a minor grimace.

This time it was Niall’s turn to show a bit of scepticism. “Thought we were meant to be chatting about you,” he replied.

Louis couldn’t help the grimace that crossed his face. It had been his idea, sure, but that didn’t make it any easier. He gulped down half of his beer and moved toward the plush sofa in the adjoining lounge area, sacking out on top of it with a sigh. He sprawled out his legs along its length, giving Niall no choice but to take up residence in the armchair opposite.

Niall did so with only a slight frown of annoyance, but even that was soon tempered with another sip of his beer. “Well, let’s have it,” he encouraged. “What’s eating at you so bad? Something to do with Harry, I’m guessing.”
Louis didn’t miss the wry twist of his lips over Harry’s name, the way it came out of Niall’s mouth as though bitter-tasting.

“Isn’t it always?” Louis shot back. It wasn’t exactly the first time he and Niall had been in this position, ready to air their grievances over Harry, not by a long shot. Louis wrinkled his nose, watching as Niall lifted the mouth of the bottle to his lips once more. “Can I ask you something first?” he said.

Niall slowly lowered the beer down to his lap, but he didn’t seem unduly wary as he looked over at Louis. “Go for it.”

Louis sucked in a quick breath and then let it out in a quiet sigh. He decided to cut right to the chase. “What did Harry say to you?” he asked.

Niall seemed surprised by the question. “What do you mean?”

“Before,” Louis replied, “at the hospital. Liam told me Harry said something that upset you.”

“He didn’t tell you what it was?”

Louis couldn’t ascertain from Niall’s tone whether he would have preferred that Liam had. He shook his head.

Niall slouched back even farther in his chair and sighed breathily. “He said,” Niall relayed slowly, his eyes gazing out lazily into the distance, past Louis’s head, staring at nothing at all, “that I wasn’t really his friend, and that I’d been riding his coattails for the sake of my solo career, and that he didn’t even know why I was there.”

Louis gaped at Niall, hardly able to believe that Harry was even capable of saying something like that. To Niall of all people. “Why?” Louis replied, dumbfounded by Niall’s confession.

Niall’s eyes drifted over to meet Louis’s again. He looked tired, like he’d aged a decade in the course of their fifteen minutes of conversation thus far. “I’m supposing no one ever told you what Harry was like after—once you guys were done for good?”

Louis shook his head. He wasn’t sure now that he even wanted to know, but if it would help him understand….

“He was paranoid,” Niall said bluntly. “I tried to help him out for the first few months or so after I got done touring myself, but he acted like everything I did was some sort of gimmick. And then finally, he got mean. Really mean. And I wasn’t sure how to handle that, so I backed off a bit, tried to let Jeff figure things out instead, but I don’t think Harry wanted help from anyone at that point.”

Louis winced. He hadn’t thought—he’d always assumed that once it was over, Harry would forge his own path, that Louis himself would be the one left by the wayside, but for some reason, everything had gone completely topsy-turvy.

“So, he what, still thinks you’re trying to use him or something?” That didn’t sound like the Harry Louis had known, but then again, there was a lot about this new Harry that Louis wouldn’t have thought to expect.

Niall nodded hesitantly. “Or at least, that’s what he thought at first. I think he’s calmed down a bit now, but I’m sure you can understand why I wasn’t chomping at the bit to hang all over him like you and Liam.”
Louis could now, and he felt bad for assuming Nialł’s reasons had been the least bit suspect. “Sorry,” he interjected, “about before, by the way.”

Nialł waved vaguely with his beer bottle, dismissing the apology. “I assume listening to me complain isn’t the only reason you’re here,” he continued.

Louis felt himself stiffen involuntarily, his body bracing itself for what might follow his confession. “I kissed Harry,” he said all at once. “Or well, he kissed me, I suppose.”

Nialł’s expression didn’t change a whit. “Like a proper kiss, then?”

“You could say that,” Louis hedged. He didn’t exactly want to divulge the juicier details to Nialł, of all people, even though it was his advice Louis was seeking. “It got a bit…heated,” he added. “Not like—” He made a face, trying to communicate without words that it hadn’t gotten as far as sex, but it had certainly been headed there.

Nialł frowned, looking troubled. “That doesn’t seem like such a great idea,” he replied. “I’m aware.”

“Then what are you doing here talking to me about it?”

Louis shrugged. “I don’t know,” he answered miserably. Absolution, maybe?

Nialł finished off his beer and set the empty down on the coffee table between them with a drawn-out exhale. “If you want my advice….”

“Please.”

Nialł pursed his lips, staring at Louis hard. “I think you should wait.”

“Wait…wait?” Louis scrunched up his brows in confusion as he looked back at Nialł, searching for an explanation. “Wait for what?”

“For both of you to get your shit together,” Nialł replied simply. “I’m grabbing another beer,” he added, rising from his seat to do just that.

Louis stared at the spot he’d vacated with the same bewildered expression and tried to parse Nialł’s advice with little luck. Encouragement was about the last thing he’d expected to come from Nialł’s mouth, even if it came with a caveat.

“So listen,” Nialł said as he sat down again, “I talked to Hailee about it—”

“Yes of course.” Louis couldn’t stop himself from interjecting.

Nialł gave him a mildly irritated look in response but continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “And she thinks that Harry just needs some time to figure himself out right now.”

Louis took a moment to process that. “What, you think we should just give him space?”

“No! No, not space like—space, at least. We were giving him space before, remember? Or well, I guess you wouldn’t, but he’d been giving me the cold shoulder for a few months before we stopped talking altogether and I’d just assumed it meant he wanted me to leave him alone. I didn’t realise it was—”

“A cry for help,” Louis realised.
“Yeah,” Niall confirmed, nodding. “More or less. I talked to Nick, Jeff, some other people; they said pretty much the same thing. Nobody wanted to push him, you know? So we all just...let go, I guess. None of us realised he was isolating himself on purpose until it was too late.”

“But why?” It was the one thing Louis couldn’t get out of his head. Even with all the shit Harry had been dealing with, Louis just couldn’t fathom what had pushed him to this point.”

Niall shrugged. “Sometimes there isn’t an easy answer for that,” he replied cryptically.

“Is that line borrowed from Hailee, too?”

“Maybe.” Niall took a big swig from his second bottle and then set it down next to the first. “Point is, I don’t think Harry knows how to be himself again. I’m not saying you shouldn’t ever—you know—but maybe avoid making any promises you can’t keep for right now. You’re going on tour again soon, right?”

Louis nodded. “Leaving in a couple days.”

“Then just let Harry know you’re planning on coming back,” Niall suggested. “And then prove it to him.”

Louis took a moment to consider that course of action. It wasn’t something he hadn’t already thought about, at least in vaguer, more fantastical terms, but Niall had a point. Louis wasn’t ready for a full-fledged relationship, not yet; Harry wasn’t either.

So: starting slow. Promises he could keep. There was a long road ahead of both of them, but Louis intended to see it to the end. He owed Harry that much.

“Thanks, Niall,” Louis said sincerely. “I appreciate it.”

“Yeah, anytime.” Niall yawned and summarily finished off the rest of his beer. “You mind giving me a lift home?”

Louis did so and then honestly contemplated coming up for a bit when they arrived at Niall’s condo. He felt now like he’d treated Niall unfairly given their collective circumstances and wanted to make it up to him, but even Louis’s strong sense of loyalty wasn’t enough to overcome the bolt of fear that coursed through him at the prospect of having to engage in a conversation with Hailee, particularly not after finding out that Niall had been talking about Louis and Harry with her in private.

“Maybe another time,” Louis told him, trying to infuse the sentiment with a believable amount of sincerity.

“Sure,” Niall replied easily. He didn’t seem put off by the rain check, at least. “Good luck with Harry, man.”

Louis nodded, waving Niall up the stairs to his condo before taking out his mobile to put on the next song in the playlist. He’d write in his head, he decided, and pen it down once he got back.

May 28, 2017
Doncaster, England

Louis’s lips were bitten raw, and he’d been staring at his mobile for the better part of an hour, but he was still no closer to picking up the phone like he’d meant to the second he finished listening to the song that had felt like a solid punch to the gut when he’d realised it was supposed to be about him.

Maybe it shouldn’t have been such a surprise, but Louis honestly hadn’t considered that Harry’s album would have anything to do with him at all. It had been a long time since they’d spoken, even longer since Louis warranted any kind of place of importance in Harry’s life. He’d expected to be left in the past, forgotten.

Louis slid his phone away with one finger, then pulled it back again. It was several more minutes before he finally took the device in hand and, with shaking fingers, pulled up Harry’s name in his contacts.

Louis felt like he was going to throw up as he waited for it to ring. What if Harry didn’t pick up? What if Harry had changed his number without telling Louis? What if Harry was forwarding all his voicemails to Nick Grimshaw to play live over the radio in case Louis called and was forced to leave him a message because calling and hanging up without saying anything would only be even more embarrassing than the alternative—

“Hello?”

For all of Louis’s obsessing, he hadn’t actually considered what would come next if Harry did answer. “It’s me,” he blurted out after a few seconds of silence had gone by. He was at a loss.

It was quiet after that, so quiet for so long that Louis feared Harry had hung up on him, but then, “I know.” The reply was softly-spoken, almost resigned, and Louis couldn’t decide if that reaction was better or worse than any of the alternatives. “Is it rude if I say I’m surprised to hear from you?”

“I dunno,” Louis replied. Hearing Harry’s voice again in his ear was so strange. It felt like he’d jumped back in time, and his brain was still struggling to make sense of the shift. “Maybe if we were normal it would be.”

“Normal,” Harry remarked with a sound that almost resembled a laugh. “That’s a word for it.”

“What would you call it?”

Harry didn’t answer. “Why are you calling, Louis?”

“I listened to it,” Louis replied hastily, like he was afraid if he didn’t get the answer out quickly enough, Harry would hang up on him before he had a chance to explain himself. “The album, I mean.”

“Oh.”

It wasn’t quite the reaction Louis had been hoping for. “I wanted to ask….” He swallowed hard. “Is ‘From the Dining Table’ …. Is that meant to be about me?” It was ambiguous enough that Harry could have gotten away with saying no, if he’d wanted to. And maybe Louis really had been wrong. Maybe the song wasn’t about him at all.

There was another pause, and Louis started to wonder if Harry planned on answering.
“Did you want it to be?” Harry asked instead. There was a slight edge to his voice, but Louis couldn’t tell what answer he was anticipating—or dreading—without being able to see his face.

“Well, I’m calling you, aren’t I?” Louis pointed out. He got up out of his chair, his feet feeling suddenly restless. He managed a good twelve, thirteen paces before Harry replied again.

“Yeah, I suppose you are.” Harry let out a soft sigh. “I don’t know really know what to say,” he admitted. “I didn’t think you’d actually….” He stopped, and Louis gave it another moment before deciding that Harry wasn’t intending to continue.

“I don’t really know what to say either,” Louis told him. “I just—I couldn’t not say anything, I guess. I had to… I don’t know.” He was rambling now, but Harry wasn’t stopping him, and Louis knew he needed to be stopped before something came out that he didn’t meant to say. “Do you ever think about how weird it is,” he continued, “that we just, like, spill our guts to millions of people and then say ‘just kidding’ afterwards, like it erases everything we said before?”

Harry’s response was dry, but he didn’t sound genuinely offended, at least. “Well, I try to avoid actually lying to people if I can help it.”

“Yes,” Louis replied, “well. You have that whole cryptic mysterious thing going for you now, which I suppose helps.”


There was a bit of static, like Harry had shoved his hand over the microphone, but Louis could still make out the muffled sound of voices, though it was impossible to distinguish any details about who they belonged to. Louis waited patiently while the discussion dragged on for several minutes before Harry addressed him again.

“Sorry about that,” Harry said, sounding distressingly morose. It was like whatever he’d just been talking about had sucked all the life out of his voice.

“Are you okay?” Louis asked cautiously. Harry sounded very much not okay.

“Yeah, it’s just—well, no. Not really.”

Louis waited for Harry to elaborate. When Harry didn’t say anything at all, Louis pushed—gently. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” he said, even though he was hoping Harry would choose to share.

“Yeah, sorry, it’s not that. I’m just… still getting used to saying it out loud, I guess.” Harry let out the quietest of sniffles, and Louis realised the pause from before must’ve been because Harry was crying.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Louis told him again.

“No, it’s… you deserve to know,” Harry replied.

Louis stopped cold in the middle of his kitchen, bile rising in the back of his throat as he realised what Harry must have been so torn up over. Robin. Of course. “Oh,” Louis said quietly.

“Yeah,” Harry replied nasally, apparently understanding Louis’s response to mean that he’d figured it out without having to be told. “Things haven’t been going so well recently, so. It’s been hard with everything else, like, the album and stuff. I’m not really sure… Yeah.”
Louis turned one-eighty degrees and made a beeline for his bedroom, where a suitcase with the essentials was already half-packed. “Are you in Cheshire right now?” he asked, planning out the route in his head before Harry even had a chance to reply. “I could drive out there once this shoot’s finished, I could——”

“Don’t, Louis,” Harry said abruptly, and his tone wasn’t cold or angry despite his bluntness. “Just don’t. I can’t handle seeing you on top of everything else, it’s just…. Not right now. Okay?”

“Okay.” Louis didn’t fight him on it because Harry was right. It wasn’t a good time to start unravelling their baggage. And well, ‘not right now’ wasn’t the same thing as ‘never’. And Louis planned to hold him to that.
Louis didn’t make it all the way back to the condo before jotting his lyrics down, instead stopping in the car park of some homegrown Mexican restaurant on the side of the road to collect his thoughts before running inside to grab some food for Sam and himself.

There was no telling himself that it wasn’t a peace offering; he’d left the condo in a hurry without offering her any explanation whatsoever and then had put his phone on do-not-disturb just to make matters worse.

Louis toyed with the idea of calling her in advance but ultimately decided to deal with the storm of disapproval in one fell swoop in person.

He was right to expect her reaction. Sam was stood in the centre of the kitchen with her arms crossed over her chest when he came in, a look of solemn disappointment plastered across her face. “You can’t just do that,” she said simply.

“I know,” Louis told her. He set the food on the island and pushed it toward her with a bashful grimace. “Sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything stupid, did you?” Sam’s expression edged away from anger and moved closer to worry.

Louis shook his head. “Just had a bit of a freak-out and went to see Niall. Honest.”

Sam shifted restlessly from one foot to the other. She looked like she wasn’t sure whether to continue scolding Louis or if she should try to comfort him instead. “Do you want to talk about it?” she finally asked.

Louis pulled out one of the stools and sat down at the island, shaking his head. “Not particularly.” He’d hashed out pretty much everything he needed to with Niall already. At least, until he had another chance to talk to Harry. But Louis wasn’t planning on having that confrontation until he was finished with the lyrics. “Let’s just eat,” he suggested.

Louis pulled out the stool next to him and started in on the take-out containers he’d brought back, laying them out so that they both had easy access from their seats. Sam sat down without complaint and humoured him, but Louis could still sense the wariness in her gaze every time her eyes drifted
over to him instead of the food.

“You’re sure you’re okay?” she asked again as they cleaned up.

Louis nodded, and Sam—being Sam—let it go after that.

Louis excused himself to go to his bedroom after that, intending to work more on the lyrics he wanted to finish for Harry. It seemed even more important to finish them now that he’d spoken to Niall, and the date of Louis’s imminent departure was drawing ever closer.

December 20, 2017
Manchester, England

Louis couldn’t help but experience a bit of déjà vu as he waited for Harry to arrive at their designated meeting spot in Manchester, the same hotel they’d made up in years ago on Christmas Day.

Things were a bit different this time. It was Harry who’d wanted the meeting for one, and it was Harry who was running late, so much so that Louis was starting to worry he was now being stood up. Maybe Harry had gotten cold feet.

Louis dropped onto the bed and laid his head against the pillows with a soft sigh, allowing his eyes to drift closed. He hadn’t gotten much sleep at Dan’s place, but he hadn’t wanted to leave his siblings for even a second, since time with them had only gotten rarer in the aftermath of Freddie’s birth.

It shouldn’t have been a surprise when he fell asleep, but it was certainly a shock when he woke up to find Harry curled into him, his head laying against Louis’s chest as he breathed in time with Louis’s own sleep-slowed inhalations.

“What time is it?” Louis mumbled. He didn’t move.

Harry stirred only enough to turn to face him. “Half-six,” he replied casually. They were meant to meet around four.

“How long have you been here?” Louis asked, helpfully omitting the part about them being in bed together despite not having spoken in half a year.

“Just over an hour,” Harry replied quietly, his eyes earnest and soulful in a way that Louis hadn’t realised he’d desperately missed.

“That long, huh?”

“You looked like you could use the rest.”

Louis closed his eyes again as if in confirmation of that statement and felt Harry snuggle even closer in response. “I didn’t see our meeting going quite like this,” Louis confessed, murmuring the words into the soft shorn curls now adorning Harry’s head. He missed the longer hair, wondered if Harry missed it too after all the adamant refusals to let Lou cut it while they’d still been in the band.
“How did you envision it, then?”

“More arguing. Maybe some tears?”

“We still have time for that,” Louis pointed out.

Harry snuffled loudly against Louis’s side and shook his head. “I’d rather not,” he replied.

They laid there in silence for a while, and then Louis, foolishly, decided to break it. “I’m surprised you didn’t want to meet somewhere more public.”

Harry tilted his head back to look up at Louis, brows furrowed in annoyance, perhaps. Once again, Louis’s mouth wouldn’t let them have nice things. “Would you have agreed to come see me if I had?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Louis replied honestly. He liked to think he would have.

“Well, luckily for you I made it an easy decision.”

Louis fingers sprang unbidden to pet at Harry’s hair. It was just so…short. Louis forced himself to focus. “Yes, but why?” he prodded. “What changed?”

Harry suddenly shied away from the touch, though he didn’t move far. He lifted himself up on his elbows and assessed Louis with a frown. “You did,” he replied, his expression seeming to imply that Louis should have already known the answer to his own question. “Or at least, I thought….”

Louis started to panic. He must have done something, said something to make Harry think things were different, that Louis wasn’t still terrified every time he woke up that people might find out his secret and rip his entire life right out from under him.

But if Harry thought differently…maybe he should live the lie. For however long he could get away with it.

It was a stupid fucking plan, and Louis knew it, but now that he had Harry pressed up against him for the first time in what felt like forever, Louis couldn’t make himself see the sense in being honest and turning Harry away.

“But what made you realise?” Louis replied quickly, desperate to keep Harry from changing his mind and walking straight out the door again.

Harry shook his head a little. He looked confused by the question. “You,” he said again, before finally admitting with a rapidly pinkening complexion, “I kept up with your promos.”

“Oh,” Louis said dumbly. “I kept up with yours, too.”

Harry seemed about two seconds away from rolling his eyes. “I know,” he replied. “You said as much in your interviews.”

This time it was Louis’s turn to flush. He’d spoken freely because he hadn’t ever really expected Harry to find out, because Harry was good at keeping things he didn’t want to acknowledge out of his purview, and Louis had become one of those things—or so he’d thought, anyway. But evidently, Harry had been checking up on him as much as he’d been checking up on Harry.

“Well, then,” Louis said shortly. He sat up a little, staring down at Harry, who didn’t move. “Now that we’ve established that we’re both emotionally-constipated prats—what now?”
Harry harrumphed with a bit of melodramatic flair. “Excuse me,” he replied. “I resent being called emotionally-constipated. I take pride in my vulnerabilities.”

Louis arched an eyebrow. “Fine,” he said. “We’ll file you under ‘sentimental but bad at communication’ instead.”

That got a quiet ‘hey’ out of Harry, but he was smiling warmly even as he said it, making it clear he didn’t take any offence with Louis’s assessment of his personality.

“So,” Harry said after a few seconds passed. He didn’t take his eyes off Louis once.

“So,” Louis countered. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Didn’t realise you were asking me. Why do I have to make all the decisions?”

“You were the one who asked me to be here,” Louis pointed out again.

Harry flopped onto his back with an exaggerated sigh. “Yes, well, I suppose you’re right.” His eyes flicked up to look at Louis again as his gaze turned abruptly serious. “I miss you,” he admitted quietly. “I’m not strong enough, I think, to be alone.”

Perversely, Louis wanted to tell Harry that he was strong enough, that he could make it alone, but it was the selfish part of him that won out. “I miss you, too,” he told Harry. “Every day.”

A slow smile crept onto Harry’s face. “You should kiss me then.” Harry said in a bold tone. “Cos I’ve missed that a lot, as well.”

Louis obliged him, pressing their lips together and coaxing Harry’s mouth open soft and slow. Louis wanted to take his time tasting Harry, in case this all went to shit again before he could have another. Louis was well past imagining that they would ever get their happy ending, but he didn’t want to deprive Harry of that same hope.

“It’ll be different this time,” Louis assured him once he finally pulled away. “I promise.”

February 15, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Louis ended up working well into the night on adding lyrics from the songs he’d already heard once before into the journal. Every pen-stroke felt like it was a Herculean effort now that he had a clear goal in mind of putting the words in Harry’s hands in so short a time.

Louis still hadn’t decided how he was going to accomplish the gesture. Leaving it somewhere Harry would find it, with a note perhaps—that was the easiest route, by far, but Louis couldn’t shake the feeling that it would send the wrong message.

If Louis’s biggest fault over the past ten years had been his fear, then letting that fear rule his decisions in the process of making amends was just another mistake. No, he had to give the journal to Harry in person. And more importantly, he had to make sure Harry knew why he was doing it.

So face-to-face then. And Louis still had Freddie and Briana to meet with before he left. There were precious few grains of sand left in the hourglass, so Louis bit back a yawn and kept working.
It was well after midnight when Louis finally quit working. He’d made more progress than he’d anticipated, and he was proud of that, but he was also really, extremely hungry. He stepped out of his room cautiously, relieved to find the sitting room and the adjoining kitchen dark. Sam must’ve already gone to bed.

Louis was careful not to make too much noise as he bustled around the kitchen, but he needn’t have worried.

There was a shudder underfoot, the dishes rattling inside the cupboards before suddenly spilling out onto the floor all around Louis’s feet. He clung desperately to the counter and rode out the shockwave in stunned silence, hardly daring to breathe until it was over.

When everything was still again, Louis turned his head to survey the damage. Other than the casualties of the kitchen cabinets, nothing much else seemed to have suffered as a result of the earthquake. But Louis had spent enough time in California to know that such events were not always one and done.

“Louis?” Sam’s head poked through the gap in the doorway, her face white as a sheet.

“I need you to toss me my shoes,” Louis told her in as calm a voice as he could manage.

Sam darted quickly to the entryway and retrieved Louis’s shoes to do just that. Louis slipped them on and carefully toed out of the debris littering the kitchen floor. He snatched up Sam’s hand in his and led her to the door.

“Where are we going?” she asked, confused.

“Outside,” Louis said curtly. He wasn’t as worried about the possibility of a stronger earthquake in the next few minutes as he was about Harry.

Harry, who—despite residing primarily in California for several years now—was deathly afraid of earthquakes.

Louis had always found Harry’s anxiety over something that was practically an everyday occurrence in LA amusingly ironic. He wasn’t laughing now.

Louis took Sam’s hand in his and carefully led them through the front door. He was on edge, waiting for an aftershock to hit at any second, but they made it out onto the street where their neighbours were already convening without any incident.

They moved far enough out from the pavement to be considered safe before Louis started to lead them through the growing crowd toward the unit Harry and his family were staying in. Louis had almost made it to the pavement by the time he spotted the door finally opening and three figures streaming out, the middle taller than the others by nearly half a foot but swaddled head to toe in black fabric that disguised their visage.

It wasn’t undeniably clear until they were only a dozen or so yards away from Louis and Sam that it was Harry sandwiched between Gemma and Anne, but Louis supposed that was sort of the point. He couldn’t imagine a worse situation for an unexpected fan encounter than the one they were in right now.

Louis shoved his way through the last few bystanders between himself and Harry and finally broke free, realising too late that he didn’t even know what to say now that he was face to face with Harry’s wide-eyed visage.
"You all right?" he asked lamely.

Harry shook his head.

Louis squeezed Sam’s hand a little tighter as a reflex. “We’re safe out here,” he pointed out, like Harry wasn’t well aware of that fact already.

“We can’t stand out here forever,” Harry replied tightly. “And aftershocks can happen weeks afterwards, so it’s not like—”

“Harry,” Anne cut in. She wrapped both hands around his arm, tugging him closer. “You need to calm down, baby. You’ve survived plenty of earthquakes before, right?”

Harry nodded, but the look in his eyes seemed to indicate he was beyond the reach of rational comforts. “It’s just…” he started to say, screwing up his face in protest. “I dunno,” he concluded. “It just makes me feel…bad.”

Louis remembered him saying something similar the first time the band had experienced an earthquake together. Just a small one, but Harry had been a nervous wreck hours before the tiniest shockwave had rattled their hotel rooms. They’d joked at the time that he was like one of those dogs who could sense natural disasters before they happened, but maybe there was truth to that after all.

Louis didn’t put much stock in all that hippie stuff, but even he couldn’t deny that Harry had always been a little more sensitive and in tune with the universe, or whatever it was, than most people he’d met.

“Were you feeling bad earlier?” Louis wondered.

Harry nodded uncertainly. He looked surprised by the question, like he hadn’t expected Louis to remember, or believe him. But Louis had, and he did.

“It’s the same now?” Louis pressed. If Harry believed they had a reason to worry, then Louis would take him at his word.

Harry frowned, his eyes narrowing as he shook his head slowly. “No,” he said in a soft voice. “It doesn’t feel the same.”

Louis was aware that Gemma was looking at them both like they were lunatics while Anne and Sam just seemed confused, but he didn’t care. “Let’s wait a few more minutes and see how you feel then,” Louis suggested.

Harry replied with a slow, cautious nod, but he seemed at least moderately relieved by the idea. “Can we…” he started to say before abruptly snapping his mouth shut with a blush.

“What?” Louis questioned.

“Nothing. It’s stupid.”

“Harry,” Anne gently chided.

Harry’s face was bright red by the time he finally got the words out, muttering them while he stared down at his feet. The black beanie and hood covering his head only served to highlight his alarmingly bright flush. “I thought we could all spend the night together,” he mumbled, “in case something happens.”
Louis glanced at Anne first, then Gemma, before finally replying. “Well, I suppose I’d have to camp out on the floor, but I’m game so long as Sam doesn’t mind a night on the sofa.”

“I’m sure we can make some room for you,” Anne said uncertainly, even while Harry nodded along at an almost frantic pace.

Harry clung to his mother while she continued to hold onto him, and neither let go even when the crowd around them finally started to disperse. Apparently, their temporary neighbours had decided that the danger and the novelty had both passed for now.

They waited just a bit longer before heading back to their respective abodes, Sam and Louis only going to theirs to retrieve any necessities for the night before heading to Harry’s. After some deliberation, Louis decided to take the journal with him, just in case, though he wasn’t planning on actually cluing Harry in on its existence until it was finished.

Once inside the condo, Louis found himself being led into Harry’s bedroom by Anne before he could say a word in protest. Evidently, they’d agreed in Louis’s absence that it would be fine for him and Harry to share a bed. Louis was a little miffed he hadn’t gotten a say in the matter, but he didn’t want to insist on bunking elsewhere and risk giving Harry the wrong idea.

Louis wanted nothing more than to share a bed with Harry; he just didn’t think he should.

But he climbed in opposite Harry anyway, trying not to eavesdrop while Anne murmured words of comfort into her son’s ear. “Try to get some rest,” she finished before turning out the light.

The bedroom door was left wide open after Anne walked out. Louis had no intentions of shutting it.

“Feeling any better now?” Louis whispered into the darkness. He’d put as much space as he could between himself and Harry, but there was still a low thrum of electricity coursing through his skin, making his heart beat a little faster. Louis wasn’t quite sure how he was meant to get any sleep at all.

“Mhmm.” A few seconds passed, and then Harry moved, every so quietly inching closer to Louis. Maybe he thought Louis wouldn’t notice.

Louis rolled over to face the wall, determined not to give in to the urge to plaster himself along Harry’s body the way he’d been so accustomed to doing in the past. “Goodnight, Harry,” he said meaningfully.

“Goodnight, Lou.”
Chapter 76

February 16, 2021
Los Angeles California

Louis woke up to two distinct figures hovering over his bed. Or well, not his bed. Harry’s.

The second thing he became aware of was the fact that, aside from himself, the bed was empty. Harry was no longer in it. Louis felt a surge of relief at first, over the fact that his fear of being caught octopus-ing Harry in his sleep was no longer a possibility, but then he was forced to wonder if Harry had left because Louis had been octopus-ing him in his sleep, and the worry started all over again.

Louis slowly blinked up as the figures stood over him came into focus. Sam, he realised, and Gemma. “Where’s Harry?” he asked, wondering why neither had said anything to him so far despite the twin looks of concern on their faces as they stared down at him.

“Bathroom,” Gemma replied, frowning.

Louis rolled over to get a better look at the open door leading to the en-suite bathroom, inside of which he could see Harry with his elbows braced against the toilet seat, Anne at his back rubbing soothing circles between his shoulders.

Louis sat up, squinting at the sight. “What’s going on?” he asked, looking to Gemma again for answers.

Gemma glanced over her shoulder at her brother and then back at Louis. “We were hoping you could tell us, actually,” she admitted in a quiet voice. “We just found him in there when I came in to remind him about his appointment.”

“How long’s he been in there?” Louis asked as he finally climbed out of bed. He was overdressed, not wanting to make Harry—or Anne—uncomfortable by stripping down, but he still felt awkward
standing in front of Gemma and Sam in just a pair of sweats and a t-shirt while the two of them were already in their day-clothes with faces made-up.

“No clue,” Gemma told him. “He’s just been…like that,” she continued. “His appointment’s in an hour, but we’re trying to see if we can get him in to see Dr Strauss earlier.”

Louis nodded and moved past her to stand in the doorway to the bathroom. He waited for Anne to look up at him before he spoke. “Can I talk to him?”

She looked exhausted. And Louis knew it wasn’t from a lack of sleep.

“You can try,” Anne said tiredly as she stepped away from Harry to make space for Louis instead.

Louis dropped down into a crouch at Harry’s side and patiently waited for some sign of acknowledgment. After determining that no such thing appeared to be coming, Louis finally placed a gentle hand against the nape of Harry’s neck, underneath where he’d pulled his curls up into a messy bun. He’d had enough awareness to accomplish that, at least. That was a good sign. Maybe.

“You with me?” Louis asked quietly.

There were a few seconds of nothing, and then finally, Harry nodded, though his expression remained unsettlingly vacant as he stared down into the water at the bottom of the toilet bowl.

“What’s going on, then?” Louis pressed, deciding to just go for it. When Harry didn’t respond, he tried again. “Harry, love, you’re scaring everyone. Your mum needs to know you’re all right.”

“Don’t want to go back,” Harry finally mumbled in reply.

Louis’s eyebrows drew together in the middle of his forehead. He slid his hand down lower, to the centre of Harry’s back. “What do you mean?”

Harry just shook his head.

Louis sighed and glanced up toward where Anne was stood in the doorway, her arms crossed over her chest in impatient worry. Her nostrils flared almost imperceptibly, but Louis noticed, and he knew that she was only willing to let him try for so much longer to cajole Harry into a better mood.

“Harry,” Louis tried again as he rubbed Harry’s back, but this time Harry shook him off.

“I don’t want to go back,” Harry said again. “I had a dream I went back and—” He cut himself off with something between a gasp and a sob before doing his best to collect himself again. “I don’t want to go back,” he mumbled.

Louis had finally figured out that the destination in question must have been the hospital, specifically the psychiatrist’s office he’d accompanied Harry to the day prior. He felt an unexpected surge of anger, followed by an equally overwhelming flash of vindication. He’d guessed that Dr Strauss wasn’t to be trusted, and now it seemed like he’d been proven right. But Louis knew convincing Gemma and Anne that Harry shouldn’t go back would be an impossible task.

“What if I came with you this time?” Louis suggested instead. The words were out of his mouth before he’d even had enough time to think twice about saying them, but he didn’t regret it afterward.

Harry slowly tilted his head, blinking up at Louis with wide eyes. “You’d do that?” he said.
Louis nodded.

And with that, the matter was settled.

It was clear that neither Anne nor Gemma seemed pleased with Louis’s plan, but he caught Sam giving him a small nod of approval as he walked past her to grab a clean change of clothes. His hands were shaking as he pulled them on in the back corner of Harry’s bedroom, while the others were still occupied with getting Harry on his feet and into the shower.

Louis wasn’t sure what he was planning to do when confronted with Dr Strauss. There was every possibility that she wouldn’t want him to accompany Harry, and he had to prepare himself for that.

Despite all his mental gymnastics, however, once Louis was face to face with Harry’s therapist less than an hour later, he found himself completely and utterly speechless. It was Harry who had to step in to save him from looking like a gibbering idiot, and even then, Louis felt his face reddening as Harry calmly explained that Louis was there for moral support.

Dr Strauss coolly evaluated Louis for a long moment before nodding. “Come on in, then,” she said, gesturing for them to follow her through the open door. “Have a seat anywhere.”

The available choices were an armchair, a small sofa, and what looked like an oversized beanbag chair. Louis waited for Harry to choose the sofa before sitting himself down in the armchair beside. He stared intently at Dr Strauss while she typed something on her laptop, wondering if it was to do with his presence there.

Finally, she glanced up again, meeting Louis’s eyes directly. “You’re welcome to call me Claudia if it makes you more comfortable,” she told him before turning her attention to Harry. “Is there anything in particular you’d rather we not discuss today?” she asked. “You can write it down if you need to.”

Harry glanced at Louis and then back at Claudia before shaking his head. “It’s fine. We can talk about…whatever.”

“All right.” Claudia’s expression didn’t change.

Louis realised suddenly that she reminded him of the first therapist he’d ever seen, the one who’d nearly put him off the whole gig entirely, and that’s why he felt so uncomfortable around her. But that didn’t explain why Harry had been a nervous wreck that morning in anticipation of seeing her again.

“Can I talk about something?” Louis asked boldly.

Both Claudia and Harry looked at him in surprise. He couldn’t tell if Claudia was annoyed by the outburst, but it was a few seconds before she finally nodded.

Louis folded his hand in his lap and did his best not to let any of the roiling emotions inside show outwardly on his face. “Why was Harry so terrified to come back and see you?” he demanded.

Harry let out a squeak from the sofa beside him, but Louis didn’t take his eyes off Claudia for a second.

She met his gaze with an impassive stare of her own. “I think that question is something only Harry can answer,” she replied. “Harry?” she said, focussing on him again. “Do you want to talk about this morning?”
Louis turned to take in the way Harry was curled in on himself, the way his anxiety radiated off him like a heatwave.

Harry sucked in a breath as the seconds passed and then finally opened his mouth to answer. “Because you said you wanted to talk about what I did, this time,” he answered in a small voice. “And I don’t want to talk about it.”

Louis experienced a disconcerting jolt of realisation—tinged with embarrassment—over the fact that Harry’s freak-out hadn’t been because of his therapist’s nefarious intentions. He was just upset; because talking about a suicide attempt was upsetting.

“Oh,” Louis said a bit too loudly.

Both Harry and Claudia ignored him.

“Would you rather talk about your relationship with Louis instead?” Claudia asked Harry.

Louis started at the mention of his name, but once again, neither party seemed to notice or care.

Finally, Harry looked up and met Louis’s eyes again. “Okay,” he said shyly. “Is that okay?” he then asked, directing the question at Louis.

Louis nodded dumbly, not sure how he was even meant to refuse now that they were in this situation together.

Apparently, Harry had talked about Louis a lot in his previous session with Claudia, because she already seemed to know everything there was to know about their history together.

“Do you blame Louis for your depression?” Claudia asked after merely half a dozen innocuous questions about the state of their relationship as it currently existed.

No more softballs, Louis supposed as he waited for Harry to give his answer.

Harry agonised over a response far longer than Louis had expected. The question seemed simple, but Harry was clearly struggling to give a hard yes or no. “Maybe?” he finally settled on, and Louis felt his heart sink in response. “It’s hard to…. I think maybe I thought so at first, but now—I dunno, really.”

Claudia nodded along easily. “Do you think having Louis here has helped or impeded your recovery thus far?”

“Helped,” Harry replied without hesitation. Louis was surprised at the vehemence of his answer. “Definitely helped.”

“Do you mind if I ask Louis a few questions as well?” Claudia asked Harry, who nodded, albeit a bit uncertainly.

Louis steeled himself as best he could for whatever was about to come next, but he had no real way of knowing what direction Claudia’s questions were going to take.

She jotted something down on her clipboard before glancing up at Louis. “Are you interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with Harry?”

All the breath left Louis’s lungs in a whooshing gasp. “What?” he choked out. He didn’t dare look at Harry to measure his reaction.
“Have you made yourself a part of Harry’s recovery because you still harbour romantic feelings for him?” Claudia clarified.

Her expression held no promise of judgment, but Louis wasn’t an idiot. He knew there was a wrong answer to that question.

“I’m here because I care about Harry,” Louis answered carefully, “and because I want him to get better. My feelings about him are irrelevant.”

“I disagree,” Claudia replied. “Given your history, if your support has romantic connotations, it could affect Harry’s recovery process,” she explained. “I’m not trying to hold you accountable for your feelings, Louis, but you should be aware that this isn’t the right time to act on them.”

Louis’s face felt like a bonfire, and he imagined that were he to gather the strength to turn his head to look at Harry, he would find a similar expression on his face as well. “I’m okay with being friends,” Louis argued, and it was true. He would take that over the bitterness and cold silence that had permeated the last two and a half years. “But if Harry ever wanted something else,” he continued, taking care to keep his voice low and even, “I wouldn’t say no to him.”

Claudia stared at him for a long moment before looking down at her clipboard again to write something else down. Her expression softened a bit when she looked back up again. “Do you mind waiting outside while I finish up with Harry?”

Louis stood immediately. “Yeah,” he said in a dazed voice. “Yeah, of course.” He walked out without once looking at Harry, not wanting to see his reaction to Louis’s unfettered confession.

Louis pulled his phone out almost as soon as he sat down in the waiting room, refusing to be left with only his thoughts for even just a moment. He was grateful he’d had the foresight to bring the journal along with him. He could work on the lyrics for the rest of the hour; there was no reason to worry unproductively about how he was meant to ever look Harry in the eyes again now. That was a future-Louis problem.

January 5, 2018

Boulder City, Nevada

“This is nice, isn’t it?”

Louis, who had been gritting his teeth against the combination of bitter wind and bright sun assaulting his face for the better part of an hour, couldn’t have disagreed more with Harry’s assessment of things. “How so?” he panted, pausing just a moment to adjust the strap on his backpack a bit before scrambling up the path after Harry.

“Like…just how peaceful it all is.”

Louis watched as Harry bent down to admire a bit of greenery among the rocks. He didn’t really think there was much that could be considered peaceful about the strenuous hike they were undertaking in order to reach the hot springs at the end of the trail, but it was quiet, at least.

“You know,” Louis remarked as he helped Harry climb over yet another boulder, “when you said you wanted to holiday in Vegas, this wasn’t exactly what I had imagined.”
“You’d really rather be gambling right now?” Harry shot back over his shoulder.

Louis took a moment to admire the curve of Harry’s arse—much improved since the last time he’d seen it—before following him up and over. “Not really,” he admitted.

“Almost there,” Harry muttered to himself a few minutes later, after they’d both squeezed through a narrow crevice between two cliff faces that had even Louis holding his breath.

Louis wasn’t sure how Harry could even tell, seeing as he’d never been to the hot springs before and had staunchly refused the services of an actual guide, assuring both the park attendant and Louis himself that they were both fit enough to manage the hike on their own.

But sure enough, it was only a few minutes later that they emerged in a secluded cove, filled with clear blue water in shallow pools, with tiny waterfalls carrying it through the mountains.

Harry’s face lit up like a firework as he took in the sight of the hidden oasis laid out before. Louis, still breathing heavily behind him, couldn’t must up the same level of enthusiasm, but he managed to breathe out a quiet little sight of relief as they descended into the hot springs.

Harry picked out a nice, flat boulder for them to lay their clothes and packs down on while they stripped to their swim trunks—Harry had wanted to skinny dip, but apparently that was frowned upon in national parks. Louis hoped Harry wasn’t planning on some sort of outrageous sexual escapade to check off his bucket list; he didn’t think he could bear the resulting headlines if they managed to get kicked out by a park ranger for public indecency.

Harry was the first into the pools of course, cavorting about like a child who’d never set foot in any body of water larger than a puddle.

Louis followed a few seconds later. He treaded more cautiously into the hot springs than Harry had, still half-afraid of cutting his foot open on a rock or getting bit by some horrid desert-dwelling creature he didn’t even know the name of. Louis was surprised even though it was right there in the name by the fact that the water was actually warm.

Louis sunk in to his neck quickly, trying to sheath as much of his exposed skin under the water as he could to shield it from the chill January wind. Harry grabbed for his hand before he could get comfortable.

“Come on,” Harry said, tugging him back up again. “It’ll be warmer in the sauna cave.”

Louis liked the sound of that, so he allowed himself to be dragged along through the water until they reached the back wall of the cove, where there was a small but imposing entrance into a space large enough to fit several people.

Inside it was even warmer, and Louis relaxed blissfully against the interior wall of the cave with Harry curled into his side. “I guess you might have had the right idea on this one,” he finally conceded.

Harry snorted wetly against Louis’s skin. “My ideas are always right,” he insisted.

He pulled away then, drifting over to the other side of the ‘sauna’—and it really did feel like one. Louis was sweating after only a few minutes of sitting inside, but he wasn’t keen on going back out into the cold anytime soon.

“Can I ask you something?”
Louis, whose eyes had started to drift closed as he soaked in the warm water, opened them again to look over at Harry. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Harry replied quickly. “I was just thinking.”

“Okay?”

Harry glared at him. He hated it when Louis tried to hurry him along. He liked to think at his own pace, apparently. Finally, his expression softened again, and he opened his mouth to answer. “What if we bought a house out here?” he said, taking Louis completely by surprise.

“What?”

“Like in the desert somewhere,” Harry said dreamily. “Or in the mountains. We could just…live, you know? Just live. And there’d be no one around to bother us, and you’d be close to Freddie, and —”

“Harry, we do have real lives, you realise that, right?”

Harry’s face creased into a frown. “It was just an idea,” he grumbled defensively, making Louis wish he’d just gone along with it after all.

Louis had practise enough with that already. It seemed like Harry was constantly living in a fantasy these days, always dreaming up scenarios in which life suddenly treated them better than it ever had in the past, and Louis couldn’t begrudge him that small comfort, but he also couldn’t imagine a world in which any of Harry’s fantasies could possibly come true.

Harry changed the subject quickly after that, saving Louis the trouble of having to apologise, but it wasn’t much longer before things started to take a turn. Louis tried to avoid the topic of Harry’s upcoming tour as much as possible, and there was one singular reason for that.

“You’re still planning on singing it, then,” Louis said once Harry had finished his spiel about the rehearsals for the new songs on the set list.

Harry shot him a withering look. “We already talked about this.”

They had. Once. Louis had carefully chosen to keep his mouth shut for the majority of that discussion. “I know,” Louis replied. “I just want to make sure that you’re, you know—sure.”

“I’m finally getting a chance to be honest,” Harry said pointedly. “Of course I’m sure.”
Chapter 77

Chapter Notes

So the final chapter will be a bit longer than the rest. Hopefully you will all be satisfied with the resolution. See you on Saturday!

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February 16, 2021
Los Angeles, California

Louis didn’t notice Harry until Harry was stood right in front of him, his cotton candy pink socks the first thing to cut through the haze of concentration that filled Louis’s brain as he tried to figure out how to word a particularly tricky lyric.

“What are you doing?” Harry asked curiously, sounding more like a child than a twenty-seven-year-old adult in that moment.

Louis slammed the journal shut as a reflex. “Working,” he said. He was fully aware of how strained the answer sounded, how obvious it was as a lie of omission.

But Harry didn’t question it.

“Should we head out, then?” Louis was still in the process of standing up from his chair when he noticed Harry fervently shaking his head. “What? What’s wrong?”

“I want to go home.”

It took Louis a minute to parse his meaning. “Home, like, your actual house?” He squinted at Harry in confusion, still not quite sure if he’d understood him correctly.

Harry nodded.

Louis was still bewildered even after getting his confirmation. “You sure you wouldn’t rather go back and rest for a bit?” he suggested. As far as he was aware, neither Gemma nor Anne had organised a clean-up at Harry’s LA house, and Louis felt uneasy about subjecting Harry to the aftermath of his failed suicide attempt now, when he still seemed so emotionally fragile.

Harry shook his head again. He glanced around like he was afraid someone might be listening in, but they were alone. “I think if I don’t go now I’ll end up chickening out later,” he confessed in a low voice.

Louis still wasn’t sure what to make of this whole plan, but Harry seemed committed to the idea, and Louis really didn’t want to have an argument about it. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s go, then.”
Harry was jittery the whole way to the car, and it didn’t seem to dissipate any after they left Cedars-Sinai. Louis glanced over at him at every opportunity, half-afraid that given the chance Harry might tuck and roll right out of the car while it was still moving.

Louis had texted Gemma before they’d left to tell her that they would be a little while longer, but he’d quickly hopped in the car after, not wanting the pressure of having to come up with a reasonable explanation for why they were coming back late. Louis almost felt as if he’d kidnapped Harry, or perhaps the other way around, even though there was nothing inherently sinister about their intended goal.

“Can I ask why you want to go back?” Louis finally asked.

Harry started like he’d been slapped, his eyes going wide before settling into a more relaxed expression. “Um, Claudia just said I should think about going back there with someone I—before I go back home for real.” He mumbled his way through the explanation, barely making sense by the end of it. But Louis could fill in most of the blanks.

“Does she know it’s...how you left it?” It was the most delicate way Louis could think of phrasing the question, but Harry still flinched.

“I don’t know,” Harry answered. He turned his head to stare out the window at the passing vehicles.

Louis didn’t press him for anything more. The rest of the drive was silent—as the grave, Louis caught himself thinking before quickly chastising his own brain for even allowing the thought to cross his mind—and then almost before Louis knew it, they were pulling onto the quiet tree-lined lane outside of Harry’s house.

Louis parked in the drive, near the end (thanks to the cars occupying the space in front of the garage), and turned to face Harry, who was visibly shaking.

“You’re sure you want to do this?” Louis asked him. “You don’t have to. I’ll turn the car around right now if you want.”

Harry let out a half-hearted laugh. “You know, you sound more scared of going inside than I am,” he replied, the smile quickly fading from his lips. He sucked in a deep breath and released it with a heavy sigh. “Yes, I’m sure,” he said. “I want to...I need to see it again, I think, the way it was. I’m not sure—it’s all still jumbled up in my head.” He glanced up at Louis, pleading for understanding, but Louis wasn’t sure how much he could offer.

Louis had wondered on more than one occasion just how much Harry remembered from the night of his accident. He’d been drugged up, bled out, but apparently his brain had registered just enough to leave him sufficiently haunted. Closure, then. Louis wasn’t sure that’s what they would find inside, but he was prepared to try, for Harry’s sake.

“Okay,” Louis said quietly. He stepped out of the car and rounded it to get Harry’s door. Louis offered Harry a hand and found himself feeling a bit surprised when Harry took it—and then didn’t let go.

They walked up the drive with their hands still linked. Harry used his right, the free one, to unlock the door. Both were hit with an unexpected wave of unpleasant smells, and Harry quickly dragged Louis over to the thermostat to start the air filtering again.

“Guess I should ask my mum to call the cleaning service again,” Harry joked, wrinkling his nose as
they passed the kitchen, the clear source of the odour.

Louis did his best to ignore the stench, but there were other things he couldn’t look past. He tugged Harry back a few steps, halting them in the middle of the hallway. “Why did you cancel it?” he asked meaningfully.

Harry stared back at him with sad eyes. “You know why,” he replied in a soft voice.

And Louis did. He had known, since the moment Gemma had told him, what all of Harry’s careful preparations meant. But he needed to hear Harry say it.

The longer Louis looked at Harry, though, the less willing he was to push his luck. An uneasy peace was still peaceful, after all, and Louis didn’t want to lose that.

Louis dropped his eyes, deciding to let it go, but then he caught sight of their hands instead, still intertwined, their tattoos almost mirroring each other as they stood with their arms extended. This was Louis’s chance to get answers. “That’s not why,” Louis insisted as he lifted his head again. He wasn’t sure if Harry even understood what he was asking.

Harry inhaled sharply through his nose and tightened his grip on Louis’s hand. “Because I was tired,” he said simply. He swallowed hard. “I was tired of being alone.”

Louis’s face creased into something plaintive and unsure. “Because of me?” he asked. It was a fear he hadn’t wanted to give voice to, that his abandonment had pushed Harry over the edge of a metaphorical cliff, but Louis couldn’t see any other options.

Harry slowly turned away, angling his head toward the back doors at the far end of the hallway, through which Louis could see the faint glow of sunlight showing through the partition.

“It wasn’t about you so much as it was just….” Harry trailed off, the cadence of his voice even slower than normal.

Usually, when Harry got upset, he got flustered, would talk faster and ramble. This wasn’t that. Louis could tell that he was choosing every word with the utmost care, trying not to say the wrong thing by mistake.

“I don’t know,” Harry continued. His face remained turned away, so Louis couldn’t see his expression. “I spent years being trained not to trust anyone or believe anyone, but I still believed in you. I trusted you. And then you left, and I kind of lost myself for a bit. It felt like I didn’t have anyone anymore.”

Louis suddenly remembered something his current therapist had told him about loneliness: it rewires the entire brain. Loneliness changes the way you see things. It makes you see threats where there aren’t any. It puts you on the defensive. It makes it harder to trust anyone again.

And Harry already had plenty of issues with trust. No thanks to Louis.

“I’m sorry,” Louis told him. Harry didn’t reply.

Louis tugged at Harry’s hand, pulling Harry into him. There were tear-tracks marking Harry’s face when Louis got him turned around again. Maybe it wasn’t the best time to go outside and stare at the carnage in the very spot where Harry had almost died.

“Maybe we should take a bit of a breather,” Louis suggested. He was surprised when Harry nodded in agreement and allowed Louis to lead him over to the sofa in the sitting room.
Louis toyed with his mobile after they’d sat down, knees touching, hands still linked. He toyed
with the corner protruding from his trousers-pocket, wondering if it was appropriate to bring up the
playlist now, given the circumstances.

“The whole block can probably hear you thinking,” Harry murmured. He moved a little closer to
Louis, pressing almost every centimetre of his body along Louis’s side.

“Sorry,” Louis said dumbly. He wasn’t sure what exactly he was apologising for. “I’m just, um.
Do you want to listen to another song with me?” The words came pouring out of him in a flood,
and by the time they’d all exited his lips, Harry looked stunned.

“From the playlist?” he asked. “My playlist? You haven’t finished?”

Louis shook his head. He couldn’t tell if Harry’s reaction meant that was a good thing or a bad one.
“No, I…I’m on seventy-seven,” he replied honestly.

Something in Harry’s face changed again, but Louis wasn’t any closer to interpreting the emotion
behind it. Finally, Harry nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

They were already as close as two people could possibly be without one of them ending up in the
other’s lap, but Louis still felt Harry worming against him as he extracted his phone and earphones
from his pocket. When their eyes met again, Harry stopped, his face the perfect picture of
innocence, but Louis knew he hadn’t been imagining things.

He decided to let it go and wordlessly handed Harry one of the earphones before inserting his own
and pressing play.

July 15, 2018

Los Angeles, California

Louis didn’t like being secreted from the arena to Harry’s house, leaving him unable to participate
in the festivities he knew were taking place after the end of Harry’s last show, but it was what it
was, he supposed. He rationalised the hiding as an unavoidable consequence of their controversial
relationship; he told himself that even if they were out, the rumours and gossip wouldn’t stop.

Maybe they’d only get worse.

By the time Harry finally got home well after midnight, Louis had managed to convince himself
that he was doing Harry a favour.

There was a bottle in Louis’s hand as he sat out on the rooftop patio, staring out over the valley
while dawn loomed low on the horizon, just a mere suggestion of sunlight still. He heard the
sliding door open, heard the soft patter of Harry’s socked feet against the deck, but he didn’t turn,
not until Harry was at his shoulder, bending down to pull Louis’s face up to meet his own.

“Hi,” Harry said in a breathy voice.

“Hi,” Louis replied back. He didn’t say anything else.

Harry stood there a moment longer, like he was waiting for something else to follow, before finally
taking a seat next to Louis on the outdoor sofa.

Louis allowed Harry to curl up under his arm, registering the scent of sweat and cologne and god knows what else all combined into a mixture that should have been disgusting but really just made Louis want to bury his face in Harry’s chest and never leave.

“I thought there’d be more celebrating,” Harry said a few seconds later in a tiny voice.

Louis took a little while to work up the nerve to reply. “Would’ve thought you’d had your fill of that after the show.”

“Maybe I was saving some of my energy for you.” Harry’s smile was just the right amount of flirty to get Louis in the mood, or it would’ve been, if…. “What’s wrong?” Harry asked, his face creasing into a frown once Louis didn’t react.

Louis let the question simmer before answering. There were a thousand possible ways this could end, and none of them good. But all Louis knew is that he couldn’t keep going. Couldn’t keep lying to himself, to Harry. Not anymore. “I’ve been having second thoughts.”

“About…?”

“Everything,” Louis replied unhelpfully. “All of it.” He could tell that Harry knew already where this was heading, and he wished that Harry wouldn’t make him say it, but he knew Harry and he knew himself and he knew there was no way to avoid the heartbeat. Harry would make Louis hurt him, and Louis would do it.

“We can…” Harry started to say, but the words faltered before they’d even left his mouth. “Louis,” he said quietly, and he was begging.

This hadn’t been an easy decision for Louis either, but it was the right one. Harry deserved someone better than him, someone he could be himself with. And Louis knew now that he couldn’t be that person.

“I’m so proud of you,” Louis said as he turned away from Harry to stare out at the city lights once again. “You’re so brave.”

“You are, too,” Harry replied.

Louis shook his head. “Not like you are.”

Louis had watched Harry go from mumbling the truth about himself to screaming them out to a crowd of thousands with a smile on his face, and he knew now that he couldn’t do that. That he could never be that. He wasn’t brave like Harry. He’d never been.

“I’m getting a hotel in the morning,” Louis told Harry. “After tonight, I think it’s best that we don’t see each other again.” He half-expected Harry to put up a fight, but there was only silence in the wake of his confession.

A clean break, he told himself. They needed a clean break. And then Harry could have the freedom he needed to be able to fly.

February 16, 2021
There was a heavy silence that followed the last few melancholy notes of the song. Louis was surprised when Harry was the first one to break it.

“I know you think you were doing me a favour,” he said softly, “but all you did was hurt me.”

“I thought you’d bounce back,” Louis explained. “You always bounced back.”

Harry stared at him for a long moment before replying in the same quiet tone. “Not always.”

Silence descended again, and Louis wasn’t sure if he was meant to respond. But then Harry’s mouth opened once more.

“You know, I built this whole life without you, because you were too scared to live in mine. And I got used to living like that, you know? Splitting all of me between my real life and this fantasy world I’d made for myself so that I could have some small part of you. And it was bad for me.”

“I know,” Louis told him. He shut his eyes. “I know, that’s why I was trying to—”

“You’re missing the point,” Harry interrupted. Louis opened his eyes to find Harry’s gaze, heavy and unfettered, still focussed wholly on him. It felt overwhelming, like being in the direct sight of God himself. “I wasn’t a child anymore. I hadn’t been a child since the minute we signed those fucking contracts. And you can’t—you can’t just take away my choices and tell me it’s for my own good and expect me to be okay. You just can’t.”

Louis nodded along slowly. He understood now, or at least he thought he did. It was harder to see the divide now between selflessness and selfishness. Maybe there’d never been a difference to start with.

“Does it make you feel any better,” Louis wondered, “when I apologise for what I did?”

Harry shook his head. “Not really,” he admitted.

His face drifted closer to Louis’s, and for a single second, Louis thought Harry might kiss him again. But then he pulled himself back, sharply, and the moment was gone.

Harry’s face twisted into something more strained. “Can I ask you for one more favour before we go out there?”

Louis nodded. “Yeah, of course. Anything.”

Harry swiped the tip of his tongue over his lips and swallowed heavily. “When you listen to the last track,” he said carefully, “will you make sure that no one else is around? That one—that one’s just for you.”

Louis’s curiosity was piqued by that statement; but there was fear, too. Despite that, Louis thought that in that moment, Harry could have asked for anything in the world, and Louis would have given it.

“All right,” he agreed. He gave Harry’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “You still want to go out there?”

Harry nodded and rose up from the sofa, his hand still linked with Louis’s. Neither of them had
relinquished their hold since Louis offered Harry his hand when they arrived.

The back garden was exactly how Louis remembered it: a mess of blood and broken glass against the patio. Harry didn’t seem shocked by the sight, but Louis could tell just from the way his breath suddenly quickened that the scene had unsettled him to some degree.

“You okay?” Louis checked.

Harry waited a few seconds before nodding in an uncertain rhythm. “Yeah, it’s just….” He stopped. “I don’t know what I expected,” he continued, letting out a breathy half-laugh.

“Better or worse?” Louis asked, curious and a little bit worried. He didn’t relish the prospect of having to explain to Anne and Gemma why he was responsible for Harry having another mental breakdown on his watch.

Harry shook his head and sniffled a bit. “Just different,” he replied without taking his eyes off the dried blood that covered the deck. “It’s like…I can remember it, in bits and pieces, I guess, but it’s like it didn’t really happen to me, I guess.”

“Can I ask what you do remember?” Louis pried, not even sure as he was speaking the words that he actually wanted to hear the answer.

“Yeah,” Harry replied quickly. “It’s, um…I can’t really remember the order, exactly,” he confessed. “It’s more, moments, I suppose. Like, I remember deciding to do it finally after almost chickening out a million times, and I remember googling the twenty-seven club and thinking it was funny for some reason, and I remember putting on music, just before—Flowers in the Wind, actually. It felt…poetic, I guess.”

There were tears pouring down Harry’s face again when he finally continued, but it wasn’t the scary kind of crying, it was the cathartic kind. So Louis let him cry.

“I remember thinking that it was a mistake,” Harry said in a childlike voice. “And I remember being scared, like more scared than I’d ever been of anything in my whole life, and I remember trying to call my mum, but I couldn’t make my fingers work right. And then there’s some blank spots…. I was on the phone with the 911-dispatcher, and I remember talking to her, but I don’t remember actually dialling. And I don’t remember falling or the glass breaking, I just remember watching the blood running into the water and thinking that at least I’d make a good headline. And I think that’s when I realised nothing hurt anymore and I couldn’t feel my hands or feet. And then after that it was just…nothing.”

Harry’s words petered out into an overarching silence that Louis couldn’t even fathom how to break. There was nothing in the world he could say that would make any of it better.

He pulled lightly at Harry’s hand, tugging him into a tight embrace. They stood there for god only knew how long. Louis didn’t want to ever let go of Harry again.
Chapter 78

February 16, 2021

Los Angeles, California

Harry was red-faced but dry-eyed when they made it back to the car. Louis still felt compelled to check on him anyway. “You sure you’re okay? You don’t need anything?”

Harry gave him an exasperated look. “Like what?”

Louis made a face. He didn’t have an answer for that. “Just checking,” he replied hastily before putting the car in drive.

Louis didn’t feel good about letting Harry walk himself up to the front door when they arrived back at his hospital-adjacent abode, and the look Harry gave him when they pulled up to the kerb seemed to indicate he felt similarly.

They didn’t hold hands this time going up the front walk, more because Louis was still scared of Gemma rather than being caught showing affection toward Harry in public. There was also the fact that Jaime would kill him if Louis did anything to jeopardise her no-doubt carefully crafted publicity scheme for his official coming out. Being papped with Harry in anything more than a strictly platonic manner would definitely qualify.

Harry turned to Louis when they reached the door, his hands coming up to stall Louis from turning the handle. “Would you…?” he started to say.

Louis didn’t need to hear the rest to know what Harry was asking. He shook his head with a gentle expression. “I have some stuff I still need to take care of,” Louis told him—and it wasn’t an excuse. Or at least, not a dishonest one. “Why don’t you and your mum and Gemma come over to ours later?” Louis suggested upon seeing Harry’s crestfallen look. “We can have dinner together.”

Harry’s face turned pinched with scepticism. And considering Louis’s history of culinary failings, he couldn’t really blame him.
“Sam is a really good cook,” Louis promised him. “And I swear not to go near any open flames.”

Harry nodded, his mouth softening into a half-smile. “All right,” he said amicably. “I’ll let them know. What time do you want us to come over?”

“Half-six?” Louis replied, spit-balling. He shoved his hands into his coat pockets suddenly worried he might try to grab for Harry’s hand anyway, or do something even worse—like reach up to kiss him right there on the front porch. “I can text Gemma when it’s ready.”

“Okay,” Harry said after taking an unsteady breath. He moved away from Louis, putting a hand on the doorknob. “I guess this is goodbye, then?”

“For now,” Louis told him. He could tell Harry was struggling with the awkwardness and the tension arising from neither of them feeling like they could safely touch the other. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Yeah.” Harry’s gaze lingered on him just a few seconds longer before he finally turned to let himself inside the condo, and then he was gone.

Louis spun around immediately and walked back down to the kerb to retrieve his car. As tempting as it was to just stand around like a lovelorn teenage girl on the stoop, Louis knew that there was a good chance Gemma was watching, and he didn’t much fancy making a fool of himself just so he could bask in the feeling of…whatever this was between himself and Harry.

Sam was nowhere to be seen when Louis walked into his own condo again after re-parking the car in the garage. He seized the opportunity to take a few moments for himself in the bathroom, washing his face and searching his expression for any lingering traces of the emotional turmoil he’d just experienced in Harry’s back garden. He wasn’t planning to hide what he’d been up to from Sam, but he didn’t feel like putting himself through a gruelling re-enactment of the gorier bits.

She was in her bedroom, he assumed. Louis knocked on the door and waited.

Sam answered within just a few seconds, not long enough to hide the evidence of her earlier activities from Louis’s curious gaze. “Packing already?” he asked, glancing over her shoulder at the open suitcases on the bed.

“Well, some of us don’t like to leave everything until the last possible minute,” she replied pointedly.

Louis shrugged. It was true, so he wasn’t about to argue with Sam’s assessment of his chronic procrastination. “Can I sit?” he asked, gesturing toward the bed.

Sam nodded, and Louis made a space for himself curled up near the headboard, out of the way of Sam’s luggage and scattered clothing.

“So how’d it go?” Sam asked as she leaned down to start folding her blouses into neat little squares while Louis sat back and watched.

“All right, I suppose,” Louis replied casually.

He relayed the events of the morning in careful bits and pieces, wanting to keep some things to himself, still—for himself, and for Harry. But it was still a lot of ground to cover, and by the end of it, Sam had all but finished packing and was perched on the edge of the bed, intently listening to Louis as he told her what had transpired back at Harry’s house.
“Oh,” he said at the end of it all, after belatedly remembering his promise to Harry. “Could you whip up dinner for the five of us tonight?”

The look Sam gave him in response heavily implied that she would have liked a bit more advance warning, but Louis shrugged. He wasn’t all that great at planning. Speaking of which—

“I still need to make a few calls,” Louis said, hopping up off the bed and heading over to the door before he’d even finished speaking. “You can take the card and the car if you need to go shopping for anything. Or you can order ingredients in; I don’t care.” What Louis did care about was making sure that Harry was treated properly to a nice homecooked meal tonight, even if that homecooked meal didn’t technically come from his own hands.

Sam crooked an eyebrow questioningly. “Any preference?” she asked.

Louis paused with his body halfway out the door. “You still make a proper beef wellington, yeah?”

He strongly suspected that if Sam hadn’t been his employee, she would have fully rolled her eyes at him in that very moment. As it was, she just nodded and gave a little sigh.

“Don’t think you’re getting out of helping with prep,” she warned him before turning back to her suitcases to pull them back onto the floor.

Louis would never dream of shirking his duties in the kitchen—the ones he could be trusted with at any rate. But first, he had other concerns to address.

He managed to escape a conversation with Lottie owing to the fact that he got her voicemail, but Briana was another story. She seemed genuinely unhappy to hear that he was leaving, but when Louis let slip that he was intending to return to LA after the conclusion of his tour, her mood seemed to perk up again. Liam was delighted to hear about Louis’s imminent departure for the UK, of course, and demanded to hear all the details just as soon as he landed. Louis assured him he would and then cut their conversation short, not wanting to reveal too much just yet.

With all that taken care of, Louis took a seat at his desk again and procured the journal. He only had tonight to finish it, and there was still a good dozen or so tracks to make it through, not including the one Harry had specifically asked him to listen to while he was alone.

Louis decided after a split second of deliberation to leave that one for last and started in on the others just as soon as he retrieved his pen from his bag.

It was easier, somehow, after his morning with Harry to write, and he finished far quicker than he expected. Louis thumbed over the next blank page in the journal, where he’d scribbled a messy ‘#78’ in the corner. The timing didn’t feel quite right.

Maybe that was just the procrastinator inside Louis speaking, but he found himself tucking the journal away after deciding to save the final track for later. And then once he was finished, he would give the journal to Harry as he’d planned. Tomorrow, then.

Louis quickly ushered himself out of the room so as to avoid giving himself an opportunity to second-guess his decision. Sam was in the kitchen when he emerged, an array of ingredients spread along each of the countertops, but she didn’t appear to have made much progress in the cooking department thus far.

“All right,” Louis announced. “I’m here to help. What can I do?”

Sam frowned as she looked him up and down. “Well, you can wash your hands for one,” she
replied primly. “And then you can get started on chopping some veg for the salad.” Upon seeing the face Louis made in response to that statement, Sam wrinkled her nose. “I’m sure Harry will appreciate seeing something green, Lou.”

Louis knew she was right about that, but ugh. Nevertheless, he did as she’d asked, washing up and then moving over to the island to begin cutting the array of different vegetables she’d picked out for their salad. The nice thing about America, particularly California, is that nothing ever seemed to be out of season. Summer salads all year long.

Helping Sam with dinner was time-consuming enough that Louis didn’t have the opportunity to be distracted by anxious thoughts about what might happen when Harry finally arrived. But when everything was more or less finished at nearly an hour to six, Louis found himself rapidly sinking into a pit of paranoia at the back of his brain. There were too many possibilities to even account for them all, but Louis couldn’t help himself from getting caught up in a whirlwind of ‘what if’s as he waited for the oven timer to go off.

Sam was long gone, off somewhere to retrieve a nice bottle of wine for the evening, which meant Louis couldn’t turn to her for reprieve either. He thought again about ducking back inside his bedroom and listening to the last track, but as soon as the idea sprang to his mind, it was like all his limbs had turned to lead, weighting him down against the sofa.

Louis ended up channel-surfing to pass the time with little success in keeping his mind busy. The oven timer went off before Sam returned, so Louis heaved himself up off the sofa and marched into the kitchen to take the main course out and replace it with pudding instead. He managed to singe his fingertips in the process and made a mental note not to mention that fact in front of Harry, ever the worrywart.

Sam walked through the door with a couple bottles of wine just as Louis pulled out his phone to text Gemma. They nodded to each other as she passed, and when Louis was finished his message, he headed back into the kitchen to help Sam with transferring all the necessities to the dining table.

There was a knock at the door fifteen minutes later, just as Sam and Louis were putting the finishing touches on the table settings. It wasn’t like they were arranging a formal affair, but Louis wanted to make their last meal together…nice.

Apparently, Harry and his family shared the same thinking. Harry’s hair had been done up in an elaborate braid—Gemma’s doing, Louis suspected—with just a few stray curls fighting to break free. He was dressed comfortably but with considerably more care than he’d demonstrated with the days of hoodies and sweats.

Harry fingered the hem of his rose-coloured silk kimono jacket almost shyly as he passed, and Louis couldn’t help but stare, taking in everything, from the black turtleneck and matching leggings underneath to the audacious copper boots that Louis first remembered Harry wearing nearly four years ago.

He looked pretty, Louis thought. He looked like himself. Finally.

None of them really said much as Louis led them to the table and pulled out chairs for each of them. Louis sat Anne at the head of the table with himself and Harry on either side of her, with Gemma and Sam flanking them at the ends. He couldn’t deny that he’d done it out of a selfish desire to be able to look up at Harry as much as he wanted while they ate, but now that he was sat down across from Harry, the green-eyed gaze that met his own was almost too much to bear.

The initial bout of awkwardness was tempered by Sam explaining the details of the meal to the
others, with only a few interjections from Louis to elaborate on how he’d ‘helped’, much to Sam’s exasperation and Gemma’s amusement. Harry cracked a smile just once, when Louis loudly bragged about the salad being entirely his creation, followed by Gemma joking that she was swearing off the vegetables entirely as a preventative health measure.

They’d all warmed to each other by the end of the main course, conversing casually between bites of their meal about Louis’s upcoming tour. He boldly promised the three of them that he’d save a few backstage passes in LA if they were all still around in a few months. Harry started at that, but he didn’t look displeased by the prospect.

Gemma was the first to finish, followed almost immediately by Louis. He stood up to show her into the kitchen after first offering to take her plate and being emphatically refused.

“I can wash up myself,” Gemma explained, but Louis could see another reason hiding just behind her playful smile.

He turned on the tap, letting the water disguise the sound of his voice as he leaned in to ask, “What’s wrong?”

Gemma shook her head and stuck her dirty plate under the faucet. “Nothing’s wrong,” she replied as she scrubbed slowly at the ceramic. “I just wanted to say thank you,” she continued, “for what you’re doing with Harry.”

“And what exactly am I doing with Harry?” Louis asked, trying not to sound as on-edge as he felt.

Gemma rolled her eyes and extended a hand to take Louis’s plate as well. “Unclench a bit,” she advised. “I can tell you’re trying to do right by him, is all.”

Louis wasn’t so sure Gemma would think that if she’d had any idea what had transpired between him and Harry in Harry’s bedroom when they’d kissed, but Louis wasn’t about to enlighten her.

“And I wanted to give you my blessing,” Gemma continued with a wry smile.

Louis couldn’t contain the laugh that burst out of him at hearing that, just slightly too loud. He covered his mouth and shook his head. “I’m not going to propose to your brother right before I jet off to another continent, Gemma.” He wondered after the words left his mouth whether she’d noticed that it wasn’t the intent he’d denied, just the timing of it.

Either way, the smile didn’t fade from Gemma’s face when she replied. “That’s what I mean, though,” she told him. “It would have been easy for you to love him and leave him.”

Louis glanced down at his feet. “Probably not as easy as you think,” he murmured softly.

This time, Gemma didn’t respond.

They were joined in the kitchen just a few short minutes later by the others, who had seen fit to collect everything from the table for the washing up. Harry, Sam, and Anne chattered amicably while stood next to the island as Gemma and Louis worked to rinse the dishes off in the sink before placing them in the dishwasher. It all felt gloriously domestic to Louis, who hadn’t had many chances to have a nice family dinner in the last couple years.

After finishing the dishes and taking the brownies out of the oven to cool, Louis and Gemma followed the others into the sitting room, where they all took up various positions along the sectional. Anne was the first to broach the subject of Louis’s tour again, surprising all of them, since she’d seemed the most reticent about it at the dinner table.
“Sam says you play the guitar as part of your set,” she opened with. “I didn’t realise you’d learned since the band.”

Louis shrugged, feeling his face heat up a little out of habit. It didn’t help that Harry was scrutinising him intently as he answered. “Niall taught me the basics a while back,” Louis told her. “Then I just kind of muddled my way through from there. I only play during the ballads; it’s not the whole show or anything like that.”

“Do you have your guitar with you?” Harry asked quietly.

Louis started to shake his head, but then Sam jumped up from the sofa, nodding eagerly. “I’ll go get it,” she volunteered as she raced out of the room, surprising even Louis himself. She definitely hadn’t brought it on the plane with her, but Louis had told her to order a couple things from home when she’d arrived due to the length of their stay. Apparently, she’d decided his guitar warranted the expense of overseas shipping.

It was nearly a full minute before Sam emerged from the second bedroom with Louis’s guitar clutched carefully in her hands. It wasn’t until Sam darted toward him with the instrument that Louis realised Harry hadn’t asked because he’d wanted to play something himself; the intent behind his question was for Louis to play instead. Or so Sam had assumed, at least.

“You didn’t tell me you had this,” Louis said to her a bit accusingly.

Sam’s mouth twisted into a bashful smile. “I had it shipped here when the tour equipment went back into storage,” she told him. “Figured you wouldn’t want your baby rotting in a storage facility somewhere.”

Sam was correct about that, though she could have just as easily had it shipped to Lottie or Jaime to take care of instead. But Louis wasn’t about to complain, even though now he was in the situation of having to actually play the damn thing, and not for an audience of thousands—no, for Harry, and that was so much worse, somehow.

“I don’t even know what to play,” Louis admitted after spending a few too many seconds tuning the damn thing.

“You could start with one of those ballads you were just going on about,” Gemma replied dryly. Harry and Sam both chuckled at the comment; both Louis and Anne gave her twin looks of disapproval.

Louis rolled his eyes and adjusted his fingers along the neck of the guitar, allowing muscle memory to guide him as he started in on a song he’d played hundreds of times. So why did Harry’s eyes on him suddenly cause him to fumble through the intro? Why did it suddenly feel like the first time Louis had ever held a guitar in his hands?

He fought through the nerves that had suddenly threatened to overwhelm him and carefully kept his eyes focused on the rug, not letting them drift up once toward Harry. Even though he desperately, desperately wanted to.

Louis made it through all four songs in that same way, and by the time he set his guitar down, he felt empty, like something had been taken from him, or given away.

Finally, Louis lifted his eyes. Gemma was looking at him almost pityingly, and he wondered if she’d understood more from his lyrics than she was meant to. Anne was teary-eyed, as was to be expected. Sam just looked proud. And Harry…Harry’s face was utterly blank. Expressionless. That
hurt more than Louis could have anticipated.

He shoved the guitar further away and stood up quickly, stretching his arms in an effort to keep himself from staring at Harry another second longer. Anne seemed to take that as their cue to leave.

“Thank you so much for dinner,” she said with a strained smile, hugging Sam first and then Louis. Gemma followed suit, and then it was Harry’s turn, and for a second Louis was worried Harry would refuse to touch him at all.

But Harry just hugged him with the appropriate amount of affection for two people who hadn’t been friendly in a very long time, and then the three of them were gone, just like that.

Louis sat down against the sofa, wondering if everything that had just happened had been a fever dream. Only the presence of the guitar still lying beside him on the cushions was a concrete reminder that all of it had been very real.

“Feeling all right?” Sam asked him.

Louis nodded. “Fine.” He wasn’t up to the task of explaining the depths of his anxiety right now. “Can we turn something on?” he asked her instead. He needed the distraction—and more than that, an excuse to not work on the last song, the one that would complete the journal he still needed to give to Harry. In person, no less.

Louis left that worry to simmer on the backburner in his head, forcing himself to get lost in whatever inane shite was playing on the telly. He managed a few hours of it before Sam finally begged off around midnight, claiming she was too tired to continue and would fall asleep right there on the sofa if she didn’t go to bed.

Louis didn’t really see the problem with that, but without Sam around, sitting on the sofa procrastinating by watching telly just felt pathetic. So after wishing her a goodnight, Louis headed to his own room as well.

He snatched up the journal from his desk and jumped into bed with it. Louis felt like he needed the security of being able to pull the blankets up to his chin for this one, so he got himself settled against the pillows before bringing out his phone.

Louis stared down at it for a long time, watching the minutes at the top corner of the screen tick by while he stared at the track title, ominously labelled: 78.m4a. There was no date. No clues whatsoever as to what Harry’s intentions had been when he’d recorded it.

Finally, with an unsteady inhale, Louis pressed play.

“I don’t even know if you’re still listening to this,” Harry said directly in Louis’s ears. It took everything in his power to keep listening, to stop himself from pausing it to catch his breath. “If you are, then thank you, I suppose. And I’m sorry about…everything. I’m gonna miss you. I already do.”

Harry went silent after that, and Louis waited on tenterhooks for whatever was coming next. There was nothing but silence, then a gentle rustling that Louis couldn’t quite identify, followed by the soft sound of breathing in a rhythm that was painfully familiar to Louis, who had listened to it countless times before falling asleep himself.

It wasn’t a song, Louis realised with a sickening jolt in the pit of his stomach. It was just Harry, the way Louis best remembered him.
Harry had recorded himself sleeping so that Louis wouldn’t ever have to sleep alone again.

February 17, 2021

Los Angeles, California

The last thing Louis expected to hear at well past four in the morning was a soft rhythmic tap, so quiet he might have almost mistaken it for rain except for the fact that the sound was coming through his bedroom door and not the window. By the time Louis figured out that the origin of the noise was someone knocking at his front door, he had a fairly good idea of who it was.

And he wasn’t disappointed when he opened it to find Harry on the other side, dressed in nothing but his pyjamas and a soft sweatshirt, the hood pulled up over his head.

“Not much of a disguise,” Louis remarked as he let Harry in, keeping his voice pitched low so as not to wake up Sam.

Harry quickly shed the hood and shook his hair out. He blinked up at Louis in defiance. “Well, if someone hadn’t left me stood out there all night,” he grumbled, but there wasn’t any heat behind the words.

“I was asleep, Harry.”

Louis’s excuse was met with nothing more than a haughty sniff as Harry pushed his way past Louis, toward the open door to the master bedroom. “This is where you’ve been sleeping, yeah?”

Harry double-checked as he approached the doorway.

Louis nodded, watching Harry slip inside quietly before tossing himself onto the unmade bed with a loud sigh. Louis followed him into the room and closed the door behind himself. His hand was moving toward the light switch when Harry turned around again and shook his head.

“No,” Harry said, a bit louder now that they were isolated from the rest of the condo’s interior. “Leave it off.”

“Harry, I can barely see,” Louis protested.

He stumbled over to the bed while Harry clattered about in the darkness without a response. Just as Louis finally made it to the edge of the bed, a soft blue light sprang into illumination from the lamp on the nightstand. Louis paused for a moment, watching as the glow radiating across Harry’s face shifted from blue to purple to pink in lingering intervals.

“I didn’t know it could do that,” Louis remarked. “How did you know it could do that?”

The rainbow-coloured lamp was bright enough that Louis could clearly make out Harry’s eye-roll as he turned to face Louis again. “Not having a phone is about as boring as you’d expect,” Harry told him. “Now are you coming to bed or not?”

Phrased like that, Louis wasn’t quite sure if he should, but he found his limbs moving of their own accord as he clambered onto the mattress to settle in next to Harry. He wasn’t even surprised when Harry started stripping down as soon as Louis climbed in beside him, but Louis didn’t follow suit, just watching instead as Harry’s body was slowly revealed under a shifting array of colours.
“You’re leaving tomorrow, right?” Harry asked as casually as possible considering he was currently in the process of pulling his shirt over his head.

“Tomorrow night,” Louis clarified. “But I’m visiting Freddie in the morning.”

Harry nodded and moved his hands to his hips to shove down his pyjama trousers. Louis let it go on another few seconds before finally reaching out a hand to still him.

“What?” Harry asked, looking confused by the light grip around his wrist.

“What are you doing?” Louis asked helplessly, raking his eyes up and down every centimetre of Harry’s exposed skin. “You can’t just….”

Harry ignored him. “Did you listen to the last track on the playlist yet?”

Louis nodded.

Harry did the same, as if affirming something to himself. He turned to face Louis head-on, his eyes fierce and glowing almost like a predator’s in the dim light emanating from the lamp.

“Louis, I haven’t been touched in what feels like forever,” he said firmly, as if he’d rehearsed it beforehand. Maybe he had. “I need this,” he continued without waiting for a response, “and I trust you, and I’m not stupid enough to think that doing this means you’re going to stay.”

“Would you want me to?” Louis asked him. “If I didn’t have tour,” he clarified, “would you want me to stay?”

Harry kept his eyes connected with Louis’s for a long moment before finally giving just a single, tiny nod.

Louis surged forward to connect their mouths, their faces clumsily mashing together in the dark before slotting right into place the way they were meant to. “Get the rest of this off,” he grunted into Harry’s throat as he tugged at the boxer-briefs he knew Harry didn’t even like wearing.

“You first,” Harry shot back.

Louis pulled away to do just that, and less than a minute later, both of them were completely bare and exposed to each other.

Louis was tempted to go straight for Harry’s cock, but he wanted to take his time with this; it would be the last time in months that he would have the chance to have Harry laid out before him like this, naked and pliant and trusting. Louis wanted to savour every second of it. The orgasms could come later.

Harry watched silently as Louis kissed up and down the outside of his torso, his legs from ankle to hips, each of his nipples in turn, and then down again to his groin. But he avoided Harry’s prick, which was steadily hardening under the attention, in favour of brushing careful hands over the scars crosshatching his inner thighs.

“You’re so pretty,” Louis told him, knowing that Harry preferred the word to ‘beautiful’, though in Louis’s opinion, both applied. “None of the memories really do it justice.”

“Even like this?” Harry asked, glancing down at the fading lines marking up his neck and torso and arms in addition to the older scars Louis had just given his attention to.
“Love you like this,” Louis replied honestly. “I love you.” He would’ve put money down on Harry’s face turning bright red, but it was impossible to tell under the rainbow casting light over his skin. “How do you want to do this?” Louis asked him as he sat up between Harry’s legs, palming his own cock in effort to make sure he was ready for the main event, whatever that might be. “I don’t have condoms or lube, really, so….”

Harry lifted himself up onto his elbows with a frown. “I brought lube, but I didn’t think…. Have you…?”

Louis shook his head. “Not in a long time,” he replied. He hadn’t even wanted to.

“Then—I want you to come inside me,” Harry insisted. “Want to feel you for days.”

Louis couldn’t help but let out a laugh at that. “I don’t think it works that way,” he tried to say, but Harry reached up to connect their mouths again before he could get all the words out, and it was easy to forget his train of thought after that.

“Fuck me,” Harry breathed into his mouth as their lips separated once more.

Louis nodded, and Harry pressed a tube of lubricant into Louis’s hands. His own fingers were steady. He showed no signs of nervousness at all as Louis helped him position a pillow under his arse before squeezing out a bit of slick onto his fingers.

Louis’s first touch was more exploratory than anything else. It had been a long time since he’d been intimate with anyone, much less Harry himself, and he wanted to make sure this was good for them both. He rubbed two fingers in slow circles over Harry’s hole, watching as Harry’s eyes drifted closed in utter relaxation before Louis finally pressed in, coaxing Harry with a steady pressure into letting him deeper inside.

“You feel good,” Louis told him.

Harry’s eyes flicked open again. He looked a bit dizzy as Louis fucked his fingers in and out, trying to get him used to the sensation again. “You haven’t even gotten your cock inside me, yet,” he argued, licking at his lips eagerly.

Louis ignored him and pressed a third finger in alongside the first two. It wasn’t something Harry needed, but Louis liked to draw the prep out as long as possible to build up the anticipation. He wanted Harry squirming on his fingers first before he had him squirming on his cock.

Louis leaned down to kiss Harry again as he finally pulled his fingers out. When he drew back, he poured more lube into the palm of his hand before slicking up his own cock. “Ready?” he asked.

Harry nearly rolled his eyes. “If you don’t get inside me right now I’m going to die,” he replied emphatically.

“You’re such a drama queen,” Louis grunted as he snubbed the head of his cock against Harry’s entrance. Even after three fingers, he had tightened up enough that there was still a bit of resistance on the first press inside, like Louis’s cock wasn’t meant to fit.

But if that were truly the case, then why did it feel like every piece of the universe was finally fitting together the second that Louis fully pushed inside Harry? Why did it feel like they were so close now that it was like Louis could feel Harry’s own heartbeat pulsing along in time with his right underneath his skin?

“I love you so much,” Louis whispered against the hollow of Harry’s throat as he finally began to
move.

They were both silent as Louis fucked slowly in and out of Harry’s body, not wanting to bring the moment to an end too soon. Harry was only half-hard, and there were tears in his eyes, but his legs were wrapped so tightly around Louis’s waist that he didn’t think he could have pulled away if he’d tried.

Louis was afraid to blink, afraid to breathe, anything that might disturb this never-ending moment of complete serenity that felt like it was over far too soon. And when Louis finally came inside Harry, he pressed his face into Harry’s hair, moulding their bodies into one.

He stayed inside Harry, gradually feeling himself soften as Harry rutted up into his stomach, coming with a quiet little cry a few minutes later. And then they both laid there in utter stillness after, neither willing to relinquish the perfect peace they’d created together.

Harry was the first to break the silence. “I have to wee,” he mumbled pathetically, forcing Louis to roll off him at long last.

They each did their business and then hopped in the shower together to scrub away the drying traces of come on their torsos and between Harry’s legs—much to the latter’s annoyance, but Louis wasn’t letting some romantic notion of Harry walking around with his arse leaking Louis’s come for days interfere with basic hygiene.

Once they were clean and dry and clothed again, they found themselves at an impasse. Louis wasn’t sure how to say goodbye to Harry, and the journal was still sitting on the corner of his desk, finished and ready to be passed on.

Harry saved him the trouble of having to come up with sufficient parting words. “Let’s go for a drive,” he said suddenly, grabbing Louis’s hand and yanking him out into the sitting room before Louis had a chance to even utter a single word in protest.

Louis jerked back, stopping Harry in his tracks. “Wait—I need to grab something real quick.”

Harry stared after Louis curiously as he slipped back inside the master bedroom, but he didn’t try to follow, and for that, Louis was grateful.

Louis slipped the journal into his jacket, tucking it securely into his waistband before emerging again to follow Harry into the garage where the car was waiting for them.

Louis followed Harry’s directions all the way to a bit of shoreline in Malibu, totally deserted at this pre-dawn hour. They parked and hopped out, Louis following in Harry’s footsteps as they trekked down to a secluded picnic bench overlooking the sea. The sun was behind them, but there was a faint glow in the sky that reflected off the waves as they watched, silent for several minutes before Louis finally found his voice again.

“Can I ask you something?” he rasped. He cleared his throat and tried again, still looking out at the waves instead of at Harry himself. “Can I ask why you wrote me those songs?”

“You just did,” Harry pointed out, before adding, “and I didn’t write them for you.” That stung, but Louis had just barely started to nod in acknowledgment before Harry continued, the words streaming out of him in a hurried rush. “I wrote them for me,” he said, “and then I decided to give them to you because I didn’t want to die knowing that all of it would go to waste. And I trusted you to turn them into something I could be proud of.”

So Liam and Sam had both been right, Louis thought. The lyrics were what Harry wanted. Louis
snuck a hand into his jacket and slowly pulled out the journal, offering it to Harry. “I want you to keep it while I’m off touring,” Louis told him. “So you know I’ll come back for it.” Louis looked up at Harry as he took the journal from his hands, and Louis was surprised by the melancholia in Harry’s eyes.

“Thank you,” Harry replied simply before cradling the book against his chest.

The wind picked up as they turned their eyes back to the sea while the sky overhead gradually brightened.

“It doesn’t feel like we’re getting back together,” Louis observed a few moments later.

It managed to get a chuckle out of Harry. “No, it doesn’t,” he replied, squinting out into the distance while the salty air whipped his curls into his face. “Life doesn’t work like a romcom, I suppose.”

“Yeah.” Louis wished it did though. He was sure Harry felt the same, but wanting the same things wasn’t always enough. “Do you think,” Louis wondered, “if I’d done things differently—”

“Does it matter?” Harry replied quickly.

Louis spared it another moment of thought. “No, I suppose not.”

“We’re here now,” Harry pointed out, “and things are better than they were before. And that’s what matters, right?”

Louis didn’t reply. His heart ached knowing that he was destined to leave Harry with their story still unfinished, but maybe that was for the best after all. They were both still broken in a lot of ways. Louis would have time again after tour to come to LA, to see Harry, to start over again.

Louis offered Harry his hand, clasping it tight when Harry extended his own in return. Louis gave it a reassuring squeeze, a silent promise. He opened his mouth to speak, but this time Harry beat him to it.

“So when everything quiets down for us and we get ourselves back on the right track…we’ll try this again?”

Louis didn’t think he was reading into the optimistic note in Harry’s voice, and he let a soft smile curl onto his face as he replied. “Yeah,” he said. “We’ll try again.”

Louis was at peace now with the idea that perhaps he’d never have Harry the same way he did before. Soulmates were for songs and stories, and they both had their whole lives left to live. But there was still hope, blossoming fast and bright within his chest. He couldn’t have asked for anything better than a second chance.

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