I Remember You Laughing

by Joydilouis86

Summary

When Anne's childhood friend passes away, she's inclined to read all her unopened emails. Those emails reveal startling news that prompts her to make a bold move, setting her on a path she thought she'd never cross again, and changing her family's life forever.

OR

Harry always knew he was different, but growing up in the countryside with an overprotective mother, he hid behind the shadows. Until he met Louis, a popular varsity captain from the city who is open and proud.

An unexpected turn of events brings them together and they spend the summer learning important lessons from each other, and falling in love.

Excerpt:-

Harry gave him a confused look, arms folded. “What do you mean? I’m not scared.”

Louis hated how Harry had to lie because he felt like he couldn’t trust Louis. He hated that
he had to hide himself from everyone. . . From Louis. He wanted Harry to feel comfortable around him. If Harry had to hide from the world, then Louis didn’t want to be part of that world. He’d make his own world with just him and Harry, and Harry would never have to feel ashamed of wearing panties in front of Louis again.

Notes

Disclaimer:-This is a work of fiction and does not represent the real life counterparts depicted in this fanfiction. I do not own any members of One Direction or their family members although Larry is real and therefore NOT a product of my imagination.

PLEASE DO NOT REPOST, PRINT, OR DISTRIBUTE THIS WORK OUTSIDE OF SHARING LINKS TO THIS AO3 PAGE. PLEASE DO NOT TRANSLATE THIS STORY. THANK YOU.

Hey guys! This is my first fanfiction ever so I'm really proud and I hope you like it. Teen love stories make me soft. Harry and Louis have me writing again after years of putting down the pen and the first idea I had for a story when I joined the fandom was to write a fetus 16 & 18 one.

It is being beta'd by my friend @shellyjerzygirl over on twitter who asks the right questions to get me thinking about where the story is going, and the lovely Aleksandra who helps me smooth out the chaos. You make the fic better and I'm so grateful for the help you guys give me.

So here it is... This is a story of patience, hope, tolerance, forgiveness and love. Any feedback will be very well appreciated. I'd love to hear from you!
Head Still On The Game

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Present Time- Harry's POV

Harry burst through the front door, dropped his backpack, and hopped up the stairs. He had eaten a chocolate bar in the bus on the way home so he wasn't interested in raiding the fridge just yet. He sprang into his room and threw himself on the bed with a deep sigh. It was two days ago, but he still couldn't get the image out of his head. The image of soft calves falling behind as knees crashed to the ground. He still wondered if any of the player's bones were broken. He shuddered at the thought.

School finished early today due to exams so he was looking forward to at least a few hours alone which was very rare since his mother never left the farmhouse to go anywhere except to get supplies or groceries, but it always took place while Harry was at school. During holidays, his older sister Gemma, was at home from college robbing him of the solitude of having the whole farm to himself whenever their mother had errands to run. With just two weeks away from the summer holidays, Gemma was due to arrive any day now since she called and said her college
exams were finished. Harry hated studying. He usually crammed on the bus ride to school during exam season. All he liked to do was write songs on his acoustic guitar.

He was glad he didn't have to deal with the tension between him and his mother, who had alerted him the night before of her plans to take the bus into the city miles away to an old friend's funeral. She had barely spoken to Harry since he broke curfew the night before last, coming home late from the game he had begged her to go.

His local school football team had a big game against a main rival team from the city. His school team was the guest, so the principal declared over the speaker, the day prior to the game, that there would be no classes on the day of the match and school buses would be available to escort students who wished to go on the three-hour ride to the city for the game against the home team; resulting in cheers throughout the entire school building. Everyone was going and Harry didn't want to be left out, as his best friend Niall was midfielder/Captain, and he insisted Harry be there. Niall even threw in a word to Harry's mother as well to let him go.

Harry didn't mean to get home so late. He was back in the bus as soon as the game was over, but there had been a massive traffic pile up in the heart of the city due to an accident blocking vehicles from exiting and held the bus up for nearly two hours. The passengers made the most of the delay by singing loudly and cheering because their team had won the game for the first time; with Niall in the lead, since he opted to leave the game with Harry's bus instead of going with the team's.

Niall was amazing like that. He always chose to sit with Harry at lunch instead of his other mates, aware that Harry would feel left out because he didn't have anything in common with the football crew. Harry had insisted that he go on his team's bus so he could celebrate with them but Niall shrugged it off and jumped in behind harry, explaining that they already had a victory party planned that evening back home. "Besides, I told your mum I wouldn't let you out of my sight!" he had reasoned.

Harry was grateful for his best friend, as his mom wasn't usually so easily persuaded. Niall had a way with words. He already had girls swooning over him; and spent most of the trip talking about how his crush will definitely go out with him now that he won a game.

When Harry had gotten home that night, he expected to be given a full lecture, yelled at, and grounded. He immediately started to explain that his phone went dead etc. etc. etc., but his mother just gave him a stern warning, almost breaking down and mysteriously retreated to her room. She barely came out since, leaving Harry to do more than his share of the farm work. He figured she was mad at him beyond words.

Harry snapped back up in the bed, suddenly remembering he had chores to do before he could relax and enjoy his time alone. He jogged back down the stairs and took the next hour running up and down the farm with his dog, Cliff, throwing feed for the chickens and ducks, and cleaning animal poo. He even helped out Cord, the hired stable hand.

Last, he went to check on the new born lambs. While feeding them baby bottles, he thought about Niall and how he actually did get his crush to go out with him twice already. He hadn't gotten a chance to properly hang out with him in school since the game because of his new girlfriend and exams. He was happy for Niall but he himself never really looked at girls that way. Not that he would ever tell Niall or anyone else. . .
His mind drifted off again to the game. . .The damaged player. He grabbed up all the empty baby bottles and headed back, feeling hungry now.

The sun was bright today, spreading its light over the meadows of the countryside, while the flowers danced in the gentle breeze. As Harry enjoyed the walk back up to the house, keen on whipping up some dinner and getting in some guitar practice, he spotted a familiar white Honda civic parked in the driveway, and let out a loud gasp.

Dropping the bottles, he made a mad dash for the house, sprinting up the back stairs to the kitchen. He stuck his head in the doorway; and sure enough, peering into the refrigerator while giggling into her cell phone, was a tall girl in a washed-out denim jacket and black skinnies, with long, straight hair, the same color as Harry's.

"Gemma!" he exclaimed, arms and eyes wide open.

She spun around, startled.

Harry ran over, scooping her up and spinning her around before setting her back down. "You're back!" he said excitedly, still squeezing her tight.

"Harry! Oh my goodness!" she marveled at how strong the petite boy was.

". . . Yeah, Harry just came in!" She laughed into the phone. "It's Mum on the phone," she mouthed silently to Harry. He let go of her, rolling his eyes, and started taking stuff to cook out of the refrigerator while she talked.

"Um. . . Harry did you feed the lambs?" She looked to him from the phone as she sat, propping her thread-bare knees on the dining table.

"Yes!" he groaned, stooping down. He spotted the partial glow of a blue shiny packaging in the far corner of the cold shelf -behind the marinating chicken breasts, jar of mayonnaise, and a giant head of lettuce, which all had to come out on the counter anyway- and pulled out a pack of chocolate cookies.

"He said yeah," the girl relayed to their mother, eyes zooming in on the chocolate disk now in her brother's hand.

Putting on his apron, Harry shook his head and nibbled on his cookie. Harry swore he answered about a hundred questions sent to him through Gemma's phone.

"Okay, see you later Mum!" She made a kissy noise before hanging up.

"She left everything for me do and locked herself in her room all week! She wouldn't have asked me any of those things if she were here!" Harry said, eyebrows creased.

With a knowing look, Gemma plucked the cookie from Harry's hand and ruffled his hair. "We can talk about it on the road. We're going pick up Mum!"

"What?" Harry was confused. "From the funeral?"

"She said the truck- broke- down?" Gemma said questioningly, biting the cookie.

"I know! The mechanic is coming next week to fix it. She said she was going on the bus!" Harry was totally confused.
"Well... She said she wanted us to meet some people, so put that stuff back and go wash up!"
Gemma said, shrugging.

Harry rolled his eyes again and got up to go shower. *So much for my free time*, he thought, shoving the lettuce back in the refrigerator.

He gave his older sister a frowning, *kill-me-now* face when she added, "Oh yeah, Harry? Mum said to bring your guitar!"

Chapter End Notes

So, what do you think? Any feedback will be very well appreciated on all chapters. I'd love to hear from ALL of you! I reply all comments! Feel free to ask questions and knock up a discussion. Feel free to follow my Louis Tomlinson and Larry Stylinson twitter stan account @joydiLana!
Don't forget to kindly press the kudos button if you like the story. Recommend this story to a friend if it's possible!
Anne And The Emails

Day Of The Game- Anne's POV

Anne sat by the phone impatiently waiting for it to ring. Just a few minutes earlier she had slammed it down.

"Why is his phone going to voicemail!? He was supposed to be back an hour ago!" She thought as she picked it up again and dialed.

"Yes, Mrs Horan. I'm extremely worried! Harry hasn't come back yet from the game! He's supposed to be back by now. Is Niall back yet?" she asked politely.

She chatted a bit with the person on the other side for a while before thanking them and hanging up again, relieved to hear that the boys were fine and just held up by a bit of traffic.

Anne's son had never been so far from home before and she was worried he maybe couldn't handle himself in the big city or picked up in a bad crowd. She knew there were also teachers on the trip, but kids nowadays...

Her daughter Gemma was the troublemaker. She used have Anne worried all the time, staying out late and running away with friends. But Harry was a good boy. He did his bit on the farm and spent most his evenings playing his acoustic guitar and writing songs. Anne thought her son was very talented. A normal teenage farm boy... A normal teenage farm boy who smelled way sweeter, and had more hair and skin products than even she or his sister had.

They lived on a farm so what did Anne want with nail polish? It would only get ruined everyday. She didn't understand how in the blazes Harry kept his fingernails so perfect all the time, with all the work he had to do. She didn't get Harry at all.

She reckoned she had spoiled him too much when he was younger, and when he approached his teens she realized how far it went. When Harry was thirteen they had a massive falling out and she started confiscating his things, taking away certain privileges, and banning him from wearing anything remotely girlish to school for fear of gossip and bullying. She often worried because their relationship became strained over time.

Before his sister went off to college, the stuff kept slowly creeping back in the house and she constantly fought with Harry, but now that it was just the two of them on the farm, she noticed Harry had become more reserved and picked up a 'punk rock' style, only preferring to wear black clothing with lots of weird accessories. She knew he still had every color nail polish stashed in his room but he only wore the darker ones as he says it's 'in' now and everyone wears it. She didn't like it at all, but she let it slide. At least it's not pink, She thought.

She was about to pick up the phone to try Harry again, when it rang out loud again!

"Hello? Yes... Oh!" She listened intently to the stranger on the phone, heart beating fast as she hoped it had nothing to do with Harry. Anne's body tensed and her throat clenched up as the person on the other end spoke. She had just gotten bad news. A dear friend she hadn't seen in years had passed.

On hanging up the phone her mind traveled back to her childhood. She saw them running through grassy hills and jumping over fences. She saw them riding their horses so far out of range, the grass turned a different color. She saw the many times they walked a good distance to the lake just to
Just as she was about to let the tears fall into her hands, Harry stormed in the front door and startled her out of her thoughts.

He started apologizing all over the place but she told him she already knew about the delay. She was not in the mood to argue but she let him know how mad she was that she had to hear it from Niall's mother and that his phone needed to stay charged at all times.

"What's the sense of you having a phone if you won't use it to call me when something comes up?" She stressed. This wasn't the first time Harry's battery 'died'. She wished they had a better relationship. Harry never wanted to talk to her.

She saw that Harry was genuinely sorry, and spoke softer, "Harry when you're out there I don't know what you're doing, or if you're even..." she dared not speak her fears. "That's why you have a phone! You keep contact!" She said, voice breaking as she realized she wasn't talking about Harry anymore. She was talking about herself and the fact that she never kept in touch with her best friend from childhood who had moved to the city years ago - yet someone still thought of her enough to call and inform her of the passing.

Wait-wait! She thought as she remembered something else. She remembered they had promised to keep in touch via email, and they did for a while, but-

She jumped out of her chair, mumbled to Harry about food in the kitchen and flew upstairs to her room. She dragged the chair in front of her desktop and sat down, hastily, putting on her spectacles. Opening drawers, rummaging through; she searched crazily through her journals to the pages she felt it would be.

"Where is it? Where is it?" she said, licking her finger and turning pages.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, finding the password for her old email account. She hadn't used it in years. The last time she remembered emailing her friend was before her husband died, when Gemma and Harry were very little. After that she went into a depression and closed herself off from everyone. It took her years to feel a bit of herself again...she was still struggling.

Anne quickly typed in the password and username - hoping for what? She wasn't sure why she logged in. A part of her wanted to know if she had anything in the inbox. She doubted herself as she waited for it to load, but as the page refreshed and the home page opened up, her jaw dropped in total astonishment.

Staring back at her from the screen were exactly 5204 unopened email notifications from that old friend's email address! From the looks of it, Anne's childhood friend had been emailing her almost everyday for the last fifteen years!

She cried her eyes out as she read the first message, a letter form email, unable to hold it back anymore. She read as many as she could that night before collapsing in bed, overwhelmed.

Waking up the next morning, she quickly got breakfast and read some more, letter by letter. It went on like that for the rest of the day. She knew it would take forever to read all of them but she had to. She desperately needed to feel close to her friend again.

As Anne read each letter she became more engrossed and intrigued by the contents. She laughed at some parts, and cried at others. It was like reading an autobiography. Every detail of events, journeys, feelings, and emotions, was described. She marveled at the fact that this person's entire
life story had been laid out in these letters addressed to her.

She opened another letter, and another . .

While reading them, her eyes suddenly widened in astonishment and she sat up straight in her chair. Her head started spinning. Anne had stumbled upon some surprising information and sparked into action. She quickly took a page of copy paper and pushed it into the printer.

I can't believe it! She thought. This can't be a coincidence!

There was a knock on the door.

"Mum! I made dinner if you're hungry! Roast chicken!" Harry called from outside.

She didn't even realize how late it was. Harry had come home from school, done his chores and had time to make dinner before she even lifted her head from the computer.

"Okay Harry! I'll be down in a minute!" She answered, taking out the hot printed page. She rest it on the desk and got up, finally leaving the room.

"Harry!" she yelled to his room. He was playing his guitar and she had to call twice before he answered. When he came out she briefly informed him of her plans for the next day and went down stairs to have dinner, the shocking emails she just read still on her mind.
Tiny Face Up On The Bleachers

Day Of The Game- Louis' POV

Bouncing into the kitchen and hungrily grabbing a slice of toast from a plate he was sure was one of his sisters', Louis walked over to his mother who was busy at the stove, and gave her a big hug and a kiss before sitting down.

"Morning mum!", he said, barely understandable through the toast. "I'm so ready for those twats today! They won't stand a chance against us. We're gonna win the title for the third time in a row! We worked really hard for it!", He said assuredly. "Harder than them for sure!"

"Well sweetheart, I'm glad you're so confident now! , because later when you're howling with aches and pains it'll be my problem to get you all better!", His mother teased, while adding eggs to his plate. "After I drop the babies of at Kim's, I have a long day of work today but I'll try to get off early. I want to be cheering you on later even if I only make it to second half!"

Eighteen year old Louis had a big soccer match that afternoon, that he was overly excited about winning for his school. As team captain, he was confident that he would lead his team to victory. It was a typical Tuesday. Everyone had work or school but he wanted to make sure his family made all arrangements to come see the game.

"Phoebe! Daisy! Take off that cartoon and come get breakfast! Now is not the time for that!", his mother called out to Louis' little sisters, who were twins.

The girls hurried in and sat next to Louis at the table, neatly dressed in their uniforms and ready for school. Next, his step dad Dan walked in, carrying the other set of twins, Ernie and Dorie, who were only two years old, and placed them in their high chairs. Dan explained to Louis that he would pick up the girls from school early and take them to his game, much to the girls delight.

Phoebe and Daisy, who were ten years younger than Louis, looked up to their older brother, and were excited about seeing him play. He had two other sisters, Fizzy and Lottie, who were two and three years younger than him. But they lived with Louis' father, in Australia. With summer holidays coming up, Louis and the girls were looking forward to making the trip to visit them.

Breakfast was always a lively scene at the Tomlinsons', full of laughter and well wishes for the day. Louis was eager to let the girls know, for the billionth time that this was his last game before going off to college and they dare not be late. He expressed how much he was going to miss being captain of his footie team and was keen on winning one last time.

"You're always a winner, my little Lou bear!", Louis Mother proudly reminded, causing the girls to smirk and fake gag to each other.

Louis' mother, Johannah, was caring and nurturing. She was the kind of mother who would never get mad if you brought a stray cat home, or yell at you for ruining that expensive sweater. She spoke softly and always gave advice from a place of understanding and empathy; she would have to be, Louis thought, since she's a psychiatrist. She could always tell when things were bothering him and Louis was grateful she put up with his anger issues when he was younger. Louis had a temper his mother reckoned he got from his dad. And after he and Louis' sisters moved away, it got worse. When he had gotten into too many fights on the field during games, she looked for the root of the problem and encouraged Louis to talk it out.
Louis knew that one of the reasons he used to be angry was because he was gay and didn't know how to deal with it at the time. He knew his anger was his way of letting off steam and maybe sometimes trying to make himself look macho, and to defend himself from being called names. But he didn't know all this at first. His mother helped him realize it, and he knew he would still be in that dark place had it not been for her. Louis knew he liked boys since he was thirteen and kept it to himself for three years until his mother sat him down, tears in her eyes, and let him know that she figured out what the problem was and that she knew he was suffering. She made it clear that even though he wanted to hide it from the world, she wasn't going to let him hide it anymore from the family that loved him dearly.

Louis remembered how light he felt after he had broken down in his mother's arms. He remembered the pat on the back he got from Dan, and hugs from the girls when he told them. He remembered the tension in his dad's voice slowly easing with every phone call they shared since he told him he was gay, (because of Fizzy and Lottie's help on that side). He remembered the confidence he gained from his family's support, prompting him to be brave enough to tell both his best friend Stan (who was also supportive), and his footie teammates, who, some of which; not so much. But even though not everyone was all for it, he still felt a huge relief not being as angry all the time, and was able to be himself with no apologies. Louis knew he had his mother to thank for that.

After everyone had a hearty breakfast, they all kissed their mother goodbye and scampered out the door. Louis and the twins were driven to school by Dan and Louis was the last to be dropped off.

"We'll be at the game promptly 2:00 pm, okay Lou?", Dan yelled as Louis hopped out of the van.

"Sure Dan! Don't be late!", Louis answered excitedly before disappearing among the other students hurrying to get to class.

"Of course! Those little 'Louis minions' aren't gonna miss it for anything!", Dan shouted at the already disappeared Louis, before driving off to work.

The game was about to begin. A large crowd gathered in the stands, shouting and shuffling, trying to find seats to take in the game. Smells of popcorn and hot dogs whiffed through the stadium as the vendors passed between lanes of loud spectators eager to get a bite before the match. The cheer leaders from both teams were warming up and practising their numbers for when they would be needed to encourage their respective teams.

Louis walked out to the field with his teammates and they gathered together, waiting for the coach. Looking up at the crowd, he could see his little sisters up on the bleachers gobbling down popcorn that Dan just bought them. He was happy that they were able to make it in time for the game. I mean sure, if he was up there he would've eaten half out of both their popconrs on purpose to piss them off, but he loved them so much and felt proud to have them witness his football victories. He just wants them to be proud of their big brother and what better way than to win this game. All Louis can think about is winning this game.

He scanned the crowd for Stan and saw him hanging with a group of kids, including Calvin and Zayn, Louis' other friends who were hooting loudly at him. He eyed the opposing team, wanting to get a good look at the competition, and saw one of the players separate from the others and was
running toward the stands.

He kept his eyes on the blond haired player (a teammate told him was their opponents' captain), as he chatted with someone on the bleachers. - WHO'S THAT? Louis' attention had shifted to the person the player was chatting with. He tilted his head, trying to get a better look. The bleachers were far, but even at a good distance he could still see the delicate features of a boy no more than sixteen, in a huge green jacket, with messy brown hair. His brain started spinning and Louis got momentarily lost in those features.

"Hey!! Captain- Head in the game!"

Louis snapped out of his trance and realized his team was huddled together being lectured by the coach who was already glaring at him. He scurried over to them to discuss strategy for the game but his gaze kept shifting back to the visitors side of the bleachers, at the boy- who was staring back at him!

At the end of the first half, the referee blows the whistle for time-out. Panting, Louis made his way over to the others who were gathered again. They were doing badly and Louis was starting to get angry with himself because during the match his focus was repeatedly stolen by the stranger in the stands.

"Okay guys! This team plays rough! We have to try a different tactic!", Louis tried to listen to the coach but he was suddenly super aware of the crowd of spectators that were shouting and clapping at both teams.He looked up again- Oh my God! He's looking at me!

"Louis! What's the matter with you!?", the coach barked at him, "It's your last game, you need to make it count!"

Still out of breath, Louis passed around bottles of water to the team and opened one for himself. Dashing it on his face and over his head, he tried to block out the crowded stadium.

What the fuck is wrong with me?, He asked himself, frustrated. He was usually able to mentally block out the noise during games but the whole stadium was a major distraction today because of one person. He put his hands behind his head and started calculating how to fix this problem, Why can't I concentrate? Okay I can do this. He looked back at the stands- The boy's eyes were wider now, still staring at him- "Shit!", he muttered to himself. You're in the middle of a game! Come on Louis!

'Pheewwwwwp!!'

The whistle to resume the game went off and Louis' head shifted back into the game. Things went on well for most of the second half. After a lot of back and forth, he had the ball now with a few minutes left. But just as he was about to kick the ball over to a teammate, his eyes flashed back to the bleachers. Then suddenly Louis felt something slam into his back and side. Two players had come out of nowhere and tackled him, knocking him down without warning.Louis felt his knee graze the cold ground that wasn't as forgiving as it's green lustrous looks seemed.

"Aaaaaahh!", he groaned, pain throbbing, but he couldn't here it. The crowd roared louder than ever and Louis heard what sounded like a bunch of bears growling loudly behind him. He spun around, and it dawned on him that his team had lost the game.

He looked down and saw that his knee had busted open and blood was gushing out. Then he felt a hand on his back. He looked up and saw the blonde haired opposing midfielder looking down at his knee concerned. He was the first to notice Louis was bleeding, and alerted the referee, and
Louis teammates who were all still in shock of losing. Over to his left, Louis saw the players who tackled him arguing with the referee, "He just dozed off! Not my fault he wasn't concentrating!"

Louis, in shock himself, felt multiple hands coming to his aid now; heard voices asking if he was alright and telling him not to move. Total confusion laced the atmosphere around him. But somehow all of it, including the pain, took a backseat as he once again turned his head to the stands. His eyes, blurry from blood loss suddenly found clarity when it came to rest on one tiny face. A face, now full of shock and concern for the damaged player on the field, was the only thing keeping him from feeling the pain right now. Louis didn't know when the medic came, or when he was carefully lifted onto a stretcher and carried out- his eyes were fully focused on the tiny face up on the bleachers.
Like A Bunch Of Red Roses

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~Harry and Gemma POV~

Harry jumped shot gun into Gemma's car, threw his jacket in the back seat and buckled up while she rolled up the windows and put on the the air conditioning.

"Gemma! What are you doing?" he scuffed as the cold air hit his arms and face.

"Harry its really hot today!" she answered.

"No, it's not! We've had hotter! Besides, don't you miss the country air?" Harry wasn't used to the chill. His mother's old pickup truck had no air conditioning and he had only gotten a few rides in Gemma's new car when she came home for Easter holidays that year.

"Harry come on, we have a long way to go to!" she reasoned, "We'll get there about six-ish according to traffic. You can have the windows down on our way back!"

It sounded like a good deal to Harry. He figured he liked the windows down at night better so he reached in the back for his jacket. Gemma smiled smugly as she started the engine and pulled out of the yard. She knew the only way to win with Harry was to twist it around to make him think he won. Being four years older than Harry, she was always annoyed by him when they were little so she developed the habit of reverse psychology to get him off her back in arguments. Harry always caved and the two got along fine. He used to follow Gemma everywhere when he was little.

"Oh! Harry! I bought you guys something!" She said excitedly, pointing backwards to two medium sized gift bags on the seat next to Harry's jacket. "The pink one is yours!"

Harry took the bag curiously, removed the wrapping and looked inside. He raised an eyebrow at his sister, who was smirking loudly now, her eyes on the road.

"Come on! Take it out of the bag!" she laughed, glancing at him.

A smile now reaching his face, he took out a bottle of moisturizer and squeezed out some, rubbing it on his arms. It was one of those fancy sweet smelling ones. He 'oohed' at it, rest it on his lap and reached in again-

-Lipstick!

"Gemma !?" he said opening it to see the color. It was a pretty pink-to-red shade that Harry could see himself wearing, if only he could wear it.

"What?" she grinned, "Keep going!"

He sighed and went in again. A perfume, I can deal with that, he thought, spraying some on. It smelled amazing, like a bunch of red roses.

Then at the bottom of the bag he removed another layer of wrap and saw what looked like - "Panties !? Gemma, No! " He emptied the bag, and out fell a heap of panties with different
patterns, styles and colors. He picked up a pink cotton one he liked. Then his face fell and he sighed,

"Gemma, you know I can't wear these. It'll kill mum." He said sadly, smoothing his hands over the fabric.

"Harry your getting older. When are you gonna do what you want? You can't wait for mum to be okay with it! She has to deal sooner or later." she reasoned, eyes flashing from Harry to the road. "I got you all the styles I can find so you'll try them out and see what you like."

Harry shook his head. "Gemma, No! You know how mum is. . ." He shoved everything back in the bag and put it in the backseat, frowning.

"Harry," she tried as they hit the highway. But Harry just turned his head out the window. "I'm just done with it all. . ."

Gemma understood all too well why Harry was upset. When she was little and their father died she was first hand witness to their mother's depression. Harry was a baby and by the time he started to walk, their mother had gotten a bit better but it was a gradual process and through the years even though their mother tried her best, her relapses took a toll on all of them.

"Harry come on, I'm gonna be here all summer. We can hide the stuff in my room if you want." she tried.

"No way! You'll use my stuff! And I'm not going in your room!" he retorted.

"You didn't mind before when you were using mine!" she smiled. Then it disappeared when she saw the look on Harry's face.

"I'm not doing anything that could trigger her again. . ." he said, frowning, "I told you she stayed in her room all day yesterday. I know she didn't come out because when I got home Cliff was super thirsty! Gemma, She didn't wanna look at me since I got home late from the game the night before. . ."

"Oh my God, How late were you!?!" she pressed, concerned. She hoped their mother wasn't having another relapse.

She remembered how their mother used to fight with Harry because he was gay and was afraid of what people would say. Gemma had to constantly part fights between them. She often felt guilty because most of those fights were her fault. See, Gemma had her own reservations with her mother, she'd yell at Gemma because she thought she looked too much like her dad and she couldn't get over it. So when Gemma was in her teens she started rebelling, part of which was encouraging Harry to embrace himself more, slipping him lipstick and hair clips and anything she thought would piss her mom off more.

She and Harry had a lot of fun when she painted his nails and helped him pick out the right moisturizer for his skin type. But the more she did it was the more their mother got mad at Harry, and Harry blamed himself for her relapses so Gemma stopped for her brother's sake and focused on getting grades to go to college and get away from her mum.

Harry gave his sister the whole run down telling her how he got home two hours late. She listened, shaking her head. "Gosh, she must've totally freaked out. I hope she's okay. her friend just died so. . ."

"Mum doesn't have any friends!" Harry retorted. "Maybe she finally tripped off and she's sending
us on a crazy goose chase! I'm telling you she's not alright! I'm glad you came when you did!"

"Well, when I got in and saw your bag I figured you were both out back so I decided to prank call mum to make her think I was still at school and that's when she told me she was at a church and a funeral was about to start and we should come pick her up."

She quickly looked Harry up and down, "And she said -'not to wear those damn rings'" she mocked in her mother's tone. Harry raised an eyebrow and shook his head, looking out the window.

"She's not okay with my rings and you think I can wear panties. . ."He said sarcastically.

"Harry I'm trying to be positive here! She sounded okay on the phone though!" She quickly changed the subject, "So what about you? How was the game?"

Harry blushed. his mind traced back to the player who got injured. Gemma gave him a confused look when she saw his flushed face and pressed on,

"Come on! What is that? Tell me!"

"Well. . ." Harry began, still blushing. There was this cute guy playing against Niall and he was pretty hot. He kept staring at me. And one time during the game he threw water all over himself- I swear he did it on purpose!"

Gemma laughed out loud and just like that they were both cackling away like they were being tickled. Then he said the guy got hurt.

"Oh my God!" she answered as they stopped at a traffic light. Gemma was the only one who knew Harry was gay, besides his mom, since she caught him stealing her makeup when they were younger and started buying him his own to keep him out of hers. Harry dared not tell another soul, not even his best friend Niall. Harry always confided in her and when she finished high school and was going away to college, he felt alone and eventually gave up thinking about it- "It's not like I can ever date someone. . .", he thought.

They drove for most of the way chatting and catching up. Gemma told Harry about the guy she had been seeing, saying he was coming to visit her on the farm in a few weeks.

"Wow- Meeting mum? Getting pretty serious, is it?" He teased. Just as she was about to smack him in the head, her phone rang.

"It's mum." She put it on loudspeaker, "Hey mum!"

"The funeral is over. I'm headed to the house now. How far are you?" they heard their mother's voice through the phone.

"Uh. . .We're on the Highway! We'll be there in about an hour! Just text Harry the address!"

Bzzzzz! Bzzzzzz!

Harry took out his phone and read the text.

"Well look at that! A real address. . ."
"Yes of course! Great, sweetie! Take your time on the road!" Anne hung up as she stood on pavement outside the cemetery. She texted the address and put her phone in her purse. She quickly took out a tissue and her powder mirror to see if her mascara was running. She hardly ever wore mascara. She snuck into Harry's room after he left for school that morning and 'borrowed' it. Harry never wears it anyway, she thought, at least not in public or when I'm around. Then she started fixing her powder hoping no one noticed her.

"Anne? My dear! We haven't heard from you in years!"

Clapping shut the compact powder, startled, Anne turned around to face an old woman with a broad hat on her head and tears down her face. She had a look of wisdom about her that stemmed from years of experience. Anne had only met the woman a couple of times in the distant past but she felt like she knew her well through reading the emails. She quickly reached forward and hugged her. As the woman embraced her she thought, You were right, my friend, she does smell like roses. . .

"My dear, we're going back to the house. Do you need a ride?"

"Well actually yes, I was headed there indeed! I do need to speak to you all about something. . ."

****

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys are enjoying this chapter! It was so much fun to write!
Day Of The Game - Louis' POV

On his way to the hospital, the only person who went in the ambulance with Louis was Stan. He stayed with Louis while he got stitches and waited with him for either his mum or Dan or both to arrive at the hospital. Stan lived a couple of houses down the block from Louis and went everywhere with him. Out of all his friends, Louis knew Stan the longest. When his parents split and he had a hard time saying goodbye to Fizzie and Lottie, Stan was there for him like a brother and filled that gap somewhat making it easier. They'd roller skate and whatever else best friends did, except for football. Stan was no good at footie but he was always there to cheer Louis on and support him in all his matches. And it's not like Louis didn't try to teach him, he just didn't have the knack for playing.

Stan had a gentler soul as opposed to Louis’ busy one and he preferred the craft of making soaps and scented candles rather than kicking his way through a field. At the moment Louis didn't blame him. Look at what he's missing out on, He thought sarcastically, looking down at his newly stitched leg.

Mom was right, Louis thought, I'm never playing again now for sure.

What's taking them so long anyway!

"I called your mom and no answer- and Dan must've seen what happened. I mean he must've thought to drop the girls off at his sister's before coming here." Stan piped, reassurance in his tone.

"Mum probably couldn't get off work. She couldn't have been at the game or I would've seen her! Call again!"

It's been almost two hours since they arrived at the hospital and Louis really needed to get out of his sweaty, dirt and blood covered uniform.

"But I did -" Stan started but got cut off by Louis.

"-Let me try!" Louis grabbed the phone impatiently from his friend's grip and dialed his mom.

No answer.

"What happened out there, anyway?" Stan asked, concerned. "You said you were ready for the
game! You were off your game."

bzzzz bzzzzz!

Stan's cell vibrated.

"-Yep! Yeah where are you? Yeah he's okay. . .Okay I'm coming to meet you!"

Louis looked at Stan curiously.

"It's Calvin. He's here, he got lost. I'll go get him," Stan answered quickly before disappearing.

As he waited for his friends Louis' mind flashed back to the bleacher boy, thinking he must've been halfway back to Champton Valley by now.

Running his hand through his hair and looking away, he saw the face in his head. He wanted to see that face again up close.

He came out of his thoughts as the short chubby boy strolled back in with a taller, slimmer boy with strawberry blond hair.

Calvin sat next to Louis and explained that he would've come sooner if had not been for a long line of traffic. "There's this massive wreck! Like, three cars wrapped up like paper!"

"Well they must've let the ambulance through because we didn't have a problem getting here. . ." Stan said decisively.

"Wow! Louis it was that bad!??" Calvin exclaimed, looking at Louis' knee. "Those guys wiped the floor with you! And at the last minute!"

"I was . . ." Louis blew hard, frustrated at himself for getting so distracted. "There was this guy on the visitor side of the bleachers. . .I don't know- I just. . .got caught up."


Calvin snorted.

"I know." he said, shaking his head, "But I don't know, I thought he was cute. . .I saw him and I just- froze. It's like he sucked my concentration out with a vacuum," Louis was pissed he got hurt. He would've gone over after the game and said 'Hi'.

“Well I think it's about you met someone!” Calvin said matter-of-factly.

Stan was aggravated. "Yeah! Sure! You let the Champton Valley team-a team that hadn't won for years- get away with your last medal!"

"I know, don't remind me. Mum's gonna be mad though, that this happened to me on my last game. Will you try them again, Stan?" Louis really needed to get out of that Hospital.

Dial tone. . .

"Nope! No answer." "Well I guess I'll have to wait here- or maybe your dad could pick us up Stan."

Just as the boys were figuring out a plan to leave, the hospital curtain flew open and Dan came
diving in. With tears covering his face like a tap that was left dripping steadily, he charged over to Louis side and threw his arms around him tightly, so tightly that Louis couldn't help but suddenly get the worst feeling that something wasn't right.

Louis pried away from the sobbing man.

"Dan you're shaking! What's wrong?" he asked concerned through Dan's cotton shirt, which was covering his mouth.

"I'm okay. It's just a few stitches. I'll be fine." Louis told him assuming the reason for Dan's hysterical tears.

Funny, Louis thought, it's not the first time one of us got stitches. Come to think of it, Dan didn't cry when Daisy fell of the backyard fence that time and nearly split her head open, and that was more something to cry about. Hell! I cried that time! He's usually the one who keeps a straight face for everyone. Mum's the crier.

"Where is mum by the way?"

"Louis. . ."- Boy! Dan really is taking this badly. My fall must've looked awful from his view up in the stands.

. . up in the stands. . . his mind drifted once again to that face.

"Louis," Dan said again, enough stern in his voice to bring Louis' attention back in the room.

"Your mum."- He stopped for second to swallow hard- "Your mum had an accident Louis! She- she's. . .ah. . ." Dan couldn't continue.

"Oh no! What happened!?" asked Stan, pure concern in his tone.

"She's what!? What are you trying to say!? Speak up!" Louis snapped at Dan frustrated at his lack of words, "Dan!"

A sharp invisible knife dug into Louis' chest as Dan looked down crying and shaking his head. The knife was causing such indescribable pain that Louis started crying out loud in consistent wails through the room.

Calvin stood helpless covering his mouth in shock and Stan grabbed on to Louis as he fell apart.

**********

**Present Day onward- Louis' POV**

"Louis! Come out, please . . ." Phoebe called.

"Yeah Lou! Come on! All your friends are downstairs!" Daisy added.

"Yeah! And you have people here to see you."

The twins pounded on the door beckoning for Louis to open it and come down stairs with them. Sitting on an armchair in his room dressed in a suit he cared not to be in, he heard them. He heard
them calling wearily, tiredly. He heard the difference in their voices. Before when they called him it was to help on their math homework or to take them to the park or maybe just to storm in his room and jump up and down on his bed with dirty feet from playing barefoot outside, eager little bunnies who couldn't hold back excitement at him opening that door. They were voices of happy.

But this time was drastically different. This time he could hear the fear, the hurt.

Louis knew the twins like a book. He knew what each exchange of looks between the two meant. What their tone of voice really meant when they were saying one thing and thinking another. It's funny, the way he read them, one would think he's triplets with them. He knew the silent conversations they had when they were not even speaking to each other, just like he knows what they are saying now when they call him from his room. The simple silent agreement that they wanted to be there for him just like he was there for them, especially today.

Feeling sick, Louis sat there wondering how his sisters can even look at him now let alone support him.

The last forty-four hours since Dan barged in the hospital room passed so slowly the hours felt doubled, tripled even. Everything, dismal. Strangers speaking so softly that you almost can't hear them. Louis wished he couldn't. Wished he couldn't hear them lie and say how sorry they were—deeply sorry, and offer condolences.

What is condolence anyway? Is that the thing they pull out of the dusty attic in their heads and bring you when they don't have any real sympathy to give? Well they can take it and shove it. After all, everyone knows who's fault it really is. . . Louis thought, heart sinking in his chest.

This is why Louis didn't want to come out of his room yet. He was afraid his thoughts would meet his lips and things would come out bitter, and he couldn't do that to his mum. Not when she'd tried so hard to help him get rid of his anger. Not when she needed him to be strong. But he felt like he'd never be strong again. She made him strong.

He looked out the window. It was a bright sunny day, but not in his mind. He lectured to himself that he needed to hold himself together today, or at least try to, just like he had been trying since Dan told him his mum died.

When the two nights of wake got too long for the twins he carried their sleepy heads up the stairs to their rooms and tucked them in while Dan saw to the guests downstairs. He would then go to his room and let it all out in his pillow, sob after sob, quickly dry his eyes and drag himself back downstairs to help Dan with whatever he needed.

He and Dan had a teamwork. Dan stressed that he didn't want the girls or Louis to worry about anything to do after his mom's death especially because of Louis' football injury, but Louis refused to let Dan treat him like a child. He refused to let Dan do everything alone. Dan's basically been there for Louis and the younger kids through the years and Louis didn't want to sit back and do nothing; so he drove the van to pick up Dan's mum who had flown in from Wales; he drove Dan's sister, Kim, who insisted on helping with the kids, to the grocery store; he drove to the flower shop to make orders for the funeral, accompanied by Stan who might as well been joined at Louis' hip as he followed him around at lot for support; he even took the girls to the boutique to buy little black dresses to say goodbye in.

But don't ask him to look people in their sad, sorry' eyes. Don't ask him to stand there and wait for anyone's condolences. He just kept a straight face on the outside and kept himself busy, but inside he was an angry mess.
He knew all his friends were downstairs now waiting to support him in case he broke down before the funeral. They had been there the whole time watching him like a time bomb but Louis knew he had to hide and cry. No way he was going to share his tears with anyone. But he knew it wouldn't last since everyone cries at funerals.

"Okay Louis, this is crazy, you have to get up and go downstairs!" he said firmly out loud as he got up abruptly and walked toward the door to open it. Taking a deep breath he turned the knob and the door swung open to reveal not four but eight big blue eyes full of sorrow and dependency looking up at him.

"Fizzie! Lottie!" He reached out and grabbed Lottie, cradling her in his arms. She nuzzled into his neck. "You guys!" He let go and took Fizzie in his arms the same way, the twins smiling faintly behind.

"How was your flight? I'm glad grandma had you stay with her! She's not doing so well in all this." Louis said, hearing a tiny crack in his own voice.

Louis and the girls called their mother's aunt 'Grandma' because she took care of Johannah when she came to live with her in Doncaster city as a teen. As a child, Louis loved to cuddle next to her on the couch when she came to visit. He thought she always smelled like the freshest rose bushes. She lived alone so it made sense for Fizzie and Lottie to go straight there with their dad when they arrived in Doncaster three hours earlier.

Louis felt a bit of warm familiarity mixed with anger now that his other two sisters and his dad were here. He couldn't help but think his family would be complete now if only this tragedy had not happened but if it didn't they would still be in Australia away from everyone, away from mom.

"Jet lag Louis. I wish we were here earlier. Grandma's downstairs as well. . ." Fizzie answered softly, her voice fading at the last word.

"Yeah, they want like a procession to the church from here." Lottie said so soft Louis almost didn't hear it.

The conversation had an awkward pause. They all stood there, eyes drooping, not knowing what else to say to each other. Each of them afraid that if they started talking again it would open up a river dam of tears and balling. Louis was grateful for the awkward silence and he was sure the girls were too. Daisy held on to Lottie's arm like she never wanted to let go and Phoebe leaned on Fizzy somberly. Louis felt like he needed to protect them now. Now that. . .

"Well, let's go down stairs. Haven't seen dad in ages. . ."
A Little Help From Friends

Chapter Summary

Louis' friends give support. Background on Louis' friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The drive back home from the cemetery was quiet, except for sobs coming from the girls who were all huddled up together in the back seat. Fizzie stroked the twins hair and Lottie rested her head on Fizzie's shoulder, eyes closed but tears falling still. Louis was angry at himself for letting the whole service and burial finish without shedding a tear.

He had no problem crying alone in his room while Stan, Calvin, Zayn, and Liam hung around on the stairs like bodyguards waiting patiently for him to finish. What's the problem today?

His mind flashed back to the service- The girls could not hold back anymore as they entered the church; Dan held on to Dory like his life depended on it; a strangely familiar lady rocked Daisy while she screamed out for her mother; everyone around him bawled when they saw the casket and he had to pick Phoebe up in his arms when her knees gave out, but Louis himself remained calm the whole time- numb more like...

Sighing, he looked over from the passenger's side to Dan; whose red, swollen eyes were focused on the road. Everyone was having normal human reactions to the loss of his mom. What's wrong with me? I let my mum go without showing her how much I miss her.

He hated the cold sickening feeling in his chest, digging away at his soul and leaving emptiness. He knew his siblings felt their own version of it too and that hurt him more than anything. He wanted it gone. I want my mum back!

Thumb da dum! Thumb da dum!

Suddenly overwhelmed,Louis' heart started beating times ten and he felt like the air ways to his lungs had closed in. Louis suddenly needed to vomit! "Stop the car! I need to throw up!" Before Dan could mash the breaks Louis threw up on the dashboard. He didn't know what the hell just came out of his stomach because he hadn't had breakfast that morning.

As soon as the car came to a stop he threw the door open and started running back down the street—back to the cemetery. . .

"Louis! Stop!" he heard a voice call out to him.

"LOUIS!!"

Louis saw that the line of cars at the back of Dan's had stopped as well, but kept running past them. He recognized the voice calling him to be Stan's and deducted that he came out of one of those cars and was now chasing him. But Louis didn't care; he just had to get to his mother, the only one who knew how to take away the sadness that was overtaking him. He had to apologize.
He felt part of his stitches rip open as he sped away but he kept on running, the sun bursting down on him unforgiving, blood and sweat mingling in his suit. But it didn't hurt as bad as the feeling in his chest. Feelings of guilt riddled him as he blamed himself for what happened.

A few blocks down the road, he started panting and stopped to catch his breath. He now heard multiple feet running, getting louder as they got nearer, and eventually they caught up to Louis. Looking around he saw all of the boys at the back of him panting- hands on their hips and bending over breathless. *Bodyguards on the job*, he thought. He should have known they would come out of nowhere.

Stan was the last to catch up, and watching him fight to steady his breath, Louis and the others couldn't help but laugh at Stan.

"You know, I think you should have done track and field, Stan!" Louis joked.

"No way! I feel like I'm gonna die and we didn't even run that long" Stan panted, taking off his tie and jacket.

Louis' smile quickly changed back. Calvin turned and gave Stan a face like, "*Seriously? you're using the word die right now?*"

"You twat! " Zayn shouted at Stan.

It hit Stan like a brick. "Louis- I'm. . ."

"It's okay," Louis knew Stan didn't mean to, but it sure did trigger the pain more. Louis doubled over holding his chest and still panting.

Until his panting turned to sobs.

They all stood there not knowing what to do. Stan kept apologizing and Calvin yelled at him to shut up and Zayn just put his hand on Louis' back sympathetically.

Then Louis' sobs burst into crying.

"It's *all- my- fault!"* He croaked, pointing to his chest. The guys shook their heads in disagreement and simultaneously started telling him how that wasn't true.

"I wish i could take it all b-ack!" Louis cried out in anguish as he lost his composure and started falling.

Liam who had been hanging back quietly the whole time, reached forward and took Louis in his arms, swaying him. "*Shhhh, its okay Louis, it's okay. . ."*

All the bottled up rage and guilt, all the numbness at the funeral had taken their toll and everything came out on Liam's shoulder as he grabbed onto him, balling. Without thinking Louis buried his face in Liam's neck as his cries fell back to sobs. It was as if Liam knew exactly what he needed right now. Taking in his body spray, Louis remembered a time when his heart used to skip a beat that close to Liam. That was two years ago -a lifetime ago in Louis' mind, and he was sure, Liam's as well.

He traveled back to when Liam used to sneak into his room through the window and when they would hide behind the bleachers. Liam had transferred to their high school in fourth form and Louis was the one who showed him around and introduced him to his other friends Stan, Calvin, and Zayn. Naturally Louis and Liam formed a friendship that turned into something more. But
Liam hadn't come out yet and was scared to be seen in public with Louis. And Louis, who had just fully come out at the time, wasn't about to be shoved back into any closet so he instinctively ended it. But not even a good week had passed when Louis started to see something he had a very hard time coming to terms with. Liam had started messing around with one of his best friends, Zayn who Louis didn't even know was gay! Initially it had caused a falling out between Louis and Zayn but they made up again when both realized how much they valued their friendship (with Stan and Calvin's help) and Louis had grasped the reality that Zayn and Liam weren't slowing down.

Emotions were high in the beginning but then it was reduced to an awkward tension that simmered down as time passed but was still to this day faintly there, lingering...

Liam remained in the circle growing on Louis, and he even helped Liam to finally come out to his parents so now Liam was out and proud like Louis. He cherished Liam as a friend despite the rough start and was glad he didn't write Liam off for merely being human. Something his mum helped him understand as well...

Oh No! - Catching himself, he pulled away quickly and turned his back to the boys. Liam was a natural hugger and was just being a good friend but Louis didn't want to know what Zayn's face looked like right now.

Louis took off his jacket and wiped his tears in it. He breathed the scent of it in, trying to get Liam's smell out of his nose. "I think I'm gonna be okay now." He lied, turning back to face the others, puffy eyed.

He took a quick look at Zayn, who was now lighting a cigarette. His expression was one of worry and concern. Anyone could say it was empathy for Louis' situation but he wondered if it wasn't just that - he felt a bit guilty for offloading on Liam -but, as if to let him know that they were cool, Zayn offered Louis a cigarette and lit it for him.

"It's not your fault, Louis. . ." Zayn reassured about Louis' mum.

As they all started walking back to the cars, Louis glanced sideways and saw Liam's hand slip into Zayn's, and he looked away feeling a mixture of embarrassment and relief. . .

Louis was glad Zayn never let petty insecurities get in between his relationship with his friends or his boyfriend because Louis couldn't bare the thought of Zayn being mad at him. Louis wouldn't trade any of these guys for anything.

All the boys were keen to let him know that he wasn't to blame for anything and it was a tragedy that they would all be there to help him get through. They related stories of losing family members and talked about how they felt and still feel; and Louis listened, drawing strength from his supportive friends. Calvin who was an orphan, shared his feelings about that, hoping Louis would take away something from it. Zayn chimed about his dad living in a different time zone (something he and Louis have in common) and how that sucked. Liam, whose parents were divorced shared as well. Stan talked about how it was when Louis' dad left and said that he knew it wasn't the same thing but he was going to be there just like he was that time to cheer Louis up.

"That's what brothers are for, Louis..." Stan emoted. It's not the first time he said it, they called each other that all the time, but he knew Louis needed to hear it now. Louis knew Stan meant it and he held on to it for his sanity.

Chapter End Notes
Hey everyone!! Please comment! Tell me what you think of the story so far! I'm super excited about this and glad to share it with you!
Louis got a ride back to the house with Stan and his mom. On the way she explained that when Stan took off behind Louis she had gotten out of her car and told Dan to go ahead with the girls who had started panicking when Louis ran out. She assured him she and Stan would bring him home safely.

They arrived at the house Louis knew was filled with people chatting, having tea, and hugging. The only hug Louis could bear right now would be from Ernie or Dory, anyone else would reduce him to a crying mess again. But then he started thinking about how they won't remember her when they get older and she won't see them reach Louis' age. She won't see Louis reach any other age either. *Stop thinking about it! Please! Not now...* he begged his brain.

Louis and Stan met the others in the yard. They had all come back to the house in their funeral clothes not wanting to leave Louis alone just yet. Zayn had lit another cigarette and couldn't go inside so Louis left Stan outside with them and figured he'd go look for his sisters and let them know he was alright. He bumped into Lottie who told him the twins were taking a nap and he quickly apologized for running out, gave Lottie a hug and made his way over to Fizzie who was sitting with Grandma, having what looked like a heart-to-heart.

*Okay maybe not interrupt them*, he thought, and made a diversion towards the kitchen.

He stopped at the door and sure enough another deep conversation was at play, this time between Dan, Aunt Kim, his dad, and- that lady Louis saw at the funeral rocking Daisy? Louis tried to place her, he was sure he knew her face from somewhere.

His dad was reading something on a paper through his spectacles. *This!? This is your validation for proposing such a ridiculous offer!?”* he heard his father, Mark, saying.

"It's an untimely request and will take massive adjustment but I understand your feelings, we will at least consider..." Louis heard Dan stress to the woman, almost a whisper, as he tried to eavesdrop.

"I'm only asking for a couple of weeks.” he heard the woman say.

Louis' father looked up from the conversation and beckoned Louis to come over. He could tell they were having an intense discussion from the stern look on their faces.

"What are you all talking about?” he asked, a little hesitant.

"Louis, you're just in time," Dan pulled out a chair between him and his sister, Kim, and nodded for Louis to sit.

"Louis, this is Anne Twist," His father piped rigidly.

Louis was sure he knew that name. He looked at the woman. She looked around the same age as his mother. She had strong features with a touch of refinement and warmth, yet something about her seemed tough and self-sufficient.

"- Your long lost *godmother*.” Louis' father finished sarcastically with a mocking smile, gesturing
the paper in his hand as reference. Louis was utterly confused.

Anne glared at Louis' father before looking back at Louis, "Louis, you won't remember me, you were so little last I saw you," her eyes were puffy as she had obviously been crying.

"Your mother and I are- were- best friends," the woman added beaming up at him.

He studied her face, then it dawned on him. "Mum used to talk about you a lot! She has a picture somewhere ..."

A smile cracked on her face as she flew out of her seat, went around the table and stretched her arms out to him. He got up and she pulled him into a tight embrace. "You know me? Oh, my sweet boy!" and with that she was wiping tears with one hand, and rubbing his hair with the other.

"It's a miracle he does since his mother hasn't seen you in years!" His father added with his voice raised a little higher than Louis was comfortable with. "Tell me, does a best friend just show up when tragedy strikes or does she at least keep in touch every once in a while!??"

Louis father was right. He remembered her only from childhood stories his mother told them and recognized her from a photo she kept in an album among his baby ones. But he didn't think she was really his godmother since she wasn't in any of the christening pictures.

"Look, there are guests here. We best talk about this another time ..." Dan said trying to calm the tension that was building up in the kitchen.

"You can't seriously think there's anything to talk about further!??" Louis' father barked at Dan who in turn shot him back a what-the-heck look. Louis didn't think Dan was used to being spoken to like that coming from a preppy background, and he knew his father wasn't the best at containing his anger.

The only time those two ever had to communicate was to sort out holiday schedules for Louis and the girls, but Louis' mother was always part of those phone calls.

"No! I wanna know what you guys were talking about!" Louis said eyeing Dan curiously, arms still around his ... godmother? She took his hands in hers and began to speak.

"Well ...," she started but was cut off abruptly.

"-There is no way you have any rights here Anne! Might as well just leave now!" Barked Louis' father again. Louis could see a vein coming dangerously to the surface of his forehead and from witnessing his parents arguing in the past he knew this conversation wasn't going to end well.

Anne just glared at the man and Louis saw a bit of resentment in her eyes.

Dan's mother, who was standing at the kitchen sink listening silently this whole time, finally piped up. "Why don't we be civilized and discuss this like adults?" she said in her usual plummy voice.

"Louis sit down." She ordered, and he took a seat again. "Dan, you said you wanted to take Ernie and Dory back to Wales with us as your job won't allow you to care for the babies alone. I already told you I'd be happy to have them."And Mark," she addressed Louis' father, "You know what's best for Louis and the girls. If you ask me they need to be with their father..." she added, eyeing Anne.

"-Wait- what!? You're moving to Wales? When did you decide this? You can't do that!" Louis couldn't believe what he was hearing. It took him years to get over being separated from Fizzie and
Lottie and now they want to take Ernie and Dory away and ship Louis the girls to Australia where they won't get to see them? Louis was already set for college in Doncaster so even if he went to Australia he'd have to come back which means he'd be without any of his siblings—Not a chance in hell! Louis wasn't ready to relive such a nightmare.

"Louis We're trying to sort out what's best for everyone. It's the same plan we had for the summer, only it's going to have to be ... permanent." Dan tried to explain.

"Please Louis, listen," Anne held his hand over the table," I would love for you and your sisters to come stay with me for the summer. I have a lovely ranch in the country that I'm sure your mum told you about, and it's a bit off your normal routine but I assure you, you and the twins will love it."

"'A bit off your normal routine'" Mark interjected mockingly, "Are you hearing yourself? You're basically inviting him to butcher ducks and clean pig shit on your bloody farm! How the heck are they going to function with all that animal 'oink oink! yeehaw yeehaw!?" Louis' father was flat out yelling now.

Dan's mother's shoulders started vibrating at Louis' father's statement as she tried to cover her laughs. Louis only saw the thin lady a few times on past visits and was always staggered at how much she and Dan resembled. Louis watched as Dan glared at her to show that he wasn't amused.

"Animal noise!? As compared to this racket in the city? I reckon they won't want to leave the farm! And Johannah does too!" Anne yelled waving the folded paper that looked like a letter, at Mark.

What is happening? Louis' thoughts were spinning so fast he feared he was going to pass out. How is this even happening? Why are his and his siblings lives being put at tug of war again? He knew things were going to change, yes, but not this quickly and drastically. Is he the only one who knows how much it hurts to be separated from loved ones. For god's sake mom just died and they all had her in common. So they should know how much it hurts.

Anger seeped in through his blood and he didn't want to hear anymore. He was angry at Dan. He wondered why he couldn't ask for some time off work to figure all this shit out, I mean, they just buried mum and he's already planning to take the babies and run back to Wales? Louis felt like he was being punished. He looked at his dad and realized he was still angry at him for leaving with Fizzie and Lottie in the first place all those years ago and causing all this confusion as to who ends up where.

And what was she talking about staying on her farm ...?

Chapter End Notes

I'd love to hear what you guys think of this chapter! What comes across to you?
"When a person has a best friend, Anne, they keep in touch!" Louis' father continued, eyes glaring as he watched her slide the folded paper over to Louis on the table.

Anne frowned and was about to retort when Louis' Grandma walked in, briskly for her age, and joined the conversation, asking why she could hear them from the living room.

She looked down at a distraught Louis and feebly squeezed his shoulders, "It's not a bad idea to get to know your mum's hometown. Anne spoke to me already. You and the girls can spend a fraction of the summer on the farm and the other in Australia."

Louis knew from the way she spoke that she knew about all of this, and when she realized he did not, she said "Oh! he hasn't read the letter yet? Let him read it first, then make his choice."

Anne picked up the folded paper and held it up in front of Louis. "This will clear things up." she explained to Louis in a soft, parenty tone that painfully reminded him of his mother.

"We will also squeeze in a couple weeks in Wales as well. We're not gonna stop being a family, Louis." Dan quickly offered as he saw Louis' hand reach towards the letter.

Louis paused at Dan's statement. Easy for him to say. His kids are going to be with him! Louis thought. He didn't want to hear Dan at the moment. He's doing the same thing Louis' father did- which was- taking a third of Louis' siblings and bailing.

Louis let out a tiny laugh. He couldn't help but think how ironic it was now that he gets reunited with his dad and two of his siblings it has to come at the expense of being separated from two other siblings and losing his mother.

Louis was so confused, soon his brain became a fog and his concentration drifted off as they went on and on about the summer plans Louis felt none of them had any right to be making. He started to feel as he had back on the field when he had suddenly cared less about what was taking place, and more about . . .

"Oops!" came an unfamiliar voice from the kitchen doorway.

Louis looked up. A slim boy of about sixteen with a slouchy posture had just bounced into the kitchen, breaking the conversation and Louis' trance.

"I'm sorry for interrupting ..." The boy said shyly.

Louis scanned the boy curiously from the dining table. He had on a tight, black t-shirt with a huge olive green jacket over it, a pair of black jeans ripped at the knees, and umpteen rings and bracelets on his hands. His hair; a rich brown color, was the fullest, shiniest, curliest Louis had ever seen and for a second Louis found himself witnessing a shampoo commercial. His face was soft and pretty, like one of Louis' sister's dolls in his opinion- and his eyes. . . Louis recognized those eyes.

Oh my God!- Louis gasped sitting up straighter in his chair- It's the boy from the game! Louis nerves kicked into high gear. What was he doing here!? "Uh! Mum, I just wanted to let you know, Gemma and I are here ... "
Louis' face went white. *This boy was Anne's son?*

"Great! Harry, come meet Johannah's family. Louis, this is my son, Harry!"

Louis stared at the boy as he timidly came up to the table. Their eyes met and Louis was sure he would need oxygen in the next few seconds. And positive that it would stop his heart from trying to jump out of his chest and straight out the door, Louis immediately broke off eye contact and looked across the table at his father as a grounding for distraction. His heart raced while his mind quickly went into meltdown knowing he had to say something now that Anne was introducing them.

*I'm Louis...' -NO! -that's stupid- Anne just said my name already!*

He went again, *'Hello Harry how are you?'- Gosh no I sound like a Grandpa!*

He finally settled on- *'Hello Harry, nice to meet you'- Simple yet effective, he told himself, satisfied with that reply.*

He waited until Dan and the others quickly introduced themselves then he looked back up at the boy - eye contact again- and swore his heart threw a punch up his throat. Up close he was gorgeous. Those were the biggest most sparkling green eyes Louis had ever seen and he suddenly felt uncomfortable in his pants.

He opened his mouth to say his improvised little sentence but all that came out was a small choked up "Hi."

Harry quickly stretched his hand out toward Louis in reply. "I'm sorry about your mum," he said, his deep voice laced with feeling.

Wow, the first stranger to say that to Louis since and actually not sound annoying. Louis glanced at the outstretched hand and was suddenly aware that his own palms were sweaty. He hesitated for a moment wiping his hand on his lap below the table, trying to build up anti- nerves, then stretched his hand out and shook Harry's. As their fingers closed in, Louis' warm sweaty hand twitched at the feel of Harry's soft, slightly cold one and Louis gripped tighter suddenly wanting to make it warm. He nodded and muttered something along the lines of 'thanks' and reluctantly pulled away his hand.

Louis grandmother went over and embraced Harry, planting a huge kiss on his cheek making him blush times ten. *Oh My God! Could you be anymore prettier?* Louis thought, taking in the red flushes appearing on Harry's face.

"You must be hungry! 'Come a long way now! Let's get you a plate!" Louis' Grandma urged.

"Actually I'm fine. Maybe I'll have some water, thanks," Harry told her, politely.

*Omg, the way he says "water". Even his voice was controlling Louis pants size! Louis watched as his grandma poured Harry a glass of fresh water, and held his breath as Harry put the glass up to his mouth. Harry took a mouthful, swallowed and said a gulpy "Thank you", and Louis suddenly wanted water.*

Harry then told his mother he'd go wait with his sister, and ambled out of the kitchen. Louis let out a sigh and realized he was holding his breath the whole time Harry was drinking the water- scrap that - the entire time he was in the room!

"Well. we certainly need to discuss this summer arrangement only between Wales and Australia!"
I'm not sending my kids to a bloody pig farm!" - and Louis' father, Mark, was back at it again.

Trying now to breathe evenly, Louis covered his lips with the back of his hand and tried to concentrate on what was being said now that Harry had left the kitchen.

"Your idea sounds like a plan to me," Dan quipped, ignoring Louis' father and nodding at Louis' Grandma, "Louis and the girls can have time with all of us."

"It's a no-brainer, Dan! Those three are going back with me to Australia and those two little ones are bound for Wales! What are we even talking about here!?" Mark argued stubbornly.

He turned to Anne, "No offense, Anne, but you already have two children. Sod off mine!"

Anne then got up in a rage and started pointing the folded paper at him like a sword. For some reason Joan of Arc popped into Louis' head and he realized how tall Anne actually was. "You're forgetting how you ran off with Felicite and Charlotte to Australia, taking them away without consideration for your other children or their mother. Sure they are accustomed now, but from Johannah's emails you were well outside your right to carry them all the way across the ocean in the first place!"

She sighed to calm herself down before she continued. "Don't take them away from their home so soon after their mother ..."- she glanced at Louis- " All I'm asking is a few weeks out of their whole lives! Surely you can see reason here, Mark."

"For God's sake Anne they need to be with their father and sisters! If that doesn't scream home to you then maybe you've spent too much time in your bloody pig pen to know what a real home looks like!" Mark exploded.

Louis head started throbbing at their voices getting louder and louder. They were arguing over something that Louis didn't even know about until fifteen minutes ago and he was sure none of his sibling knew about at all yet. He didn't want to hear anymore. His stomach felt like lurching again.

Maybe go have a cigarette with Zayn, his brain told him. He just needed to get away from the yelling.

Sweat starting to trickle down his forehead, he got up so quickly he almost kicked the chair down. "I need to get some air," he told them over his shoulder as he sped out of the room.

He walked out into the living room on his way to look for Zayn and the others and spotted Harry in an armchair, casually nibbling a butter cookie from a tray on the side table, causing his to stop dead in his tracks.

Gosh, even his eating is turning me into mush... Does he even know how hot he is? Louis found himself asking as he stared across the room at the boy, feeling breathless.

I need to stop! Harry was a problem from two days ago when normal teenage problems were Louis' problems. Now Louis problems evolved way past that and Harry was causing additional problems from inside of a new problem he could not process at the moment as he was the son of a woman who came out of nowhere wanting to take Louis and the girls in like they were orphans or something. Sure their mom just passed but they had a dad, and even though the twins didn't remember much about what it was like living with him, Louis did. He remembers it was his dad who taught him how to kick a ball.
He hated that his dad had to leave. Before he left, he and Louis' mom had to decide who he took with him. Fizzie and Lottie were the safest bet because Phoebe and Daisy were too young to be without their mother and Louis' grades were too good to just uproot him and start over fresh in a new country plus he had at the time just landed a spot on the school football team. Fizzie wanted to go with dad to see the wildlife in Australia and Lottie who couldn't breathe without Fizzie, followed her older sister everywhere so that was that. Louis hated that a decision like that had to be made again without his mom there to have a say. Everything was so confusing. He was angry at everyone and everything and didn't need to be crushing on anyone right now. Especially not that boy.

Louis looked around the dimly lit room. Harry's green jacket stood out against the room full of black and white clad silhouettes, huddled in little groups chatting and talking about Louis' mother, he supposed.

*I really need to find Zayn*, he told himself.

He glanced back at Harry, about to turn to head outside, when Harry made eye contact and slightly waved at Louis.

Louis looked over his shoulder to make sure it was him he was waving at. Harry seemed to find that funny, and shook his head while smirking at Louis. Louis' heart leaped at the sight of Harry's smile, and he felt a thump on his rib cage.

Louis shot him a bewildered look and Harry got up and strode over to Louis, shoving down the last piece of butter cookie he was nibbling on and nervously dusting his hands on his sides. He stopped directly in front of Louis and being shorter, Harry looked up at him and Louis started to see tiny teddy bears floating around.

"Um, I wanted to ask you before- How's your leg?"

Just as Harry said it, Louis remembered his stitches were open. He looked down in a haste at his bleeding leg. "Shoot!" Even though his suit was black he could still see the blood soaked through.

"What happened? You're bleeding!" Harry asked in a caring tone.

Louis looked at Harry who was looking down at his knee concerned and gulped at how close they were standing. Louis could see the top of Harry's head. He could smell his hair. He was inwardly going crazy how good it smelled. Whatever shampoo Harry was using Louis wanted to capture it and let Stan make a scented candle out of it for him to keep in his room.

"Uh, It's fine. I fell and – That's right! You were at the game ... um ..." Louis drifted off the sentence. He was going to say "... on Tuesday", but then thought, *the day my mom died*, and stopped talking.

Harry nodded and gave Louis an understanding look. "Yea, I had to beg my mum. My best mate actually played against your team. Niall- captain."

He looked back down at Louis leg, "I know how to clean cuts. Should I ask your Grandmother for the first-aid-kit?"

"No! Actually, I gotta get out of this suit. I don't want to bother her, I have one ... up in my room ..." Louis' inward frog jumped at the thought of Harry in his room, not that he was even going up there with him, but that he was talking to Harry about his room.

Harry looked at him without blinking as if waiting for some kind of invitation. His eyes were so
full of concern that Louis felt an urge to kiss him.

"Uh ..." Louis quickly broke eye contact, looking at anything but the boy in front of him. "I kinda need to get out of these ..." He started nervously mumbling to Harry, thoughts of him undressing adding with the ones of Harry in his room. He tugged at the pants legs of his funeral suit, suddenly feeling suffocated in the thick, sweaty material.

He was about to say he would come back down to chat with him after, when his friends came up behind him and started acquainting themselves with Harry ...

Chapter End Notes

The two boys meet! Please tell me how you found it!!!
Upstairs

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Louis watched as his friends surrounded them, shaking hands with the boy and exchanging names.

Okay- he's sixteen (yeah, I figured), last name is Styles (which is pretty cool), lives on a ranch (of course)... friendly banter about the game... small pause to glance at me because they're all mindful of my mum dying the same day of the stupid game... Now they're asking him if there are mosquitoes in the country- Eye roll - way to change the subject, Stan.

Liam seemed to somehow know Harry. Louis and Zayn looked on confused as Liam chatted with Harry like he was family or something.

Liam, noticing their questioning looks, laughed, "You guys keep forgetting I told you my mum's family lives in Champton Valley. Harry's mum deals with my uncle's Hardware and Contracting store." Then he turned to Harry excitedly, "I'll be helping him this summer too so I'll see you, Harry!"

Oh, that's right, Louis remembered. Liam does talk about his uncles a lot...

Louis gave Stan a look to let him know Harry was the guy at the game. Stan looked totally confused but Calvin picked up on the message and returned Louis an I-got-your-back wink, which Harry almost saw causing Louis to shoot Calvin back a wide eyed dude-what-da-heck look, which Zayn saw. Zayn, clearly puzzled, looked at Calvin who then whispered it to him. Eyes widening in realization, Zayn then whispered it to a lost Stan who gasped, finally catching on. All while Liam was yapping away with Harry, both oblivious to the secret conversation going on around them.

"Guys I'm actually gonna go upstairs for a sec..." Louis interrupted, leg now throbbing.

"Great! Let's go!" Stan included before Louis could finish and motioned everyone -Including Harry!- towards the stairs, encouragingly pushing them along.

That's the thing with Stan. He and Louis grew up so close that boundaries were, well, non-existent! They would always charge into each other's rooms whenever they pleased and wear each other's clothes. They even had their own clothes stashed in each other's closets. Calvin and Zayn had been in Louis' room before as well, and Liam, for a total different reason... Normally Louis wouldn't mind Stan inviting new friends up there but Harry wasn't just someone. His presence was literally doing things to Louis body like he owned an invisible remote control.

As they climbed the stairs he noticed the pain in his leg was growing more intense with every step. He tried to ignore it, and the others were too busy talking the whole time to notice his limp.

"Louis, are you alright?" Well at least one of them noticed.

Harry touched his back in concern and Louis thought he was gonna get a seizure and fall back down the stairs. Calvin and Zayn seemed to catch on with Louis’ leg and they each took an arm over their shoulders and hefted him until they reached the landing.

Stan was the first one in the room followed by Calvin, Liam, Zayn, then Louis and Harry bringing up the rear.
Louis bit his lip hoping his room wasn't too messy or there wasn't any embarrassing stuff lying around like dirty underwear or stinky socks. He would throw himself back down the stairs. He didn't care much about the others with stuff like that but he was mindful of what Harry might think of him for some reason. Although he had only seen the boy once before and just now met he was sending electricity searing through Louis like a live wire.

As he entered the room he made a quick check of his surroundings and let out a quiet sigh of relief as he deemed it passable.

While Calvin and Stan were digging in Louis chest of drawers for clothes to change into, Louis, in the corner of his eye, noticed Liam slumping down on his bed without a care. Louis wondered how he could keep a casual face with Zayn sitting right next to him. He shot Calvin and Stan a look and Zayn must've noticed because he grabbed Liam's hand and smiled stupidly. Awkward.

Harry, still standing by the door, asked for the first aid kit right away. Louis hobbled to a shelf in his closet and held it out to him. Calvin and Stan, already stripping, threw Louis a shorts and T-shirt.

Now this is the tricky part. How in the heck was Louis supposed to take his clothes off in front of Harry, let alone Liam? Again his brain tried to navigate per second all the possibilities of this Harry-related problem having a non embarrassing outcome. He could not come up with one! He caved and decided that he had to wing it out and just turn to face the wall hoping Harry wouldn't look.

He started to unbutton his shirt uncomfortably when Stan, now dressed, started talking. "So Harry, you said you live on a farm? What's it like?"

Louis never felt more love for Stan than he did right now for bringing up a topic to distract everyone in the room from the fact that Louis was removing his clothes in front of Liam, the person who shouldn't be seeing him naked at all, and Harry, the person with whom he couldn't get naked thoughts out of his head, though they had just met half an hour ago.

Stan knew him so well. Well enough to know when he felt uncomfortable and needed to be bailed out a bit. Louis took it as Stan's apology for leading them up there in the first place!

Louis quickly changed into shorts while listening to Harry describe the farm. To Louis it was like listening to Harry Potter talk about Hogwarts. He talked about the horses he and his sister owned, the sheep, the cows and even the chickens! He talked about a lake not too far from the farm where he and Gemma would often go when they were younger but she never has time anymore since college; he talked about his friend Niall, who would come over and make paper lanterns and he and Harry would light up the deck at night in the summer. He made every detail sound like it was Disney Land.

Relieved to be fully clothed now, Louis studied the boy. Louis honestly didn't know what to think about that whole holidays on the farm thing. He was confused about everything that took place in the kitchen. Harry's facial expressions gave no indication of knowing about his mothers' offer so Louis put that thought aside as he looked around for a seat.

"Oh, Harry don't forget the rodeo show! I can't wait for that one," - he turned to Zayn- "Two of my uncles are cowboys. I wished you made it in time but trust me, you're gonna love the countryside, Babe!" Liam cooed to Zayn, still sitting on Louis' goddamned bed.

Louis looked at them sideways and opted to sit on his desk chair.

Harry took his rings off and asked Calvin to hold them for him, then opened the kit, took the
rubbing alcohol from Stan, and motioned for Louis to slide up his pants a bit. Louis shifted it, looked up at Harry pouring some on a piece of cotton and couldn't believe his eyes- The sun that was now setting outside had illuminated a bright burst of orange light through the window, directly onto Harry, making his skin glow and his eyes turn an even more brilliant green. Harry's eyes bore into Louis' and he felt them eavesdrop into his soul. All of a sudden everything around him disappeared and all he saw was Harry. Harry knelt in front of Louis to clean his reopened wound and Louis swore he saw that in slow motion.

He glanced over at the other boys who were now trying on Harry's rings, too engrossed to notice Louis fond, and swallowed hard. He sat as still as he could manage with his nerves. He knew any weird move or face he made would conveniently come across as him being scared of the rubbing alcohol burning him. His leg hurt a lot but he wasn't worried about the pain the alcohol would cause. He was now worried of a growing problem in his groin!

Harry must've noticed him twitching because he then asked, "Does it hurt? I've done this before you know ..."

All Louis was capable of answering was a head shake. He leaned forward and placed his hands at angle to block the bulge in his pants. He hoped it was working, and he knew it probably looked weird, but Harry was none the wiser as he carefully concentrated on Louis' knee.

"Yeah, the rodeo is alright but I'm looking forward to the fundraising concert." Harry piped to Liam.

Liam answered "Yeah! Will you be performing? I think I'll just sing a song or something." he turned to Zayn again." Wish you could've made it in time for that too, Babe. But we still have the Last Blast Graduation Party to look forward too!"

"yeah, I will -" Harry started but was cut off by Louis.

"Yeah, about that- I don't think I'm up for it anymore ..." Louis said to Liam and the others. He hated disappointing them but there was no way he was going to that party now.

"Well,you still have a week to change your mind, Louis." Calvin stated.

"My mum isn't going to be any less dead in a week Calvin. Louis bitterly thought.

"You guys are in a band?" Harry said looking up at Louis flabbergasted.

Stan answered. "Yeah, but just for fun. We've been practising for Last Blast. Louis, its okay if you're not up for it-"

"Speak for yourself, Stan. I'm landing a record deal one day!" Zayn jumped in.

"So which one of you plays the guitar?" Harry asked turning to the others. Calvin raised his hand.

"Cool! Same!" Harry smiled. Louis stared in awe at the dimples appearing on his flushed cheeks.

So you're visiting Champton Valley?" Harry asked without looking up.

Louis, assuming he was talking to him, started to answer. "um"

"-Oh, He's going to finally meet my family." Liam interrupted. Louis realized it was Zayn Harry spoke to so he pursed his lips.Okay, he doesn't know about his mother's plans?
"Yeah, I'm going on a family trip for a few weeks and then head there." Zayn informed.

Louis tensed up at that and hoped no one noticed. Thoughts of his own ruined holidays dredged his mind. He looked at Stan who rolled his eyes in response to his gaze, telling him that he too noticed the Liam and Zayn barf moment.

"That's really cool, man. Congratulations." Harry said kindly, looking to the couple then back at Louis' knee. Louis noticed that Harry was making an effort not to look up at him.

"Thanks, Harry!" Liam grinned.

Louis met Calvin's eye- An eye roll from him too.

Then as Louis watched Calvin's gaze divert to the ring in his hand, he saw his eyebrows narrow as he tried to read the carved out words on the silver object. "Waiting ... Wait -is this a ... purity ring?" Calvin asked.

Louis' heart skipped a beat at the revelation of Harry being single. He could just be really religious so don't get ahead of yourself, Louis.

Harry looked over at Calvin and nodded without speaking.

"I have to get me one of these." Calvin added, causing the others to erupt in laughter.

"What? It's a chick magnet! The chick'll think your super sensitive or some' like that! Right, Harry?" Calvin said, making sure to wink at Louis.

Louis eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. Oh my god! Calvin, you did not just-

Harry glanced up at Louis and smiled shyly, dimples showing up again. "I guess so."

He watched Calvin nod decisively at that answer like he was personally satisfied with it or something. Since when did you become a gay guru? "I guess so"? That answer didn't reveal anything! Very vague ...

"Done." Harry finished up Louis' knee and stood up shooting him another smile, driving Louis crazy with those dimples. I really hope you're right Calvin.

As they all headed for the door, Calvin crept up behind Louis and secretly slipped Harry's rings into his hand.

Chapter End Notes

One Direction without Niall! I'm so sorry Niall isn't in these scenes as he has been put in a different setting. Don't worry he has a special place in the story! But for now enjoy an alternate OT4 with ZAyn.

Please leave comments!!! I want to know how this is going...
Heading downstairs, Louis found himself lagging behind with Harry. As they reached the staircase, both boys stopped at the same time.

Smiling stupidly, Louis politely gestured for a reluctant Harry to go first, and he watched as the boy's face turned a deep pink. Both stood there looking at each other, unable to move.

"I'll only slow you down. Go on..." Louis tried holding back a smile that already spread to his eyes, making the corners curl up...

Harry smiled. "The stairs aren't that narrow. I can go with you so you don't fall."

Louis grinned at this and felt his cheeks go hot. Peeling his eyes away from Harry, he made a step forward and noticed that Harry's feet started moving at the same time in identical steps. They both glanced at each other, and from the look on Harry's face, Louis knew they were both secretly marveling at this trivial thing.

Louis fought to peel his gaze off Harry and only faintly heard Zayn ask from the bottom of the staircase if his knee was okay, as his mind was preoccupied with Harry's smile. But, coming to think about it, he was perplexed because his knee felt nothing, not even a tiny pinch. It was as if Harry had made the cut disappear.

Feeling suddenly light-headed, Louis found himself tipping forward in slow motion!

Trapped in his slowed trance, he saw Harry's hand slowly reach out and try to hold him from falling. Then, eyes still locked on Harry, he saw him realize he wasn't strong enough to hold Louis' leaning weight; stretch the same hand onto the railing in front of Louis, gripping on to block Louis from going any further, their faces only inches apart. Harry then pushed Louis up against the railing with both hands to steady him, and as he hit the hard wooden bars he gasped deeply finally taking in air that had escaped him when they started down the stairs.

He was now aware of Harry's hands on his chest, pressing against his loudly beating heart, and his lips which were dangerously close to Louis' now.

"Are you okay?" The boy asked in his deep voice, a voice Louis found captivating.

All he could manage was a tiny nod in response as he bore into Harry's green eyes, unable to move.

Then Harry did something that took Louis completely by surprise. Harry shoved his hand under Louis' armpit from behind and linked his arm into Louis', cracking an awkward smile. "Yeah, I'm not taking any chances with you..."

Feeling renewed heat flush across his face, Louis walked with Harry down the rest of the stairs in silence this time completely avoiding eye contact, with their arms connected in what felt to Louis
like an intense grasp on his entire being.

The boys all squeezed through the many guests in the living room and bumped into Dan's mother, who relieved to see them, asked them to help serve refreshments. They all made their way to the kitchen where they found tuna sandwiches waiting to be shared out.

Louis picked up the tray ready to go out with it but Harry, quick on the draw, reached out and gripped it, easing it away from him.

"Uh Uh! I don't trust you with this yet," Harry laughed, handing the tray to Stan.

He took a sandwich and held it out to Louis. "You better at least have one before you go weak again and capsize the whole tray out there!"

"Ha ha ha." Louis mocked as he took the sandwich from Harry.

Liam dragged a chair out for Louis."He's right. You can't go on like this..."

"When was the last time you ate something, Louis?" Zayn piped, concerned.

Louis looked at the sandwich. "Yesterday around lunch, I guess..."

Harry's eyebrows reached the middle of his head. "Well, no wonder you're so faint. Please don't just look at it!" he gestured to the sandwich in Louis' hand.

A bit startled, Louis immediately bit into the sandwich as though Harry had an invisible wand making him do so. Zayn's eyes narrowed at Louis' sudden obedience and he broke into a silent smirk. He then exchanged looks with Calvin who was having trouble holding back his smirk as well. Liam looked at them questioningly until he realized why they were smiling and cracked a goofy smile. Harry's back was turned to them and Louis pretended not to see them through the corner of his eye. Stan stood innocently holding the tray while the others took sandwiches for themselves, all eyes on Louis and his new friend.

Trying to ignore his amused friends, Louis devised to make sense of the shock that this boy actually cared about whether he ate or not. He knew Harry was just being kind, and considering their mothers were friends it was only natural for him to care. Louis wasn't sure if it was lack of food that made him go weak on the stairs but as he hungrily ate the sandwich he was glad Harry pointed it out.

Stan was about to rest the tray down when Dan's sister shot her head in the kitchen. "Oh! Stan, help me share those!" she said urgently and disappeared again.

Stan turned around, startled, and left with the tray, looking dumbfounded.

Everyone was bursting with laughter at Stan when they heard the sound of a guitar coming from the living room. It was playing a single note over and over like a call of some kind.

The boys muttered to each other. "What's that?"

Harry looked up at the ceiling. "Uh ...that would be mine," he confessed shyly.

A little head popped in the doorway and Daisy called out asking for Harry. "Are you Harry?"- He nodded- "Your sister wants you to play the guitar!" Daisy informed and took his hand, pulling him towards the door. Louis and the others exchanged curious looks and followed them out of the kitchen.
In the living room, a girl Louis suspected to be Harry's sister was sitting in an armchair talking to Louis' sisters, holding an acoustic guitar, and when she saw Harry her face lit up. "Harry! Mom wants you to play something!" She called out loud, and then mouthed "now" when he made a face.

Louis smiled curiously as Harry reluctantly took the guitar and pick from her. He sat on the coffee table and started strumming, fully concentrated, and everyone in the room got quiet and looked his way. He seemed pretty focused strumming short notes trying to decide on a tune. Then Harry looked up at Louis for a second, and Louis blushed with the knowledge that the boy only broke away from the guitar to look at him then return focus.

Everyone gathered around as Anne boasted about how well her son played, and Stan snorted behind Louis whispering, "Your boy can clean cuts and play the guitar Louis!"

Gemma relocated to a chair opposite Harry and mumbled something to him quietly. Exchanging looks of agreement, he started playing a steady tune. Harry kept his eyes her as he strummed and Louis thought how cute it was that he did that to calm his nerves like Louis had done with his dad when he met Harry earlier in the kitchen.

Louis stood silent as he listened quietly, feeling every note press into his muscles, soothing him. Then Harry started singing.

**You tell me that you're sad and lost your way**

**You tell me that your tears are here to stay**

**But I know you were only hiding**

**And I just want to see you**

Louis looked over to his siblings. All six of them were all huddled together on the couch close to Harry, intrigued eyes looking up at him, except Fizzie who he noticed was glaring disgustedly at someone behind him and turned to see Calvin smiling at her like an idiot. He punched him in the side and got a silent "Ow!" from his friend. Then Ernie burst free from Lottie's grip and made to grab Harry's hand and Louis had to sprint forward and grab him away before he interrupted the song but Harry had already lost his base as his eyes had broken away from Gemma and was now on Louis and Ernie fighting each other but then he kept on singing,

Tell me that you're hurt and you're in pain

**But I can see your head is held in shame**

**But I just want to see you smile again. . .**

**But don't burn out. . .**

**and I'll be here for you**

Then Harry queued at Gemma and she heartily joined him in the chorus:

**Oh I will carry you over fire and water for your love**

**And I will hold you close and hope your heart is strong enough**

**When the night is coming down on you We will find a way through the dark . . .**
The whole room erupted in clapping and cheering and Louis even saw his dad crack a bit of a smile in reaction to Harry's piece. He set Ernie down and walked him back to their sisters, having to stop in front of Harry's guitar. Ernie stuck his finger in between the guitar strings causing it to make noise resulting in laughter and swoons from onlookers. Harry grinned at him and ruffled his blonde hair but Ernie pushed away his hand and continued to poke at the string until Lottie responsibly stretched her arm and pulled him into a hug.

Stan gripped Louis' shoulder and whispered to him, "Your boy can clean cuts, play the guitar, and sing, Louis."

After helping pass around coffee and sandwiches, Louis and his crew made their way outside for a smoke. As they hit the porch Louis and Zayn lit up and Louis turned to see Harry and his sister, Gemma on the porch swing staring at him. Harry had taken off his jacket and Louis could see his figure more clearly now. It looked like they were having a deep chat and stopped when they saw the boys.

Gemma eyed Louis' cigarette with a raised eyebrow then she flew out of her seat asking for a light which Zayn was happy to provide in exchange for her and Harry to sing another song with them, which she responded by picking up the guitar and handing it to Liam. She pretend choked Liam as she chatted with him and Zayn, jogging down the few stairs to the yard with Stan and Calvin in tow.

Louis started behind them and stopped when he realized Harry was still on the porch. "Come on! What's the matter?" he said, tilting his head up and sideways at Harry who was leaning over the banister looking down at him.

"I can't be around the smoke. I have asthma," Harry answered, looking out at his sister yapping away with the guys.

Louis, almost choking on his cigarette at this, and immediately dropped it on the floor and mashed it. Harry noticed and let out a small giggle. "Totally unnecessary!"

Exhaling the last of his smoke away from Harry's direction, Louis then hopped back up the porch stairs to meet him. "It's okay. I've been wanting to stop ... Your sister smokes?" he said, propping himself on the banister next to Harry and watching the others in the distance.

"Yep, she doesn't have asthma." Harry deadpanned.

Louis studied his face for a second before breaking into a smile. He raised an eyebrow at Harry, thinking how ironic that situation was. Harry swallowed at the sight of Louis' smile. He clasped his hands nervously and Louis suddenly remembered he had Harry's rings in his pocket.

Leaning sideways on the banister, he took them out and casually fiddled with them. Harry apparently didn't notice but stared straight ahead, eyes moving around like he was searching for something to start a conversation. Louis wasn't ready to give them back anyhow. He wanted to talk to Harry too.

"Where did you learn to play like that?" he asked, taking in Harry's features as he turned Louis' way in response. The sun had now disappeared and no one remembered to put the porch light on but even in the dark Harry looked too good to be real. Harry returned his gaze to the others, leaving Louis to stare at his profile.

"I practice a lot, and write my own songs." he said, a darker shade appearing on the cheek visible to Louis.
Louis held one of the rings out for Harry and he took it, still blushing. As Harry put it on, he peered at the rings still in Louis hand, then at Louis, and looked away blushing harder than before. He must've figured out Louis was flirting with him.

Gemma started playing a tune and Louis' friends enthusiastically sang in harmony causing Harry to smile."Your friends are pretty good." "Yeah, Liam and Zayn want to be full time musicians. I dabble on the keyboard but that's about it."

"I've never played the keyboard." Harry said, lightly tapping on the railing.

Louis shook his head. "Well I've never played the guitar. Maybe we can meet up sometime ..." he said trying not to sound too excited. Inside he was screaming at the thought of seeing Harry after tonight.

"Of course!" Harry squeaked.

"So, you always wear these things?" Louis asked, examining a ring with a tiger's head molded on it.

"uhm." was all Harry answered.

Louis held the ring out for Harry, eyes flashing over him. Harry shyly took it, and put it on.

Then Harry asked. "At the game..." - attentive nod from Louis, - "Did you have to play, knowing ...?"

"Knowing what?"

"I mean- did you get the news before?"

Louis' face fell as he melted back into his cold reality realizing what Harry referred to, but Harry didn't see as he was looking at the yard when he said it.

"I don't want to talk about it." Louis said, hearing his own voice crack.

"I'm sorry, it's just that you were acting strange during the game." Harry whispered apologetically.

"I really don't wanna talk about it." Louis said louder, holding out another ring as a symbol for Harry to stop pressing. Harry hesitated to take it, and Louis felt bad that he may have snapped at Harry who had been nothing but nice to him the whole time. He feigned a smile and hoped Harry bought it.

Harry took the ring and slipped it on, still apologizing.

"It's okay." Louis said, looking out at the yard and seeing the empty space where his mother's car used to be parked in the gap. He was suddenly so angry.

Squeezing the last of Harry's rings tightly, he asked "Have you ever lost someone close to you?" Louis wasn't even flirting anymore neither was he looking at Harry.

Harry looked at him, compassion in his eyes, thought for a moment and then answered. "I was a baby when my dad died so I didn't get to know him...Then I lost my grandfather when I was like, ten."

The two boys stood in silence as Louis processed Harry's answer. Feeling even more stupid for snapping, Louis took Harry's hand and put the purity ring in his palm, instantly regretting the contact as an invisible live-wire surged through his veins and up to his beating chest, amplifying it.
Harry placed his hands behind his back sheepishly, obviously putting the ring on so Louis wouldn't see.

Just then, as if beckoning to change the subject, a gentle evening breeze blew and Louis breathed in deep.

"Mhmmm...You smell like my Grandma," Louis wasn't even sorry he made that weird comparison. One whiff of Harry and his brain was gone.

Harry looked at him confused and laughed, "Is that a good thing or...?"

"Yes it is. She smells like flowers..."Louis said, smiling.

"Oh! Well she did hug me in the kitchen..."Harry said, jokingly.

"Wait- How did you know she was my Grandma? She could've been anyone's Grandma." Louis teased.

"I think we've already established that! Besides, she actually did smell like flowers!" Harry quipped, laughing.

Louis said heartily, "Yeah, she does, but- it's not exactly the same scent. Similar, though."

Harry blushed heavily, now realizing what Louis was smelling. "Ah- that would be my sister's-perfume. She sprayed the whole car with it" he said, looking at his sneakers.

"It's nice. I like it." Louis was so drawn to the boy that he needed to know if Calvin was right. Louis scanned Harry's face in the streetlight that had come on sometime during the conversation. No reaction. Okay, let's try something else. He decided to make a bold move.

He then asked "Does your sister have a boyfriend?", and watched for Harry's reaction. Louis thought if he spotted just a hint of jealousy he would know if Harry was into guys-into him.

Harry kept a straight face as he nodded and answered. "Yes, she does..." But soon as he said it his lips had disappeared, and Louis took that as a- yes!

He spent too much time reading his mum's text books and sitting in on her lectures since psychology was his major, and learned how body language can tell a lot about a person. He didn't want to get ahead of himself but Harry could definitely be into him.

"Good for her..." Louis said without taking his eyes off Harry. Harry glanced at him and blinked, clearly affected by that answer, and Louis looked away, smug. The boys could hear the others in the road now laughing at whatever Gemma was now saying and Louis commented on how loud she was. Harry snorted wildly.

"-You should hear Harry when the two of them are yapping at home... Real foghorn" came a sudden modulated voice from directly behind them.

**
Harry and Louis both snapped around to see Anne, black lace-sleeved arms folded, looking over their shoulders at her daughter in the road.

Then the porch light finally came on and a tired Fizzie, still in her funeral dress, emerged and slumped down on the swing.

Louis saw Harry's flushed face in the light and was sure Harry saw the same thing on his as well.

"Harry, go get your sister. I need to speak with both of you." Anne said in a serious tone to her son who glanced at Louis before obediently jogging down the steps and out to the road.

With eyes full of pertinence, Anne gestured for Louis to sit, and he glanced a flash of white in her hand.

As he sat down on the swing next to his sister, Louis secretly hoped Harry didn't get close enough to the others to inhale their cigarette smoke.

Anne sat down next to Louis and sighed sharply, finally getting a chance to hand him the letter that had caused the earlier confusion and argument. She clamped his hands over the folded paper and held them there.

"Louis, I think it's about time you read this." she said in a engaging tone, maintaining eye contact. "I trust that after you do you will better understand me and why I'm here."

Louis turned to Fizzie as he opened it and they both read silently.

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Monday 9th July,

My Dearest Friend Anne,

I've had it. I swear this is the last straw! The weekend was supposed to be a fun family trip to the hills on the edge of the city, but no! My completely ignorant and stubborn son turned me down and opted to continue practising for his game! He's been practising for weeks! What was one weekend? I had it all planned out but he just laughed in my face and ducked out last minute! And the girls were all for it but when they heard Louis wasn't going they changed their minds as well! My petty attempt at getting them outdoors failed. I ended up spending the weekend doing housework!

I must admit I may have been a bit unreasonable but I feel just as I did when Fizzie and Lottie moved to Australia, and just needed some time with my eldest before I lose him to the busy college life in the city. I swear If Louis could just take a second to breathe he will realize what's important otherwise he'll never know what it's like to slow down.

They're already scheduled to go visit their father and sisters for the summer and Dan wants me to go to Wales with him and the twins, so honestly with everyone separated, when am I going to get ample time to say goodbye to my boy? And God knows I could enjoy a quiet day without all the hustle and bustle. You know as I've said before, I never got used to the city. I've been missing the
fresh country air more than ever now. I still badly want Louis and the girls to experience what it was like when you and I were children. I want the want the girls to run through the endless hills of flowers, and play in the treehouse -Oh my gosh, is that thing still around? I can't wait to see...

Yes you heard me! I've made up my mind! I'm using every ounce of courage I can muster and I'm going back to Champton Valley. It's time I let go of my fear. You were always the brave one, Anne but It's time I borrowed some, for Louis' sake especially.

I'm packing up all their clothes on the last day of school and kidnapping them! Even if it's just for a few days. I don't care who opposes me. I don't want to hear it. I'm fed up wondering if your dad still has the ranch or if your cousins are still competing in the rodeo. And I'm downright fed up with writing these stupid emails you never answer to anyway. This is the last email I'm sending you! It's high time my children get to know their Godmother!

We have so much catching up to do! ~smiles~ I hope the horses are still around. The girls will love them. Oh-and I can't wait to throw Louis in the lake! ha! ha!

I want our kids to know each other, Anne. I want my kids to experience even just a fraction of what I'm sure your kids live every day. I can't wait to finally see you after so long! Wish me luck!

ps- How are Gemma and Harry?

__________________________________

Louis let the tears fall as he read it. He heard his mother's voice in every word.

This was Monday. The day before she . . . Louis thought to himself as he interpreted the letter.

He went back to that weekend before it all went wrong. Louis remembered her pleading with him, and him refusing to go. But he didn't remember her arguing with him about it. He had no idea this was how she felt about him declining to go on the planned trip. The expectancy. The disappointment in her tone in the letter. She never shared it with Louis at all. He already felt guilty over the game and now learning that he let her down even before that? Louis felt like he lost her twice reading it. He wanted her back. He wanted her back to tell her how sorry he was. He missed her even more. He suddenly wanted to go on a thousand trips to wherever she wanted to go.

He shut his eyes and rubbed his nose, sobbing with the pain. The pain of never having the chance to make it up to her.

Anne started rubbing his back and he looked up at her. "I let her down... I should've gone on the trip. If I hadn't been so caught up..." Louis sobbed.

"Dear, don't blame yourself, no one could've predicted such a thing. But I must say, when your stepdad called with the news, all I could think of was the time we lost..." she answered pleadingly, grabbing his shoulders.

Fizzie took the paper from Louis and read it over silently while they talked, her long brunette hair cascading over the page.

"Your mum was planning on taking you and your sisters to the country. I'd very much like to carry out that plan on her behalf. It's the least I can do..." Anne said drifting off before she continued. "I hadn't seen or spoken to her since her father's funeral and to know after all these years that she still wrote me up until the day before she died and that she missed Champton Valley... I loved her dearly. I do hope you consider. I'm telling you this not only because your the eldest and can make your own decisions independent of your father but because as you can see," she tilted towards the
letter, "she wanted it for you the most".

"It says here, you have horses?" Fizzie asked, lifting her head up from the letter expectantly.

Anne laughed. "Well, yes we do! I can't wait for you to see!"

Fizzie went off about how much she loved horses and Anne was delighted at this. "There is a very special horse I'd like for you to meet!"

Louis heard Gemma and Harry's voices coming nearer and quickly wiped his tears with his t-shirt sleeve. They came up the steps and Anne motioned for them to sit. Gemma sat next to Fizzie, and Harry squeezed in next to her in the corner.

Fizzie handed Gemma the letter and Harry peaked over his sister' shoulder, reading with her, while Anne got up and started pacing, explaining everything to her children about the emails.

Harry glanced at Louis in between reading and they met eachother's eyes. Louis blinked to break it but his eyes drifted right back up to Harry's face. Harry's eyes were now fully on the letter but Louis knew Harry still noticed him as he scanned every detail of his face; his forehead, his nose, his cheeks, and stopping at his lips; because they each turned red, one by one, as soon as his eyes fell on them. Louis was amazed he was having this colorful effect on the boy. He couldn't help but smile to himself.

"...So, if we can all agree?" Anne went on.

"Of course! We'd be happy to have you guys! Won't we, Harry?" Gemma answered looking at her brother.

"Yeah, she described the countryside perfectly." Harry muttered, while standing up. He was still blushing from Louis' gaze.

"Well, from what you said earlier I won't doubt it must be beautiful out there." Louis said, looking up at Harry.

"Oh! You've already pitched a proposal I see... My son reading my mind!?" A shocked Anne laughed, throwing an arm around her son's neck. Harry mouthed "Help!" to his sister, and Gemma laughed causing Louis and Fizzie to laugh as well.

Louis felt a strange sense of warmth in the moment that reminded him of his mother. He dropped his head as he felt fresh tears well up in his eyes.

"Louis, take all the time you need to make a decision." Anne said.

He nodded, looking at the letter. Just then Louis' friends all came up into the porch and after brief farewells, Anne, Gemma and Harry started walking out to the car.

As Harry hit the bottom stairs, guitar in hand, Louis urgently called out to him and he turned around.

"Yeah?"

Louis dipped into his side pockets and patted his hands over the lower pockets of his shorts, looking for his phone. Shoot!

"Gimme' your phone." he commanded, coming down to meet Harry.
Harry nervously slid his hand in his pocket and Louis heard his ringed fingers knock the hard phone case. He handed it to Louis and he punched in his number.

"Text me so I'll get yours too, okay?" Louis said, hopeful.

"Yeah, sure." Harry answered, flashing dimples one last time before walking off. Louis stood there watching in a daze and as soon as Harry disappeared into the car and shut the door, Louis wanted him to come back.

"Someone's- Got- It- Bad-" Louis got knocked back to reality by Zayn echoing a teasing impression through his hands.

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The night was technically over as it was after two a.m. Louis could still hear voices coming from downstairs as he lay in bed unable to close his eyes for even a minute. He kept picking up his phone, checking it and resting it on the bed again, sighing, over and over in that order. He was hoping Harry would at least send one text. He wished he had taken Harry's number but as he found out after, Ernie had taken his phone (it had to be him!), probably when they were play fighting, and stuck it under the couch cushions. But what if he doesn't text me? I won't know the actual reason if he doesn't. I should've just taken his number. Please text me!

He couldn't get his mother's letter out of his head and he wanted to ask Harry more about Champton Valley. Heck! He just wanted to talk to Harry.

Looking at his phone again, he sighed. He flirted with Harry- but that was before he read the letter! Maybe that's why he didn't text him, maybe he was embarrassed too after reading it and hearing his mother propose that Louis vacation on the farm, in his home! He already made up his mind that Harry was more than just a guy. Apart from their parents being friends, he felt something, he just didn't know what it was or what to call it. With the day Louis had, Harry was a pleasant distraction. He hated that he might've made him uncomfortable and was desperate for a chance to apologize if he had.

Sitting up, he had an idea.

There was no way he was going sleep anyway so he grabbed his phone and dialed Liam's number.

"Hello?" He heard Liam's raspy voice answer.

"Hey, Liam. I'm sorry for wakin you this hour, I-"

"-That's okay! What's up!" He heard Liam's voice groan as he must've shifted himself up. He pulled the phone away from his ear slapping his eyes shut.

"Ah, I was actually wondering if you maybe had a number for Harry or Gemma maybe..." He had to pull the phone away again as the sound of button tones beeped in his ear.

Then he heard Liam's voice again, "Yeah, I got Harry's number... I texted it. Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm having trouble sleeping, you know. Everything is just. . . "

"Do you wanna talk about it?" Liam whispered.

"No, I didn't mean to wake you really. Go back to sleep."
"You know it's not a bother, right? Anytime you wanna talk, it doesn't matter. I'll answer."

"I know. . ." Liam had that inviting drone thing that made Louis kinda did wanna talk about it- but just as he was going to, he heard the distinct murmurs of a voice he was sure was Zayn's.

Okay, this isn't completely awkward... "Thanks, Liam. Goodnight."
came out instead.

He hung up and looked at the screen. It was twenty eight minutes past two and just as he was about to check for Liam's text his phone made a buzz.

He looked and saw that it was a text message from a strange number. It said, Hey, It's Harry. This my number. How r you doing?

Louis' face lit up as he observed the irony of what just transpired.

Shaking his head, he replied. What's hairy?

While he waited for a reply he saved Harry's number.

The phone buzzed again.

He opened the message.Ha! Ha! (smile emoji) Did I wake you?

He smiled as he typed and paused wondering what to text. No. Why aren't you asleep this hr?

He waited, smiling.

A little more than a minute later the reply came. Heart fluttering, he pressed the screen and read it.

I was actually sleeping but then I remembered I had to txt you.

Oh. My. God. Louis' eyes widen with amazement as he was inclined to believe that that was a blatant flirt. He threw himself backward, flat on the bed, and studied the text. There's no way he was actually sleeping. He just wanted to let me know he dreamed about me. His mind quickly went into panic mode as he wondered what answer. He didn't want to assume wrong. Maybe Harry was just being honest and not really flirting. Maybe he was really asleep and jumped up suddenly remembering to send Louis the number. Yeah, maybe but still, he thought of me well after sleeping hours and that counts. Louis didn't know what the feeling in his chest was but it was making him smile at a time where smiling would not otherwise be possible for anyone.

He didn't want to type something embarrassing or awkward to put Harry off so he decided to passive deflect.

LOL! I'm glad u did bc I was actually thinkin abt the letter and ur mum's offer. I wanted to ask you more about Champton.

Hv u made up ur mind?

Not yet. but If I did...

But if u did what?

If I did would u be ok with it?

Why wouldn't I be?
Louis knew the answer to that. Maybe because it'd be weird as they flirted not knowing they could possibly end up in the same house for the summer in the most unromantic circumstances! Who was Louis kidding? He wasn't even sure if Harry was gay. He decided to leave that heavy conversation for another day. For now he could just talk about the countryside and sell it to himself with Harry's help.

And...he kinda wanted to hear his voice again.

Wd you mind if I called u? he texted.

Now, or...?

Yeah now. It's ok if u rather not, I just feel like - indecision, u know?

The phone rang. It was Harry.

Louis answered and giggled into the phone. "I said I'd call you, Harry."

"I know." Harry paused and breathed hard through the phone. "Look, Louis, if it were me I would want to come and see for myself... She seemed really nostalgic in the letter - your mum - and... if I were her I would miss Champton too. My mum- she-I think if you're up to it then you should definitely come. It doesn't have to be whenever, just when you're ready." Harry said.

Louis found himself cuddling with the phone. "Yeah, about that, if we come it'll have to be during the holidays. My dad wants the girls to go back with him to Australia so that's gonna have to be worked out, and I have college next semester. I can't come after that so..."

"Well then if you decide to take the time during the summer then definitely come. Like I said, we'd be glad for the company. And maybe bring your keyboard 'cause it looks like we will be meeting up soon."

Both boys laughed.

"I won't forget, Harry." Louis smiled, remembering their earlier conversation.

Harry made a weird breathy noise and Louis' boxers started gripping him in certain places. Get a hold of yourself! His brain snapped at his crotch.

Then Harry spoke in a cautious tone, "Look, Louis, listen. You said yourself, you won't have time during the summer, and I know it's not my place but, I think you should do the gig at your Graduation party with your friends. Its just that- it's the last one..."

Louis turned on his side and tucked a pillow to his belly. He didn't want to think about partying. He left the line silent for a few seconds until Harry broke it.

"You don't have to be one hundred percent involved, just be- there with them."

Harry was right. It wasn't his place to tell Louis how to feel at the moment, but if he was going to do what his mother would've wanted he guessed he should start with that party, but "I'll try." was all he was able to manage.

"Great! You can tell me how it went."

Louis didn't know whether to love or hate that about Harry. The way he bypasses the uncertainty of Louis' answer and charges forward with a positive response.
"If I go, I'll make a video for you." Louis said, smiling at the boy's enthusiasm.

"Yay!" Harry giggled. His giggles were contagious and spread to Louis through the phone.

Louis took a deep breath before speaking again. "Thanks, Harry."

"See you." Harry answered. Louis hung up the phone feeling a lot more positive about going to his mum's hometown. He sank into his pillows, finally sleepy.

Chapter End Notes

Hey! Comments are welcome! Talk to me about this chapter.
Hello everyone! I'm dedicating this chapter to my very special friend gbyloveshazandlou who has been an inspiration in writing it!

I'm so glad every single one of you are reading my story! I'm putting a lot of work into this and you have no idea how much your support means to me! Please, if you like what you're reading leave kudos and comment below! I would love to hear all of your thoughts on this! Enjoy-

Harry's pov.

The brakes gave a gentle clank as Gemma parked the car, yawning like a tarzan. Anne raised an eyebrow in uproar only to end up following suit as she clicked her seatbelt free.

In the back seat; eyes flashing from mother to sister, Harry waited for his mother to exit before clambering between the front seats and settling his bum on the spot where she had sat on the ride back from her friend's house. Louis' house.

The whole ride Harry kept replaying the evenings' events, stopping a few times between to catch his breath whenever he remembered he was supposed to be breathing. Any part of what had taken place at the Tomlinson residence that he thought about, picked out, and analysed made the combustion build up more in him; made his breath even more lost.

He sat now letting out slow, even wisps of air to calm himself.

He needed Gemma for this.

He made a quick glance at his mother entering the house before turning to his sister who was still sitting in the driver's seat.

Right hand slightly gripping the steering wheel, she stared at him.

"Gem! He freakin talked to me! And he gave me his numb-"

He cut himself off; fast deep breaths huffing through his dry throat. The feeling in his sweaty fingers going numb; he feared his inhaler would be prevalent soon.

Even in the dark, Gemma could see the paleness of his skin. Launching her long thin arms, Gemma grabbed his shoulders. "Harry! Harry look at me- You're shaking!"

She rubbed his biceps frantically, trying to get him warm but Harry was cold sweating now. "Gosh, what did he say to you on that porch!?"

She rubbed off the sweat on his forehead and slowed her rubbing but Harry's eyes were still all over the place. She half expected this kind of reaction to a guy simply talking to him, knowing he hadn't had such interaction like that with a guy before.
"Gem, no! You don't understand! He's coming heeeerrrreeeee!?" Harry gasped. Gemma shivered, suddenly remembering Golum from Lord Of The Rings.

"I know! It's crazy! I'm sure it's gonna be okay. You guys hit it off, right?"

"I've been thinking about him for the past two days- and there I was putting the band aid on his knee! And he let me! And oh my God, he-" Harry looked down at his hands wide-eyed," He took my rings! He had my rings!" he gabbled.

"Okay, Okay! Let's get this straight- After you pulled me on the swing and told me that he was the guy from the football game; you two talked...?" she nodded slowly, trying to get order to what Harry was saying.

"NO! I mean yes! But I told you we talked before that! But not exactly! It was more like we just kinda- I don't know!" Harry yelled in an airless rasp. He pressed his trembling hands over his face and dragged them down to his open mouth.

"It's called chemistry, Harry." Gemma side-tracked.

Harry's eyes widened unblinking at his sister. "You think so!?"

"Finish the story so I can tell you for sure."

Head bopping like a dashboard ornament to his sister's instruction, Harry continued panting, unable to immediately speak.

"Harry do you need your inhaler?"

"Nooooo!" Harry stressed. He took another deep breath. "Ok! I saw mum in the kitchen,"-pause to breathe in- "so I went in and there he was..."

Making an executive decision, Gemma shoved her skinny fingers in her brother's jacket pocket as she listened to him struggle to relay the events. Harry looked down as they emerged wielding his inhaler.

"... And then I talked to you and then- and then-"

"Take your time, Harry..." Gemma darted the small apparatus in front of him but he extended his huge palm, batting it away.

"Ouch! Harry, your rings aren't exactly rubber!" Gemma said, stroking her knuckle.

In reaction to her sentence, Harry produced a loud gasp. "When we were on the porch he had my rings! I thought his other friend had them- but he did!" He balled his fist and massaged it thinking back, then jumped in excitement again. "And he was just-playing with them! And he smelled the perfume you bought me! And he said he liked it! I was so scared!"

Gemma knew she would hear every detail again when Harry was calmer, the next day maybe, but she understood he needed to let it out now before it built up too much. Apparently, had the drive home been any longer; he might've exploded.

"Do you think heeeezzzzz...? Do you think I'm being silly!?"

"Well... He is gay, for starters-" Gemma said, her tone perking with assurance.

Harry stopped crying immediately and watched his sister closely. "You think so? What gave it
Harry was so still Gemma nearly thought he was petrified. His eyes remained unblinking for more than a few seconds. She stared back, waiting for a different reaction. Then-

He lunged forward and clutched her shoulders hysterically. "Tell me you're not bullshitting me!"

Gemma screamed out, startled by the sudden horror-movie-like outburst, and gripped her hands over his on her shoulders.

"Harry! Listen to me, very carefully!" she whispered harshly as she gestured her head to grab his attention with every word, "Liam said they had a brief thing a few years ago and he's single now."

Harry nodded slowly as he registered what she was saying.

She smiled smugly. "Come on. Let's get inside before mum comes back out. I'm gonna take a loooonnng shower and tomorrow we'll go over all the details again, okay?"

Harry slowly nodded and Gemma shifted in her seat to open the door; her butt throbbing like she had been sitting there for years.

They strolled up to the house; Harry still wobbling but now breathing evenly.

"Earlier he was just like normal and I was normal and-"

Gemma let out a tiny laugh. "Nor- mal? Well based on your reaction before you even got out the car, I'm guessing you did that thing you do; shutting out your nerves on the field."

Harry sharpened his eyebrow at her and tossed his upper body sideways to exaggerate the confusion she was spewing his way.

She rolled her eyes. "Harry, you do it all the time. You act all normal like everything is fine," she bent her elbows and waved her palms up and down,"...then as soon as you're alone you fall apart."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Maybe, but even so it just felt natural. We weren't flirting like- you know- 'cause his mind was on his mum. I think he flirted with me after-on the porch. I don't know maybe he was trying to take his mind off it. But the whole time it was like-help me here, Gem- It's like when you have a connection with someone, but not that strong a word!"

Gemma pursed her lips. "You clicked?" she offered, looking down at the porch lit lawn sliding under her feet as they neared the steps of the old style ranch they called home.

"Yeah, that's it!" Harry flicked his fingers as they hit the aged wooden steps.

Harry heard his sister's sneakers squeak as they reached the short landing, she had stopped dead and was now gripping the back of Harry's coat as he had reached a step ahead of her. He jerked around and she shared quick focused glances between him and the doorway.

He followed her eyes and saw an outline standing in the doorway. Coming into the light, strapped
boots and a mixed coloured checked shirt; Cord dipped his head, dragging off his cowboy hat, staring into Gemma's eyes.

Caught up in his own drama Harry totally forgot about the Gemma and Cord tension he was sure to be witnessing now that the two of them were going to be seeing each other every day for the rest of the summer; since Cord, who used to date Gemma on and off during high school, now worked on the Twist Ranch and was currently staying in the guest Cabin on the east side of the compound, a hundred metres away from the house.

"Cord!" Gemma stated, sounding like a goat. "I was actually here earlier. You must've been in the stables."

"Yeah, Harry came out back and told me you were here and you guys were gonna be out." Cord's stance was one of someone caught in motion, about to take off in a marathon; or rather someone looking to run away.

He placed his hands in his back jeans pockets trying to look casual but just ending up looking more awkward.

Harry felt Gemma's shoulder tense as she leaned on him. "Oh. Wasn't expecting you to still be here."

"She said the last word rather unwelcoming, Harry thought.

"Well, actually the cabin doesn't have a TV, so..."-Gemma raised her eyebrows and he smiled- "It's good to see you Gem."

Silence hung between them as Gemma did not reply. Literally feeling her struggling as she dug into his back, Harry wished he was back in the car. Or back at Louis'...

"I'm gonna go." Cord finished, flashing a noticing glance at the veins protruding from her arm that was latched to the back of Harry's coat. He brought his eyes back up to her face one last time before shifting his body; shoulder first, towards the stairs while placing his hat back on his strawberry blonde head.

Tiptoeing into his sister's room, with the sole purpose of not waking his mother, Harry crawled onto the double sized mattress and eased the side of his head on a pillow next to his sister whose eyes were already shut. They popped open as soon as Harry started talking.

"His eyes, Gem, did you see? They're so big! And bluuueee!"

As soon as they had entered the house, they had both gotten hungry. Their mother had already gone off to bed, so Gemma had to sit in the kitchen while Harry leisurely prepared a meal that had lengthy preparation (in her opinion); while listening to him reiterate the details of his experience like he had just gotten back from a holiday or exciting adventure; and Harry had no sooner finished talking before they had eaten and Gemma had peeled away to finally shower and head off to bed.

Shifting back up on the bed, she was annoyed and sleepy but still couldn't help but grin at his cute and innocent crushing voice.

"It's so sad his mum died, Gem. And it was while he was playing footie. And I think maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it because he was so upset, but it's just that I felt so comfortable talking to him- gosh, I'm so stupid! Gem please you have to tell me what you think! Are you sure I'm not
reading it wrong? Was he and Liam really...? There's no way he would even look at someone like me!"

Gemma tilted her head with a slight annoyance on her face and moved a loose curl off her brother's forehead. "Why not?"

After a few seconds of non-reply, tears threatened the rim of Harry's eyes. "Liam is a really cool guy, and he's outgoing and- tall..."

Gemma stepped to cut him off, knowing where Harry was going with that. There was no way she was going to let Harry put himself down before anything even happened.

"- And not dating Louis Tomlinson!" she whispered. "Nobody is!"

Harry's eyes bore into hers, seeming to hang on to her every word. "Yeah, I know, but if that's his type then I'm-"

Gemma sighed. "You are an amazing guy, Harry! Besides, didn't you say the sparks flew?"

"Yeah." He said unenthusiastic.

Gemma smiled. "You said he gave you his number?"

Harry nodded. "Uh. Huh..."

"Well, I'm one hundred percent sure you didn't ask him for it so that's a start! He's showing interest in you. Text him! See what he says."

Harry suddenly remembered Louis told him to text him. He told Gemma and she sent her palm crashing into her own face. "Do it!"

Harry wormed his way out of that idea. "I can't now! He's probably asleep!"

"Well, he'll see it when he wakes up, stupid!" She yanked his phone out of his side pocket and slapped it on his chest.

Phone trembling in his grasp, Harry typed, then showed her what he typed, then sent it when she nodded.

Harry shoved it back in his pocket and dragged himself off the bed. "Well, good night. I'm gonna go to bed-"

Buzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!

Harry pulled the device back out and swished his security pattern, revealing a message from the number that had been stored by the older boy earlier as "Louis [smiling face with sunglasses emoji]".

He snorted, diving back on the bed to show his sister the message.

She twisted her eyebrows, showing teeth. "Well, if this isn't some gay ass flirting, I don't know what is!"

"What am I gonna say!?" Harry blushed.

"I don't know, use your brain!" Gemma answered.
Harry screwed his face at her and typed. He sat up, fumbling with the phone, waiting for a reply.

Buzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz...

At the sound of the buzz, he ducked back to lie next to Gemma; head to head as they muttered the text together. "...Why aren't you asleep this hour..."

Shrugging, Harry tapped his fingers over the screen keyboard again as his older sibling watched.

A "No!" loud enough to wake up their mother (sleeping behind Gemma's right wall), and Cord (all the way out in the guest cabin), rang out as Gemma snatched the object from him. "Give me that! You can't tell him you're chatting with your sister in the middle of the night! Ugh!"

She quickly typed something and handed it back, smirking.

She ruffled his hair and made a smacking noise on his cheek. "Now, get out of my room! It's already after two!"

Gasping at the time on his phone, Harry moseyed back to his room, contemplating the text his sister just sent Louis.

Thumping his doorknob shut, he sighed into door as he intentionally bumped his forehead twice on it. The text she sent sounded so rude! He's going to think I totally forgot about him! What was she thinking? His mum just died!

The phone buzzed just then. Reading the new message, a wave of heat came over his face. Oh no! I'm gonna kill Gemma! He isn't even thinking about that kind of stuff! Okay-rewind! Wait- did he just say he's glad I texted him?

His first instinct was to rush back to Gemma's room but he decided to brave it out. No way he was gonna let his older sister finish this entire conversation for him.

Harry stop! He's just being polite, okay! He reasoned to himself as he typed a reply to the boy whose blue eyes had taken up residence in every corner of his mind.

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As she sighed into her pillow, the sounds of faint periodical buzzing could be heard from the other side of the left wall in the dead of the night by a sleepy Gemma who was bummed out from all the driving, and dealing with her younger brother's 'life changing experience.'

Slowly fading into sleep, her eyes suddenly fluttered open at the sound of distinct giggling that had now taken over from her brother's vibrating cellphone.

Shuffling herself to face the other side, a smug smile from ear to ear, she reached her hand behind her and pulled her spare pillow over her head.
The next morning at Breakfast Gemma made no hesitation to fake pant and wheeze while shaking her hands to and fro to mock Harry's initial state the night before.

"Gemma!?!" Harry said, feeling betrayed. He eyed her to shut up as their mother put bacon on their plates.

Gemma's hand reached for the milk and noticed an extra place setting to her left. She swung her head Harry's way and he took a bite of the bacon; looking at her.

She sent her eyeballs in the direction of the unoccupied plate and back to Harry.

Harry bit into a slice of toast.

"Coorrdd!!!" he bellowed like a goat, mocking her from the night before.

She smacked him over the head but both ended up laughing like two hyenas anyway.

Anne looked at them, baffled at how they ended up her children.

"Someone called!!?"

A fresh-shirted, cologned Cord clad in a new pair of jeans came in, shut the back door and huddled over to the table. "Good morning!"

As soon as his eyes hit Gemma he slid off his Stetson and hung it on the chair behind him.

"Good morning, Cordy." Anne said.

Gemma shot her a confused look.

Harry repeated his mother's "Good Morning", looking at Cord teasingly.

Gemma shot Harry a look too.

"Gemma, what's the matter with you? I reckon they don't say "Good Morning" at that city college, but you're from the country, and I know I taught you manners." Anne said.

Cord and Gemma looked at each other and blinked at the same time. "Morning." Gemma muttered, looking down at her eggs.
Anne filled Cord's plate. "There's a lot to be done this week! Murrey and his guys are coming today to start replacing all the old floor boards in the house. Someone can fall through the back porch! Harry, when you get back from school you and Cord will tackle that attic. I want it cleaned out to serve as an extra room for when Louis gets here."

Harry shot his head up from his plate and drove his eyes around the table. There were four huge bedrooms upstairs. If all the girls stayed in the extra bedroom then Louis would surely be left without a room. Harry forgot they even had an attic, and after chatting with Louis last night, he was willing to do anything to make the older boy's stay comfortable. he had gained a burst of excitement knowing that he may get to see him again, let alone have him stay at their home. He just wished he'd call and confirm soon.

"He can stay in my room..." Harry offered. His room was big enough for another mattress and sure he was nervous but he decided that if it came to that he will just have to box up all his stuffed animals and old cosmetics he doesn't even use anymore and hide them; in the attic , perhaps... But then of course there was the issue of his blanket. Harry had a huge pink blanket with white ringed patterns which he had forever and was never able to sleep without. His brain raced through all the strategies he could use to get through a couple weeks without the older boy seeing it. Boxing it up was out of the question so he devised to overlay it with another ordinary, not so flamboyant one, preferably bigger so the pink won't show up in the edges.

Anne didn't seem to hear Harry's offer as she sat down to eat now.

Gemma shot Harry an apologetic look and Cord smiled at them, trying to be included, but she ignored him.

"I can stay on the couch if you want them to stay in the cabin..." Cord offered. Gemma eyeballed him.

"Cord, don't be ridiculous! I'm not going to put you out! And the cabin is too far out for any of them to stay!" Anne answered immediately.

Harry sighed to himself. She had heard Cord loud and clear though.

"I'm going to school. I can't be late for Physics exam." he said, getting up in a flash.

"Have a good day, son!" Anne answered, but he was already out the door.

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Harry hopped of the bus, pushing his brown hair out of his eyes. He swung his backpack over one shoulder and made up the little hill towards the house, looking down at his black and white converse; his red checked cardigan wrapped around his waist and bumping behind him.

In the distance he heard the sounds of hammering and an electric saw at work as he neared the house.

Pelting down the hill, Cliff ran up to him and started skipping and stretching his forelegs up. Harry stooped down to run his hands through his dark, curly fur; and the dog jumped to the sound of a crashing wood pile.

"Yes, i'm home. I missed you, Cliff!" Harry cooed as the dog pressed it's head into his chest; lightly brushing the Rolling Stones logo on his black t-shirt. "Let's see what they're up to back there!"

He proceeded straight to the kitchen and saw his mum by the back door talking to someone who
must've been on the back porch floor, judging from the weird angle her head was bent in.

He poked his head out the door and gasped. There was no longer a back porch!

*All this for Louis and his sisters?* Harry thought looking out at the workers in the back yard.

"*Mum?* I'm home." he said softly, not to startle her lest she fall off the threshold.

She looked up, unsurprised to see him. Measuring his stares at the scene in the back yard, she said-

"Murrey advised we take out the whole thing! This place was getting away fast."

She sat at the table with a notepad and a pencil, and put on her spectacles. "I have to get a few things at the grocery store. Harry what do we need for dinner?"

"Pasta." Harry said, not feeling up to cooking much today.

Anne looked up at him wide-eyed. "Okay, but when the kids get here you have to make something nice."

Harry gave a quick nod and stared out at the man prying away the last of the termite inflicted board from the back of the house; Murrey Payne. Three years older than his cousin Liam, he worked with his dad's Hardware and Contracting business. Operating in the close knit community of Champton Valley, Murrey and his dad, John, usually found themselves doing the field work with their employees and it was especially rare to go to the hardware and see Murrey himself behind a counter waiting for customers to come in. Harry would know because there was always some work to do on the Twist property and Murrey was always first on the scene. Not to mention the fact that Murrey had a well-known crush on Gemma, which caused a few minor 'Trojan' battles between him and Cord who were ironically best friends since kindergarden.

Wiping the trickles of sweat off his brow which had already trailed down to his mouth, making Harry stare a bit too long, Murrey looked up at the porchless kitchen doorway.

"Hey Harry! I saw your sister's car out front! Unless she's avoidin me, you might wanna get her out here with a cold water pitcher?" He nodded toward the one on a table in the yard, and Harry watched as the three other workers drained the last cups of refreshments. "This one's empty!" he finished with a goofy smile significant to all the Paynes.

Harry, caught off guard, was about to answer when Cord appeared next to him. "I reckon she doesn't even remember you, Murs! Besides, *I'm* the one she's avoiding."

"Cliff! Out!" Anne commanded as the dog slumped down by her feet and started chewing on her favorite blue rubber slippers. Harry decided to pull himself out of the kitchen to go find his sister, Cliff tagging along close behind.

He hopped upstairs and knocked on her door. "*Gem?*

He waited a few seconds before turning to his own room when-

Gemma's door opened and a hand grabbed the back of his shirt, pulling him in.

"*Oww!*" he said as the door slammed behind him.

"Harry, you gotta cover for me! I can't be here right now! The entire day he's down there strutting around like he owns the place! I can't, I just can't!"
Gemma's turn to freak out? Harry thought as he took in her expression with one long nod.

"Okaaayyyyy. I thought you said you had a new boyfriend?"

"Harry! Gemma! Get down here! Now!" they heard their mother bellow from the bottom of the stairs.

Gemma shrugged off Harry's question and motioned for him to open the door. She followed close behind and had to drag herself from behind Harry as an annoyed looking Anne flanked by a flushed Cord came into sight.

"Oh God..." Gemma whined only for Harry to hear.

"Harry, we don't have time for you two idling around! Get Cliff out of here! Cord, get up there and help him clean the attic!" she said with impatient hand gestures. "Gemma! What do I have to do to get some help from you today!? I need to use your car to go to the grocery store. Rodger said he'll come on Monday to check out the truck."

"Mum, I'll take you!" Gemma said, desperate to get out of the house.

"No! You have to be here in case the boys need anything. Oh- Get Murrey and the boys some water!" Anne answered, the bunch of keys jingling in her hands as she slipped on her flats and sped out the door.

****

Harry and Cord moved some boxes blocking their path as they crept in the attic, and a wave of dust rose up.

Harry clenched his fist and brought it up to his mouth as he coughed in a series.

He barely remembered ever being up there before. There was always way too much going on in the yard with all the animals to even think about exploring the abandoned attic.

It was dark and as they furthered in, Cord tripped on something they could not identify.

Harry made a move for the light switch and he saw something flash past the dull ray of light coming through the dust covered window. He jumped back and hit the wall.

"Wha- What was that?" He said.

"Looked like a bird," Cord said squinting to see.

"It's so creepy in here!" Harry observed as Cord hefted a big box with old, scary looking Santa Claus ornaments hanging out of it.

"It won't be once it's cleared. It'll be pretty cozy. Someone can actually stay here." Cord estimated.

"I would never stay in anyone's attic!" Harry said as he repeatedly flicked the switch to no avail. He really hated the idea of stuffing Louis away in an old dusty attic. He had barely gotten through his exam that morning just thinking about Louis, wondering if he will like the ranch. He wanted to text him so bad but he knew it was best to wait for him to sort out whatever and call or text him first.

"Maybe if Murrey and the boys get up here, you know, pull down this wall," Cord demonstrated with both hands, "Make it into a loft style..."
"Yeah, but Louis and his sisters are coming in a week! That's not enough time! And I shouldn't even be in here!" Harry said, coughing.

Cord shrugged. "Wait here. I'm going to get the vacuum cleaner."

"And a lightbulb!" Harry said to Cord's descending figure.

Suddenly alone in the cluttered room with cobwebs towering over the layers of dust that sat on the piles of furniture and paraphernalia, Harry pulled the neck of his shirt over his nose and trod towards the window, hoping it wasn't jammed from years of inactivity and rust.

He almost made it when-

Out of nowhere something swooped in front of him so fast he was startled.

He jumped a foot in the air and yelped. Sprinting into action he made a mad dash for the door and slammed it behind him, climbing down the ladder as fast as he could without losing his footing.

****

Gemma let the fridge door swing shut, hurrying out the front door and round the back of the house with the water pitcher.

She felt a pair of eyes on her as she set it down on the table, and looked up to see Murrey standing a few feet away, arms folded, facing her.

"Gemma, what do you think you're doing, Girly?" he said as the other workers surrounded the table.

She turned to him, eyes squinting. "Uh, refilling your water?"

The man ignored that.

"Grimshaw!?!" he said unfolding his muscular arms and bringing them to his side revealing a hammer in his right palm. He lifted his arm and targeted the hammer across as far as the corners of his eyesight; gesturing to his words. "Of all the guys you could've picked, you had to mess around with Simon Cowell's nephew!?! I would've thought you knew better!"

Gemma swallowed and grabbed the material of her floral pink sundress as she charged over to him. "And just how did you know about that?"

Murrey let out an involuntary laugh and nodded the hammer at her. "You haven't told them yet, have you? See, while you were here being all innocent for your mama, Aiden 'done gone blabbered to the entire Cowell Ranch about his new girlfriend!"

The last word said with scorn; he turned to resume his work.

"It isn't anyone's business!" she said sternly to the back of his blonde head.

He swung back around. "Well, that's for you and your new boyfriend to discuss. Ain't nothing o' my b'nis, but you see that boy right there?!", The hammer stretched toward the guest cabin, "You better think long and hard how you gonna deal with that once he finds out!"

And with that he turned away and started plucking a nail out of an old floorboard with the back of the hammer.
"Thanks for the water, Gem." Andy, one of the workers said before he swallowed a glassful.

"Your welcome!" she said smiling as she turned from watching Murrey's sweaty back. She was about to say something else to him when Cord came up behind her and she swung around.

"Ah, your mum isn't here. Any idea w-"

"She took my car into town to pick up a few things." She answered walking off, her hair blowing in the merciful breeze.

Cord exchanged looks with Murrey and followed her back around the front.

Bringing his long legs around to stand in front of her, he held his knuckle in front of him and sighed. "Yeah, i know- well, see, I need the vacuum cleaner and, uh, I have no idea where to look."

"How the heck should I know!? I'm not the one living in the cabin and can't keep out of the main house; out of the stables; and eating here, and watching TV on the sofa all hours of the night!"

Cord stepped back, aghast. "You- Are you talking about me?"

"What are you doing here, Cord!?"

"I work here! After you left, I started helping with the horses; thinking we were still..." Hand on hip, he sighed into the ground. "Your mum needed a lot of help around here and I didn't have anything else to do so I accepted her offer and stayed!"

"I asked you to come with me!" Gemma said, smacking the back of her hand in her palm.

"And what the hell was I doing following a girl around the city!? What was I gonna do there!?"

Gemma held her temples. "You've gotten a job! There are lots of jobs for people who don't go to college. Uggghhh! I told you it was over! But you just had to fit yourself right in here!" - Cord started shaking his head, confused- "Well, it doesn't matter now, Cord, because I'm seeing someone!"

****

"Mum, you can't put him in the attic! There're bats! He can stay in my roo -"

"No. No. No. Have you been to your room, Harry!? I'm not putting him in your room!"

Harry blinked at his mother's words as he, Gemma, and Cord helped her unload the car. He didn't know what she meant. His room was always neat. Maybe he kinda knew what she meant. Nah, He knew exactly what she meant.

"Mum, it's fine. I don't mind sharing! " he said in a question-like plea.

She put up her hand. "If he can't stay in the attic, then move your stuff out of the Study!"

"And where're my equipment gonna go!?" Harry scuffed, wondering how she could even think about putting Louis in there with his drum set and his grandfather's old books.

"In the attic!" came her immediate reply as she hauled of two of the bags to the porch. "Look, Harry, he's eighteen years old. He needs his own space! Empty out your dresser if you want to share so much. And help Cord get the mattress out of the attic! I'll get Murrey to make a simple bed frame..."
"And where will my clothes go!?" Harry protested. He did not mind sharing his dresser but he doubted it would fit in the Study together with a bed, his drum set, and his Granddad's old books. And there was fat chance of him going back in that attic!

"You have a closet!" said Anne.

Harry ruefully thought of the double meaning to that fact.

"With all due respect, Anne, I don't think Harry should go back up there, it's too dusty. Murrey can help me with the attic if that's alright." Cord advised.

"Oh! You're right! Harry, dear, I'm so sorry. You could've reminded me! I have a lot on my mind these days! I would never have sent you up there in the first place! All this nonsense about sharing your room..."

Harry rolled his eyes. He didn't even bother arguing that.

Instead, peeking into one of the bags and spotting a green stuffed animal, he asked "What's all this stuff, anyway? I thought you went to buy groceries..."

Anne took the bag from him and handed it to Gemma. "Well, yes I actually bumped into Mrs Horan outside the grocery store and she asked me to come check out costumes for the fundraiser concert coming up so we skipped over to the toy store. They didn't have anything remotely like 'The Wind In The Willows', but lots of lovely-"

Gemma pulled out the stuffed beetle. "Gee, Mum, thanks...I love turtles!"

"It's a bug!" Cord sassed, hanging behind the girl.

"Yeah, sure, it's a turtle with whiskers, Gem." Harry dead-panned at his sister's daftness. Anne couldn't help but chuckle.

"Harry, first of all, these little things right here are called ant-lers." Cord laughed, pointing at it's head.

Harry and Anne cackled, and Gemma hit Cord square in the chest with the animal/insect. Anne grabbed it and shoved it back into the bag.

"That's not for you! That's for my God children! All of them are!" she said, waving her hand to the porch.

Gemma whirled around, her eyes widening at the sight of at least a dozen colorful gift bags in different sizes covering the old porch floor. She and Harry exchanged well-excuse-me looks.

"Now, help me get them inside!" Anne said patting her daughter hurriedly on the back, Harry following behind with three more gift bags.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, sorry for the late updates. I needed the extra time to make sure the chapter
says all it needs to say while keeping the flow. I didn't want to skip over important details.

Plus- The character of Cord was inspired by a younger, more age appropriate James Corden (20 years old).

Olly Murs is my inspiration for the minor character of Murrey 'Murs' Payne. A really sweet guy who doesn't stand for bullshit! (Again, I imagined him age appropriate.)
The Last Blast

Chapter Summary

Louis wraps up his old life before he goes to the countryside.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Louis' POV

Twisting around under the covers, woken by the familiar beats of his favorite song, Louis felt around for his cellphone with one stretchy arm as he rubbed his eyes with his other hand. He hit something hard with his toes and groaned sitting up to push away the covers and grab the culprit, his phone, to check the time.

It was almost twelve o'clock! Dashing out of bed too fast, he fell to the floor and grunted. Apparently someone (It had to be Ernie) had changed his alarm time. He marveled at how a two year old can mess with his phone that precisely.

The previous day's events slowly creeping up on him, he noticed a strange new feeling had lodged itself in his chest together with his pain. Determination. His mind was pretty much made up. He wanted to fulfill his mother's plans.

Uncapping his toothpaste, Louis brushed his teeth going over the conversations he had with Harry and Anne. He finally understood where she was coming from. Her need to make up or compensate for all the time she lost with her friend, taking her for granted; because he felt the exact same way. He too had a need to make things right even though his mother won't be around to see. He knew it was what she'd want.

That afternoon, after his dad stepped out to have a cigar on the porch, and Dan was out running errands, Louis brought up the subject to his sisters and Grandma in the living room. He told them about his desire to go to Champton as their mother had planned and experience whatever the town had to offer.

Sixteen year old Fizzie readily agreed, as he had expected, and the twins went on about hearing Harry's guitar again- which made Louis blush heavily.

Grandma nodded from her arm chair. "Excellent choice, Louis. Like I said, you and the girls can spend a couple of weeks on the farm."

Fifteen year old Lottie screwed her face and whined. "I don't wanna go! I can't smell those dirty animals! Let's not go there, Louis!"

"Look, it can't be that bad, Lottie. You don't even have to go near the animals if you don't want to. Please, let's just go and see." Louis pleaded.

The old woman sharply sighed, and demanded that they all sit down. She eyed Lottie; disappointed, by the looks of it, Louis thought. Frightened, Lottie sank behind Louis and moved with him to the couch. The others followed. Louis never seen his Grandma so unnerved before. She
took off her spectacles and wiped them in her dress, eyes looking tired.

She eyes trailed off as though reliving some distant memory she hadn't visited in a while. Louis' sisters looked at him bewildered and he shrugged.

Then she spoke to them.

"Children," she started with a dramatic pause. "Although it would've been of zero consequence had it been so. . . , Anne doesn't want you all to come stay at just any random ranch in the middle of nowhere. That dirty farm-" her eyeballs flaring on Lottie-"is your mother's childhood home!"

Louis and Lottie both gasped, and she held his arm tighter. Fizzie, who was sitting on the other side of Louis, tilted her pony-tailed head back and burst into the biggest laughter. She almost took Louis out with the force. "No way!"

Daisy turned her torso to Lottie from the other end of the couch, and giggled. "She's kidding, Lottie! She's just saying that to get you to go! ha! ha!"

"Grandma? Is this true?" Louis asked half believing. He knew his Grandma wasn't one to make idle jokes especially about something like this, but how come he didn't know this before?

"Well, my half-brother, William -your Grandfather- came to me for help one day," she said, leaning over to them, "He wanted to start up a rodeo ranch so I helped with funding. I was a silent partner while he ran his ranch how he pleased. When he passed, the next of kin- me- sold it to the his best friend, Edward -Anne's father. He was a cowboy and always. . . interested in the business of horses. So you see, Lottie, it's not an imposition to you, really. Anne is just merely reaching out! As their fathers were friends, naturally Anne and Johannah were too. I'm not saying you do this for Anne, but for yourselves. Get closer to that part of your mother that she regretted none of you knew. She may have spent her entire adult life in the city but her heart was always in Champton Valley."

Louis, caught off guard with this enlightenment, immediately thought of Harry and wondered if he knew he was living in Louis' mother's childhood home.

"Why did you sell the ranch, Grandma?" Fizzie asked, curiosity hanging over the top of her forehead.

"Well, what was a city bug like me going to do with a ranch in the country!??"

She raised an eyebrow and smiled cunningly to Lottie who was about to protest, -"Don't worry, I know it's your father that put you up to this. I'll go speak to him now. He's not as stubborn as me."

Or as me . . . Louis thought to himself as his Grandma stood up ready to go provoke the middle aged man. This new information only served to fuel a deeper fire in Louis' resolve to go to Champton; and no one, not even his father, was going to talk him out of it.

The old woman patted Lottie's blonde hair in a forgiving manner before disappearing to the porch.

**

"This is ridiculous! Louis, you can't be serious!" Louis' father said charging in a little while after with Grandma looking dejected at his heels.

"I'm serious dad, you can't change my mind!"
"You will be wasting precious time!"

Louis and his dad went on like this straight into the weekend until Louis had begged his sisters for help, knowing they would come through for him; and the man caved- Well, sort of...

"Louis, you were always headstrong and well grounded in your decisions; and taking into consideration you're eighteen now; and your sisters,"- he threw his hands up- "all four of them, are backing you. . . If you feel you have to go find some kind of . . . closure that you can't get in the very walls you grew up in, then be my guest. Just take care of your sisters while your there." Mark had said at dinner on Sunday.

"Two weeks! That's all you get to go. . .farming, okay?"

"And then two weeks in Wales, don't forget!" Dan added, clinging to his plate as Ernie stretched from his seat on Fizzie's lap and made to grab it.

"And then it's off to-" Mark started.

"And then it's off to Australia- yeah, yeah, yeah - I know, Dad!" Louis smirked before grabbing him into a hug. Mark closed in, tightening the hug and Louis felt like his dad was trying to give him years of unreleased hugs all at once, or in a strange way trying to extract some sense of his mother that still lived inside of Louis. Whatever it was, it made Louis feel safe and loved and he was grateful for that.

Then immediately after dinner Louis called Harry and told him the good news- trying not to sound too excited- and from the sound Harry's voice, he too was holding back his giggles. Harry then put his mother on the phone who was less able to control her jovial scream.

"Mom! You'll give yourself a heart attack!" Louis heard Gemma laugh in the background.

"I guess I'll see you in a week, then. . . " Harry said, when he finally gained back control of his phone.

"Your mum is my sisters right now. I think you and I are the only reasonably patient ones." Louis joked causing a spurt of uncontrollable giggles out of the boy at the other end.

"Well, look at that, I spoke too soon!" Louis smirked, loving the sound of Harry's laughter.

*****

The next day at school, Louis decided to tell his friends of his final decision, having already filled them in about the letter shortly after Anne and her children had left. As he sat with Stan, Calvin and Liam at their table in the cafeteria waiting for the right moment to tell them -because Zayn was missing -, his mind flashed back to their initial reactions to Anne's proposal-

"It's not that confusing when you think about, Louis." Zayn had said, "I bet at the end of it you'll have all the answers you need."

Stan, on the other hand, had not been pleased about the idea of Louis going off to a strange place where they won't be there if he needs them."Your dad's right, we don't really know this lady!" But Louis assured him that he would be just one phone call away.

"That's not good enough! What if she cuts the powerline like in those scary movies!" Stan had protested.

Calvin had told Louis it was worth getting to know his roots, plus he had a chance to get close to Harry who Calvin swore was gay. "Dude, he was blushing like a *ketchup* bottle!"

And Liam, well Liam reminded everyone that he'd be in Champton Valley for the summer so if Louis ended up there he'd show Louis and Zayn around-(eye rolls).

Mind zooming back to his tray as he heard his friends laughing around him at the table, he remembered that every summer they all had their own plans but would always meet up somewhere before school reopened and hang out without curfew. He didn't see where that would fit in this time and after all, they were all going separate places to college or work. *Harry was right! I really should go to the Last Blast!*

So as soon as Zayn showed up and slumped down next to Liam, completing the group of friends, Louis let them know that although he wasn't up to celebrating or having fun, he was going with them to the Last Blast Graduation Party.

"We won't be seeing each other this summer, so I'm going with you guys on Thursday."

Zayn furrowed his eyebrows, wrapping his arm around Liam's shoulders. "So... does this mean you're going to Liam's hometown?"

"Yep! I'm going to Champton Valley for the first two weeks of summer." Louis answered, nonchalantly.

Zayn nodded, looking at Liam. "We totally support that. Even though Liam and I will be seeing you sometime during the holidays, this party is like really our last blast, our last chance for all of us to hang out for long time."

Liam smiled and bit into his sandwich. "I'm really proud of you, Louis."

Calvin threw a hand behind Louis back. "Well that's great news, Louis. We would sound like crap without your keys."

Everyone looked at Stan.

Slurping on his straw, fat fingers engulfing his milkshake, Stan met their stares and reluctantly thumped the box on the table. Looking up at Louis' nose- Louis already knew he was upset- he swerved his head into a weird half nod. "And what did your dad say?"

Louis recapped what took place with his father and explained to Stan his reasons for deciding to go, and in the end- with a little advice on keeping his phone charged at all times while on a farm in the middle of nowhere- Stan understood.

Louis always took his friends' advice into consideration and he assured them that after talking to his Grandma, and Harry, he felt confident that he was doing the right thing.

****

Louis spent the next few days saying goodbye to teachers, classmates, and his football team; getting pity hugs from each including his coach, and on Thursday evening he indeed showed up at the Last Blast party. His friends were adamant on performing the number they had practiced together before hand. All dressed in matching silver shimmery suits complete with blue ties; Liam and Zayn did a duet with Louis on the keyboard and Calvin on guitar while Stan dominated the
drums, and the whole graduating class went wild, but Louis got dizzy with all the excitement and ran out on the others while they were still being applauded on stage. He just couldn't deal with all the happy crowd stuff so he sneaked out of the party.

Of course, they came after him and caught up with him as he took one last stroll out on the quiet football field, and they all spent the rest of the night drinking vodka on the bleachers talking about summer plans and college while listening to the faint sounds of party music in the distance. It was then that Louis brought up the subject of Harry -

"I still don't know for sure if he's into guys." Louis said, holding the bottle of vodka between his knees, tapping his feet on the bench to the music as he looked out at the tall, neighboring buildings in his vision juxtaposing the green field before them.

He and Harry had been texting each other during the week, and each time, Louis had tried not to be too obvious about how he felt. He knew they had something but he still didn't want to be mistaken that Harry thought anything more than friendship. The boy was only sixteen and Louis knew he had to be careful since he was practically family, and living in the house his mother grew up in. When he had told Harry about what his grandma had said, he was shocked beyond words. In fact, he had actually left the line vacant for a while as Louis heard him mumbling to his sister some distance away. "You're kidding me!" "Well, 'can't go in the attic for sure now!'" Louis heard them say, barely audible. He had no idea what they were talking about and tried not to eavesdrop. "Is everything okay?" he asked when he had finally heard Harry's breath in the receiver."Yep! Wow! I had no idea! This is so strange!" Harry answered. Louis replied, "I wonder what else our mothers never told us!"

Stan nudged Louis' shoulder and nodded toward Zayn snapped his fingers to get Louis' attention. Louis handed Zayn the bottle and he took a swig before handing it to Liam who just smelled it and turned his nose up then handed it to Calvin who lay flat on the bench with his legs crossed, looking up at the starry sky.

"Dude, what have you got to lose? I, for one, will not be suffering for tail this summer. My foster parents don't know what they're unleashing on Brazil! I heard they got some really hot chicks down there and I'm not gonna sit on my ass-unless of course, they prefer it that way." a tipsy Calvin slurred as they heard smacking noises coming from their left. Louis knew it was getting late when a drunk Zayn started snogging Liam in public- something he never does sober.

Stan leaned all the way into Louis, almost tipping him over, trying to distance himself from the shameless couple. "God! Get a room!"

Calvin was so steadfast in his belief that Harry was into Louis, that he said he felt like he had dropped into a porn vid when they were up in his room.

Louis shrugged off his insistence, not wanting to jump to conclusions, but Calvin stood firm. "Dude, how long have we been friends? I think I'd know a gay guy when I see one."

Louis then showed them the text Harry had sent the night after he left, and after brief differences of opinions, they all came to the consensus that it was a downright flirt. Louis took their words for it but assured them that although getting to see Harry again was a bonus, he really just wanted to go for his mother. "I don't know how I'm going sleep at night if I don't do this, guys."

*****

In the hallway after his last day of high school had finished, Louis emptied his locker. All the hugs had left the building and every move he made sounded amplified. He sighed and slammed the
locker shut, leaving only the collection of stickers he had put there periodically since his first week of high school for the next occupier.

As he turned to walk away his sneakers screeched in the abandoned hall, echoing, and he felt a sense of dread, not knowing what his life would be like now that high school was over. He wondered if his mother was still around if he'd still feel the same on his last walk out the door of his high school. If his throat would still clench up and hurt with the imminence of tears welling up in his eyes. If the school smells would still be strangely heightened... If the school cafeteria would still quietly beckon for him to sit and laugh with his friends one last time... As these feelings were thoroughly blended with the emptiness of losing his mother, he will never know.

But what he did know was that her last wish for him would be realized.

Chapter End Notes

R.I.P Olive, Louis Tomlinson's Nana. Sending all my support to Louis

ps- This chapter was written weeks before the fandom heard the news, and the character of his Mother's aunt (who is known as Grandma) is an original one not based on a real life person.

Also congratulations to Louis on his Teen Choice Award, Choice Male Artist 2018! I'm so proud! Louis buzzin!
Hey Guys! Sorry for the delay in updates! Comments are welcome!

**Louis' POV**

"I'm taking my fish and that's that!" Daisy yelled to her father who tried to grip the fish bowl, reminding her it was only for two weeks.

Louis darted from behind, taking Honey the fish and giving it to Grandma, who was lolling in the yard while they packed their luggage in the car; then checked his phone which had buzzed a few seconds earlier.

"Hey!" Daisy hit Louis on his bicep and made to take back the fish.

"Don't worry, Daisy, Dear. I'll take care of Honey for you, just have to keep him away from Tamar!" Grandma said, referring to her pet cat.

Daisy gasped and hit Louis again as he grabbed her hand away from the fish while he read the text. Almost there. Abt 10 mins away.

Louis typed a reply. Can't wait to see you. Take your time on the road.

"Okay, okay, Guys! It's just Harry and Gemma coming so I'm gonna ride with them, okay?" He said, relieving Fizzie of her duffel bag.

"I wanna go with you, Louis!" said an excited Phoebe. "Yeah, me too!" said Daisy, who kept eyeing for a chance to take back her fish.

"Sorry, Dad. I'm going with Gemma and Harry." Lottie said, measuring the livelier ride.

Mark threw his hands up, accepting that he would be carrying most of the luggage and Fizzie, who had no choice but to ride with him now that everyone else would be filling Gemma's car. She didn't mind though- she hated her dad feeling left out and he was already losing out on two weeks with them.

Louis stuffed the trunk with the last of the luggage, pushing the duffel bag past its' limits to allow the lid to close. As he sighed deeply, he felt a hand touch his shoulder. He turned around to meet his father's wary gaze. "Son, I know this isn't the time, but I've been thinking-actually I sort of made a few arrangements . . ."

"Louis' eyes narrowed and he stuck his chin out curiously as he shoved his hands in his coat pockets. "Dad, come on. We don't have all day. . ."

His father took a deep breath. "I think it's best if you come back to Australia with us. . . Permanently."

Louis pulled his hands out of his pockets and held them up. "Wai- wait wait! You want me to
what? You do know I'm going to the most sought after college on this side of the globe, right? I don't exactly understand."

"Louis, it's okay. I've spoken to a few friends, and a transfer is underway. I need my boy with me. You're my responsibility now. I can't just leave you all by yourself over here."

"A trans- What!? Are you out of your mind!? All my friends are here! Grandma is here!" He pointed to the fragile woman standing on the sandstone driveway, still holding Honey the fish.

"Louis, trust me. This is best for your future. Australia has good opportunities for you and your sisters-"

"And what about Ernie and Dorie! They are my brother and sister too! You think I'm just gonna forget about them!? Louis flared his hands. "Gosh, you are so SELFISH!"

"Louis," Fizzie called. "Nobody wants to be away from Ernie, or Dorie, or Grandma. Dad's just trying to help." she spun around to her father, "Dad, maybe you should've brought this up before now, I mean, we're about to leave..."

Louis burst out into a rage, feeling his vein popping in his neck. "This is exactly what he wanted! To throw me off from going to Champton! You know what, Dad- I'm still going, and then after that I'm going to Wales to be with my baby brother and sister, and then after that I'm going to college in Doncaster and I'm staying with Grandma! I'm not going a shit to Australia with you! You are not going to show up after five years of not being here and dictate my life!"

Mark looked hurt. His eyes fell into a wade of red tears. "Louis, I tried my best. I was here for things. Yes, I missed your graduation, but your mum sent me the video. I try my best! This is me trying my best!"

"Thank you." Daisy said in a low but perky voice to her Grandma as she grabbed the fish bowl from the old woman. Lottie and sat on the driveway, clearly scared of the yelling and Daisy put the fish on her lap sending water splashing on her orange tights. "You hold Honey!" "Hey!"

Kim stood on the doorstep, arms folded, looking at the scene. Dan had left her in charge of the babies while he drove his mother, who had been staying at Kim's house, back to the airport; The reason Anne offered to send Gemma's car to help bring the kids and their luggage to Champton.

Fizzie, sighing, came and stood between the two men. "Louis, just think about it, okay. Let's just enjoy whatever time we have together now, and you think about it." She looked at her father, "We aren't going to make any rash decisions right now."

Grandma peered out into the road. "Look, they'll be here any minute now. We don't want them to see our long faces now. They'll think you're not as enthusiastic to go!"

Louis flared his nostrils at his father's audacity. "Dad, whatever you're doing- or did- Call it off! Call it off or I swear to you I'll never speak to you again!"

"At least until he has time to consider, Dad." Fizzie pleaded.

Mark ignored her and kept his desperate eyes, and hands, toward Louis. "Louis, there is a small window of opportunity. I can't go cancelling these kinds of deals."

Louis put his hands behind his head and let out a loud painful, frustrated noise. "Do you not here what I'm saying!? How ignorant can you be!? I'M NOT GOING WITH YOU!" He turned to Fizzie. "He's not even giving me a choice! If he had asked me, I would've said no! Even if I didn't,
I still needed time to think about it, and he knows that!" He flung his index finger at his father defiantly, "But you went ahead and did it without my permission! Congratulations, Dad, you screwed up my life again!"

Louis stood panting from his rage, feeling so much anger, he needed to scream. His father made a sudden move to touch him, and he threw his hand out defensively, turning away from him. He looked up, and-

Two pairs of eyes were on him, peering out from the white Honda Civic that had quietly eased to a stop in the road in front of the house. Harry's face proper showed a bad-timing look, and Gemma's reflected exactly what Louis was feeling right now—utter embarrassment.

After what felt like a year, the girls looked to their father for guidance as to what move to make; and he gestured for a hug. Phoebe threw her arms around him and then pelted toward Gemma and Harry as the latter opened the door and got out. Lottie gave her dad a brief hug and took Louis' arm shyly. Mark made to hug Daisy but she made a zigzag around Fizzie and sprinted toward her twin sister. Kim had enough time to run for the youngest twins and bring them out to say goodbye.

"Louis," Mark started, sounding apologetic. He felt his hand rest on the back of his neck, and he jerked away.

"No." Louis muttered to his father as Grandma came over for an embrace. He rest his head on her shoulder as he hugged her, fighting back angry tears. He hated his father for causing a scene right when Harry showed up. "I love you, Grandma."

When Dorie saw Daisy enter the strange vehicle, she started to cry, and the girls had to jump back out and run for a hugs. Ernie, on the other hand, took it quite well! He even shoved everyone's face away from him as they caved in for kisses, with Louis getting a downright slap which he reciprocated by holding his baby brother's hands down as he cascaded him with a ton of sloppy snacks and mock baby noises.

Harry helped pack the carry-on bags, and although the girls had taken their seats by this time; he waited for Louis to let go of his Grandma and the babies, only jumping back in when Louis was ready.

With her I'm-the-second-oldest-so-I'm-almost-your-equal face, Fizzie patted her brother's back and got into her father's car; and Louis himself descended into Gemma's car.

Daisy shouted at Harry as he moved for the passenger side. "No, don't go in front! I don't want to sit with Lottie in the back! Let her go in front with Honey!"

Eyebrows raised at the sudden order being barked at him, Harry jumped in the back with Daisy while Lottie took shotgun.

Everyone looked on as Mark hustled up to Gemma's car and dipped his head down, peering at Lottie. "Lottie, get in the back! Now!"

Lottie made a whiny noise while unbuckling the seatbelt as Louis opened his door and got out to switch places.

Then... a fight broke out-

Daisy, who was sitting between Harry and Phoebe, glided over her sister and clawed at Louis' jacket, pinning him in an awkward position. She started yelling. "I don't want Lottie in the back! Her butt is huge and she sits on me!"
"Oh my God, Daisy!" Lottie's blonde hair swished, and her pink lip-glossy mouth fell completely open as she glared back. "You wouldn't even be sitting next to me if I were to come back there!"

Harry giggled at Louis as he tried to pry his sister's strong fingers away without hurting her, and he couldn't help but smile back through his predicament.

"Lottie, you should take that as a complement!" Louis said, to which Lottie's mouth fell even wider.

He heard a slight on-the- verge-of-ripping sound."Let go of me, Daise!"

Then Phoebe started. "Dad, please! I wanna sit with Louis! I can't go so far without him!"

Mark looked wary of these tantrums. "Phoebe, he will be right there!" he said, pointing at the seat in front of her, which still held a reluctant Lottie.

Daisy shouted back at him, almost ripping Louis' coat."You're mean! You just want Louis to die first if we get in an accident! I hate you!"

Gemma shot Harry a look, and he got out of the car. "I'll hold the fish for you in the front."

Daisy tried to grab Harry with her other hand. "No! Let Lottie hold Honey in the front! Come back, Harry!"

Phoebe's eyes started to water and her voice broke as she begged for her brother to sit with her.

Daisy huffed at her, still gripping Louis' sleeve. "You're always crying, you big baby! Shut up!"

Louis ducked back inside the car and put on the biggest big-brother-angry-face he could come up with, which wasn't hard at the moment; and Daisy -on seeing it- let go immediately.

"Daisy, say sorry!" Louis yelled at her.

"Louis, don't yell at your sister!" Mark shot, darting forward to look in through the back window now.

Louis glared back at him but stayed silent as Phoebe took possession of his arm now.

Then Fizzie showed up. "You know what, Dad, let them sit where they like. It's a long drive and they wanna be comfortable. We'll be right behind them if anything happens. It's getting late, we should be on the Highway by now!"

"No, Fizzie. Lottie get in the back. That's my final word!" Mark barked.

Lottie jumped out of the front passenger side and handed Harry the fish- and Daisy went full siren on her father. She jumped out and started screaming at the top of her lungs. Lottie froze halfway to the backseat.

Louis had had enough. He jumped out, ran around the car and grabbed her from behind, clapping her mouth shut. "Daisy! You will not embarrass me any further! Do you understand!?"

He was shouting so loud that Daisy started sobbing under his grip.

"Look at her now! I told you not to yell at her!" Mark exclaimed, looking terrified.

"Well, I'm the only one she listens to! You would know that if you were here!" Louis yelled back
as he knelt in front of her.

"I want my mum!"

Everyone went silent as they heard it. A tiny squeal with the echo of a promise to return with the sad message louder than before, coming from the backseat. Both Kim and Grandma stood looking on helpless, with Ernie standing on the grass yelling nonsense words at Daisy, and Dorie spectating quietly in Kim's arms.

Just as Louis expected, Phoebe continued to wail as she clenched the bars on the neck of the front seat. "I. Want. My. Mummmm!!!!" Louis was silently heartbroken he couldn't go to her now as he was already dealing with a crying twin.

Unbuckling her seat-belt and opening the door, Gemma finally got out. Unbuckling her seat-belt and opening the door, Gemma finally got out. She half-ran to Phoebe and took the girl in her arms, kissing her head and whispering to her.

"I don't want to sit with Lottie." Daisy said more slowly now as she continued sobbing.

Louis smoothed her blonde, braided pigtails in each hand and held her shoulders tightly. "Do you want to sit with Fizzie? I can go with Dad-

"NO! He'll make you angry the whole time!" Daisy said, placing her hands on his shoulders. Louis lowered his head and wiped his own tears that had started to emerge.

"Yeah, you're right." He said, not wanting anything to do with the man at the moment. "Then Lottie has to sit with you because I have to be next to Phoebe. So you have to behave for me, please! I need you to be good today, and for the next few weeks, okay?"

The child nodded as Louis wiped her tears with the back of his sleeve and pulled her into a hug.

"See? This is why you should come, Louis. Your sisters need you!" Louis' father added, his voice low and urgent.

Louis sighed as he got up, leading the child back inside the car. "This isn't the time, Dad."

Finally settled down, everyone took their places, with Harry in the front holding Honey the fish at his feet, and the Tomlinson's huddled in the back seat; and both cars took off for the three-hour trip, waving back at their family left in the yard.

"I'm so sorry about that, Gemma. They don't normally behave like this."

Gemma shook her head, looking in the rear-view mirror at him. "No, that's okay. Harry does that to me all the time!"

Harry nearly caught a fit. "What!? How did I come in this?" He then stuck his head in the back seat. "If it means anything, I win most of the time."

Daisy chuckled and Lottie engulfed her with a hug. "Get off me, you balloon!"

Louis tried to discard of his father's influence on his attitude as they drove away; blowing a sigh and remembering that the man was following him all the way to where he didn't want Louis to go in the first place. To where Louis now wanted to be away from him. A little more than a week since the funeral; this was the longest his dad and sisters had visited for. Louis and the twins needed him and he was there. Louis wished he'd understand that that's all he needed from him now,
or anytime- To just be there.

He knew for sure Fizzie was already grilling him as the two of them were alone for the whole trip.

Louis smiled at Harry whose eyes were already on him in the mirror, and quietly watched the boy's dimples turn red, smiling back. He wasn't sure how he'd like being miles away from civilization. He would miss his friends terribly particularly Stan who Louis never went a day without seeing, but that dimpled face brightened his prospects.

Halfway to their destination, Gemma pulled into a gas station. Daisy had dosed off on Lottie, and Louis was still holding the pink fluffy jacket containing a solemn Phoebe drinking her little box of juice.

"Harry, wake up!" Gemma said, poking her brother. He jumped out of his sleep and she handed him some cash. "You go pay, I'll fill up."

"I'm taking the front!" Lottie said as soon as Harry emerged from the vehicle. "She's dribbling on me!" she added, meeting Louis' stern gaze.

Harry came back a few minutes later and jumped in the back, replacing Lottie, behind Gemma. Lottie sat relieved next to Gemma, with Honey the fish between her feet.

Gemma closed the tank and got back in. "Your dad saw that. He's watching like a hawk back there!"

Lottie looked back and grinned. "We're almost there anyway. He has to deal!"

Louis and Harry exchanged smiles.

Buzzzzzzzzzzz

Louis shifted to retrieve his phone from his back pocket, and saw it was his father calling. "What, Dad?"

"What happened there? Why is Lottie shotgun again?!" he said through the receiver.

"Daisy fell asleep on her and drooled all over her-"

"Dad!" Louis heard Fizzie in the background. Then he heard a deep sigh from his father. "Louis. . . Let's make a deal. I'll stall the transfer for a couple of weeks in which you will genuinely think about it. Please, I want all of you together."

Louis closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. "I don't see how a couple of weeks are going to change anything but okay. If I say no, then you have to respect that, Dad."

... A pause followed.

"Okay. But this has to go both ways. Promise you will give it thought. Soak on it . . ."

"Okay." was all Louis had to offer before hanging up.

Lottie, who had twisted herself around, listening the conversation, studied her brother's face. Louis gave her a look that said "It's fine." And she turned back to face front.

As they drove on, Lottie asked how the wifi was on the farm in the middle of nowhere. Louis himself wanted to know the same thing, as Calvin and Zayn promised to post pictures on their
social media from their respective vacation destinations in Brazil and Kuwait.

"Oh, there's wifi alright. But I don't know where you're going to find the time out here! I've been home for a week and I forgot what my phone looks like!"

Louis considered what she said and looked over to Harry who was fading in and out of sleep; head falling and jerking up repeatedly. He had woken up to a text that morning from Harry, stating that he hadn't slept the night before; helping his mother with last minute cleanup to prepare for the new housemates.

Phoebe's head started to lean into Louis as she too fell into sleep mode, and just as Louis thought, Daisy followed suit, burying her face into a sleepy Harry's shoulder. Louis watched Harry's head gently fall onto his sister's sleeping one, making them look like puppies cuddled together; and felt a warm sense of belonging. He stretched his hand over and gently moved a curl that had fallen onto Harry's face and was tickling his nose; which kept cutely scrunching up, threatening to wake him and Phoebe both up if Louis didn't move it.

Nearing the countryside, Louis gently nudged his sleeping sisters.

"Welcome to Champton Valley." Phoebe read as they passed the town entry Billboard.
On The Ranch

Chapter Notes

Hi! Glad to update! Things are going to get intense from here! If you like this so far, Kudos and comments are appreciated!
Feel free to follow me-
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Louis' pov

As they entered the town and passed the buildings that used to be familiar to his mother, and would soon be familiar to Louis and his sisters, Louis peered out the window and took in the scenery. The grocery store, a toy store, the gas station, a clothing store... He pictured his mom being there. Walking those streets, barely four feet tall, with her backpack to school...

They went past the town buildings and soon there were only pastures on either side of the road. They slowed around a corner and drove up a hill past a sign that read "Twist Ranch", and a fairly sized farmhouse came into view. It was humble looking with a peak at the top where a little window was lodged in what had to be the attic. Louis quite liked the house and immediately pictured his mother running up the hill as a child, with brunette ponytail bouncing behind her.

As soon as he exited the car, a huge black dog jumped up on him and started barking and smelling him. The twins screamed in fear.

Harry called the dog and stooped down to pet it. "He's okay. He's just trying to get your scent. Come on! Let him sniff you a bit to get accustomed to you guys."

Louis bent down and petted the dog. Daisy clutched his hand and tried to pull it away, protectively. "It's okay, Daise. What's his name?" Louis said as he encouraged the twins to come closer to the dog.

Mark and Fizzie pulled up behind them and got out.

"Clifford! We say Cliff for short." Harry said, kissing the animal's head and receiving licks in return. The girls giggled.

Louis slowly came upright and turned around and almost bumped into his father whose eyes were boring into his in a way Louis was sure was meant to reinforce their previous understanding. He gave him a tentative nod of agreement and hoped he would drop the whole thing until another time- or completely.

Gemma took Phoebe's hand and Fizzie nudged Louis to walk along. Mark started pulling luggage out of his car while everyone else walked up to the house where a beaming Anne was waiting on
the threshold; arms wide open. She hugged and kissed the girls while a broad young man who was on the porch waiting as well politely introduced himself as Cord, and enthusiastically shook hands with Louis.

"I'm so happy! Sweetheart, you have no idea! Are you okay? Come. Come inside!" Anne said, crying as she squeezed Louis with what felt like all her might.

While Gemma showed the girls to their room upstairs, and Anne gave a quick tour of the grounds to Mark; Harry helped Louis pull his luggage into a room downstairs. The room was adjacent to the kitchen, and the entrance was next to the stairs leading to the second floor. As the boys entered, Louis noticed it was a large room with a partition straight through the middle dividing a neat double sized bed and a dresser on one side, from shelves full of books; a stack of musical equipment; and a desk, on the other side.

Louis smiled as his eyes glazed over the guitar Harry played at his home before.

"This used to be my Granddad's office. I hope it's okay because I was gonna move all my stuff to the garage but there's a leak. We're gonna fix that soon, so it'll be bigger for you..." Harry said as Louis dropped his bag in a corner. "I was supposed to clean the attic but there are bats. . ."

Louis laughed at Harry's mock-scared face. "I'm with you on that! Bats, birds...Throw anything that flies at me if you wanna hear me scream like a girl. . ."

Harry giggled like a rattle and held his belly, and Louis himself fell into laughter.

"But- no, really. This is fine. Thanks Harry." Louis said, looking around.

He noticed the room only had one large window, and the wooden partition sliced it down the middle, leaving half on Louis side of the room. A fancy, white curtain with flowered patterns hung on it; the bed was adorned with a fresh, well laid duvet and two large, fluffy pillows. It looked so comfortable, Louis quite wanted to dive into it.

The boys went back to the cars for the rest of Louis and the girls' things, and Louis took out his keyboard last. Harry grabbed the stand and they set it down next to Harry's drum set. "Looks right at home, I'd say." Louis quipped, nudging Harry's shoulder.

Harry pressed a couple keys with two fingers, and something about that made Louis' insides skip. He moved slowly behind Harry and held his fingers, guiding him where to press. He slid his other hand around Harry so that he held the fingers on Harry's other hand as well, his chest brushing against Harry's back; but let go when he felt him tense up at the sudden intimacy. The last thing he wanted was to alienate Harry but he couldn't help himself. The boy had been so nice when they met, and now they had this time to get to know each other better. Louis was excited about that and he didn't know if he had any right to be.

I should be honest with him and just tell him I'm gay...

Knock! Knock!

The Tomlinson girls flooded in all talking at the same time and tugging at the boys to go outside with them. Gemma wheeled in behind them. Harry looked happy and scared at the same time and Louis giggled at him.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to them soon." He grinned at Harry and Gemma.

Gemma answered. "Wow, you guys are like Harry times four!"
Harry flared his palms and pretend frowned. "Hey!"

However, Louis found that statement endearing and met Harry's eyes, smiling. Harry smiled back as they all left the room.

They headed through the kitchen and out a door leading to the back porch, where the girls leaned over the banister, gasping at the scenery. A huge round pen lay in the middle a few yards out, with a stable and a barn on one side and some kind of quarters on the other. Beyond that, way out, Louis saw what looked like cattle in green pastures that stretched out as far as the eyes could see. Immediately he tried to picture his mother there as a kid. He wondered how hard it must've been to leave a place like this.

Lottie must've had the same thought because she then said, "Well Mum, we're here. This place really is beautiful..."

Louis hugged her.

Fizzie on the other hand was disgruntled. "Where are the horses!"

Harry answered. "Oh, they're in the stables. You guys wanna go?"

Loud chatter and cheers followed.

They huddled down the backstairs and stooped as they saw their father and Anne coming back from the very stables. Louis knew his dad wanted to inspect every square inch of the farm to make sure it was safe enough for the girls to tread- especially knowing Daisy and how hyper she is.

"Well, Guys, looks like I'll be seeing you in two weeks!" Mark said as they approached the children.

"Does that mean you've stamped your approval, Dad?" Louis teased in his best I'm-still-mad-at-you-but-I-love-you voice, as the girls hugged their father goodbye.

"Well, it is what it is." The man said before turning to Anne. "You have a lovely place here, Anne. I'm sure the girls will love it here. It'll bloody take them two weeks to get from one place to another! Jay did say it was huge..." He wiped the sweat that was dripping down from his forehead to his polished shoes, with a tissue.

"Well I'm afraid that's just you, Mark! Someone needs a bit of exercise." Anne said "I did say you're welcome to stay if you change your mind."

Mark scoffed." Trying to adopt the whole family, are we?"

Gemma seemed to find that funny and let out a hysterical laugh and everyone in the yard giggled.

Mark kissed the girls "goodbye" before pulling Louis close, kissing the top of his head and patting his shoulder. Louis felt Harry's eyes on him; and sure enough when he looked, he was staring at him, but Harry didn't turn away on the eye contact. He kept the gaze, with Louis wondering what his eyes were saying.

Lottie opted to walk back with her dad to the car as the others waited for her on the back stairs. Louis looked at Harry as they leaned on the railing. He seemed quiet and distant.

Louis pulled out his phone.
"Look what Ernie did to my phone." He said showing Harry his screensaver which was a picture of Ernie so close to the camera that his nostrils were the main focus.

Harry's face broke into a giggle and he let out a snort.

*Score! Gotta remember the give Ernie a kiss for that.*

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Harry lead them to the stables, treading over a track where the grass was worn out by constant on-foot trafficking.

"Oh, my!" Phoebe said as a tall chestnut brown horse came into view, peaking its' head over a stall.

Fizzie leaped into the air and skipped over to the animal, poking her index up at it.

"No, come back! It'll bite you!" Lottie said, holding onto Louis' shirt.

Harry walked over to the horse. This. . . is *Phoebe*!" he said happily.

Everyone looked at him.

"But she's Phoebe!" "But I'm Phoebe!" Phoebe and her siblings said at the same time.

Harry laughed, looking at Louis who was leaning on the door of the opposite stall. Louis pushed up and stood on his toes to see inside. Empty. He took a walk around. The entire left side was empty. He turned to Harry who was already smiling at him.

"We only have five horses and a pony." He said pointing to the stalls next to Phoebe the horse's.

He looked back at the girls. "This Phoebe, has been here long before me..." He gave the horse a few rubs, showing Fizzie how to do it, and one by one the other girls came up to them and stuck out their hands to the animal who was more than happy to extend its nuzzle toward them.

They heard the sound of boots nearing and soon Anne, Gemma and Cord joined them. Cord and Gemma seemed to be busy carrying saddles and reins and other equipment.

Anne said, "Phoebe, meet *Phoebe*, your name's sake."

Fizzie leaped in excitement. "Oh, this is the horse you told me about! She's so beautiful! Oh my God- *Phoebe*, ha!"

"Lahahaha! You're a horse, Phoebes!" Lottie laughed as Phoebe frowned.

Louis walked over to the horse and tilted his head, examining the horse's features. "Looks about right to me!" he said, flatly.

Everyone exploded in laughter and Harry covered his face in his palm.

"Phoebe was your mothers' horse." Anne said proudly, standing tall in her equestrian suit. Louis had to look up to meet her eyes.

Phoebe the horse bowed her head to meet Louis and nudged the side his head. He responded by patting her, all the while wondering why his mother never mentioned her. If she missed the country so bad, why never talk about it? He sighed at the animal as Harry walked up to them.
"Oh, I think she likes you!" Harry said, just as another horse dipped from its' stall and started nibbling on his curls.

"Whoa! He's hungry!" Louis exclaimed as Harry pushed the horse off of his hair.

"This is Scotch- Bad Scotch!" Harry pointed sternly at the horse, which was a different brown from Phoebe; a sort of orange-y brown. Louis smiled as he watched Harry kiss the animal several times and rubbed their noses together. He assumed that one was Harry's horse.

Daisy walked up to Anne and asked, "If she's named after mum's horse, which one am I named after?"

Louis thought about that. "That's a good question, Daisy."

Anne smiled smugly. "That, my Dear, is a surprise for another day."

"Winniepeg- She's a pony." Harry called out as they passed the stalls of horses that weren't so keen on saying hello to their new friends.

Harry tiptoed over the door and called the mare again but she whinnied at him and didn't move from her spot down on the hay.

"Salsa- don't ask; and Poppy. . ." he finished as youngest girls bent down to look under the stalls trying to coax the animals to come out, with Fizzie taking pictures on her phone to show her friends back in Australia.

"Harry, why don't you show them the other animals while we tack up the horses for exercise." said Cord nodding to Gemma who was attaching a bridle to Scotch. Harry nodded and gestured for the others to exit the stable.

They strutted around the farm taking in the sites as excitedly as if they were at a zoo; calling the sheep as they grazed in the pastures.

Harry lead them to a small building on the other side of the stable. As they entered, the pungent smell of animals mixed with dried grass was dominant just as the horse stable, only slightly different odor- as they were a different species of animal- Louis figured.

Louis saw his sisters trying hard not to turn their noses up rudely, as Harry's face lighted up at the sight of little lambs in their pens running up to the gates as their little red eyes fell on Harry.

To Louis, Harry was a vision; leaning over to pet the animals as Louis and the girls came beside him.

"They'll get used to you." Harry said. "This is Penelope; Cotton-although they all look like cotton; Softball; and Ginger!"

As he pointed them out, Louis' sisters cackled at how the lambs reacted to their names being called.

Harry reached in and took one up in his arms, and walked over to a bench on the opposite wall. He motioned for the twins to sit with him as he put a bottle in it's mouth.

"I want to hold the baby lamb, Harry!" Daisy said, as politely as she could, watching Harry feed the lamb the bottle. The cute animal sucked contentedly in Harry's arms.

"You don't say a 'baby lamb', Daisy. You say baby sheep or just lamb," Louis corrected.
Daisy turned to Harry, who was cradling the little animal almost like a human baby, and asked "What do you say, Harry?"

Harry rolled his eyes thoughtfully and answered nodding. "I -- I pretty much say baby lamb."

He edged his teeth apologetically, looking at Louis, causing both girls to giggle, and Louis to make a teasing mocking face.

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The evening breeze blew softly on the old house, making the loose edge of the galvanized roof shudder, alerting the new guests as they were enjoying glasses of lemonade after a hearty dinner made by Harry. Anne huffed and told Harry to remind her to get Murrey on it.

"Yeah, I'm going by that way tomorrow. I have to catch up with Niall. I can't sleep tonight until I have some kind of a hook for us to build on!"

He explained to the curious faces that he had a deadline to meet as he was composing a piece for a community fundraising concert coming up next week, and sleep was out of the question for him until it came together.

"Oh, Harry. Why don't you just sing one of your old songs? You have a whole book filled with them." His mother asked.

"I loved the one you sang for us at- um- " Phoebe's voice trailed off.

Louis brushed his fingers through her hair and sighed as she swung back her face into his chest to hide her tears. It was times like this he was frustrated he would not be there in the future to help his sisters cope. Lottie and Fizzie's presence helped a lot considering they were hardly physically there over the years, and Louis understood that they will have to take over once the twins settle in Australia and he goes to college but he was still the only one who shared the exact weight of their mother's loss; having lived in the same house, ate the same home cooked meals, heard her voice everyday at the same time as the twins so naturally they looked to him first whenever they got triggered, like now. He sighed, thinking about his father. Was he right? Did Louis really have to stay in Doncaster while Phoebe and Daisy adjust in a new country without him? Then he mulled over what his mother would say. What she would want.

"Well, thanks Phoebe," Harry said softly, "Everyone has these new ideas for a play and dances and stuff. Niall is supposed to be helping me but his dad, our town minister, has him doing charity work for the fair. Every year we have a huge charity fundraising fair for three days. There are different booths and cool stuff to see. The concert is on the last day. The whole community comes together and everything goes to the needy."

Lottie's eyes widened. "Well, can we be a part of the fundraiser?"

"Yeah, I wanna be in the concert too." Daisy jumped in.

"Oh, yes! That's a splendid idea!" Anne said, rubbing Phoebe's back as she continued sobbing into her brother's T-shirt.

"I bet we can get you two roles in it!"

"Yeah, they always need help down at the Community Center." Harry added.

"The Center is only a phone call away, Mum!" Gemma said, pointing to the front door, gesturing to
the landline in the living room.

Phoebe emerged from Louis’ chest and joined. "If you're going to make a new song make one just like the one you sang at our place. Maybe different lyrics, but same song."

"I think you mean same message, Phoebes." Louis corrected.

Harry nodded at them. "I better get to it! See you guys in a bit!" And with that he jumped out of swing and darted inside.

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Harry and Louis POV

"You didn't tell me you wrote that..."

Except for the sound of guitar strings, the backyard was quiet and all the animals were probably resting for the evening when Louis strolled up to Harry who sat on a huge whitewashed boulder large enough to fit three people- if they touched shoulders. The sun was supposed to be setting but it was apparently hidden by clouds causing a twilight effect on Harry's pale features. He propped the guitar head on the grass between his feet as he turned to Louis. Louis' breath punched him in the neck as he looked into the boy's eyes.

"Well, yeah, I did." Harry said, shifting as Louis drew near and slid his bum down next to him.

"It seemed somehow to speak to what we're going through at the moment. I think we all liked it. When did you write it?" Louis asked as he haphazardly ran his hand over the guitar edge.

Harry shrugged pretending the movement didn't affect him. It affected him like a ramsacked room. He turned the other way facing the round pen and swallowed. "I wrote it a few years ago, for my mum."

Louis bent his head to get a view of Harry's face. The little light left was fading fast but he was certain he caught a bit of disdain in Harry's expression. He vowed not to continue what he felt may have come across like an interrogation to Harry, and chose to just say, "It's a beautiful song. I can't wait to hear what you've got for the concert thing. Maybe you can play us one of your other songs?"

"Sure," Harry said, raising his eyebrows. "What are your sisters doing now?"

"Well, Anne has them watching TV, but they'll fall asleep in no time. Had a long day." Just after he said it, the sun had disappeared and it was dark. "Well, I'm glad actually. We can get a chance to chat. Or do you wanna go inside? It's getting dark out here."

"No, it's okay. Gemma's gonna come and put the lights on- four, three, two, one..."

As soon as Harry said "one", the back porch light came on and threw a bit of light over the back yard.

"Ha! You were dead on it!" Louis flung himself backward all the way until his belly was arched over the boulder. Harry sat laughing as he waited for him to get a hold of himself enough to get back up.

"Mum..." Harry giggled. "Mum's made her do it every day since she came home! So she's like a trained puppy!"
This emanated even harder giggles from Louis. The sounds tickled Harry's ear as the other boy slowly forced himself upright. They both sat, awkwardly staring at each other as the giggles died down.

Harry turned away and lightly knocked the guitar on the grass. "Um," he started, looking up again, "What's up with you and your dad?"

Louis expression changed faster than a car wheel takes to spin one cycle. He looked down at his feet, then turning to face Harry as he propped one leg between them, holding his ankle as it lay sock-less in his sneakers; he shook his head, frustrated.

"We were having an argument when you guys came. He wants me to move to Australia with him and the girls. He's getting me a transfer to some college there. Says it's as good as a done deal."

Harry felt a dread at those words. He turned his waist in to face Louis as much as he could without moving his legs. Louis had texted him all about his predicament with not being able to see any of his siblings often once they split up for Australia and Wales, and Louis being set for college in the very city he grew up in. But now he's going *with them?*

"I hope it's as good as Doncaster College. He knows you won't get an opportunity like that again, right? I mean, Gemma almost didn't make the cut! They only accept the best!"

"I know! And my dad knows that too! He's just... I think, trying to make up for stuff."

Louis trailed off. "*Like?*" Harry pushed. He didn't understand what could justify stripping your son of something he worked so hard for and making look like a good thing.

"I don't wanna talk about my dad. I want to clear my head of that and focus on your beautiful farm!"
"No I didn't order too much! I wanted this exact amount!" Anne explained to Harry as he stood arms folded looking at a pile of new unused board left over from the recent repairs on the house. She insisted she knew there would be excess but she kept them in suspense until now.

Murrey and his father, John, who got time off from the store to come help his son, stood boot-and-glove clad waiting to hear what she proposed they do with it.

"Well, Louis," she said, looking at the boy dressed in a white t-shirt and dark blue jeans standing next to Harry, "When your mum and I were children, we had the neatest little tree house up there." She pointed at a huge tree to their left which was giving little shade to them from its distance. A bright, sunny morning- Louis was able to notice there was a dilapidated remnant of a tree house in it.

"Well, your mother mentioned it in her e-mails and I thought, well, what the heck! Let's build a new one! Today!" she added to John and Murrey.

Phoebe and Daisy leaped and screamed out. Louis reached and covered Harry's ears playfully from the noises. Harry smiled and clutched Louis' fingers, and Louis' hand ended up dropping over his shoulder.

"Now, look here, Anne . . . There are a few things we need to do before we jump right into building a tree house!"

Anne looked at John, puzzled. "First thing's first, we have to inspect the bark! That tree is no doubt hundreds of years old! We don't want any accidents."

Louis' arm stiffened at that last word. From the corner of his eye he saw Harry turn to watch him and was sure he felt the tension on his shoulder. He dragged his hand off as Anne continued.

"Whatever it takes. Do what you have to do! I'll check in with you when we get back!"

She took the twins' hands and lead everyone to the round riding pen where the horses strutted around lazily in the sun. Cord, Ivory Stetson sitting religiously on his head, was busy fixing the saddle on one of them.

Louis and Harry walking, feet briskly stepping in time with each other; And Harry suddenly stopped, looking at him with crystal ball eyes..

"Yeah." Louis answered quickly. The last thing he wanted was to talk about his sensitivity toward anything that reminded him of his mother's death. "Didn't you say you were going to Niall's today?" he then asked, swaying to come upright again.

"Yeah. Didn't you say you were going to Niall's today?" he said, swaying to come upright again.

"Yeah. We cancelled. He said he'd come out to the ranch tomorrow for sure." Harry answered in a matter-of-fact way, as they started walking again, watching where he was going.

Louis' gaze moved like the arrow of a compass toward the boy's jawline. His neck and chest were
shining with tiny sprinkles of sweat that now surfaced, pre-trickle, on his skin. Unable to look away, Louis strangely felt like the moisture had somehow apparated from his own tongue, as he swallowed dry, ironically and weird enough, feeling the need to lick it back in.

"They're all ready, Anne." Cord called from inside the round pen as the boys ducked under the fence behind Anne and the girls, entering the circle.

Anne heaved and lifted Daisy up onto one of the horses.

"Great! Let's see if we can get them used to being on a horse before we take them out riding!" she said as Daisy yelped. The child sat mouth opened on the animal, looking to her brother with wide eyes.

Louis lifted his phone and took a picture. "You're a natural, Daise! Smile!"

As Harry showed her where to hold on, Louis took some more pictures. He cracked a smile when he heard the camera flash on him and looked toward Louis who snapped him again just in time.

Harry slowly walked Salsa in circles with Daisy on her, as Anne hefted Phoebe up on Phoebe the horse. She made terrified little noises as the hose whinnied and threw it's tail up.

"I wanna come down! Please!" she shouted as Louis and Lottie snapped pictures of her.

"What if Louis came up there with you? Would that be better?" Anne asked the distressed child, as she tried to stabilize the animal who was growing impatient with her.

"No! I want down!"

Anne took her down and comforted her as Cord helped Lottie up on Poppy the horse.

"You're really good at this, Lottie!" Cord said, guiding them around the pen. The girl eased the horse into a mild gallop and waved to Louis' camera.

Fizzy clapped looking on at her younger sister. "We took some lessons when we went to Australia the first year. When Dad tried to make it fun for us!"

"Yeah, Fizz. Those lessons were the only reason you stayed!" Lottie said out of breath as the horse picked up speed.

Louis walked up to Fizzie. "I didn't know that. You wanted to come home? But you're the one who said you wanted to live with Dad!" Fizzie eyeballed Louis and folded her hands. "Come on, Louis. It's Dad . . ."  

*What? Dad bribed you guys into going? Why am I not surprised?*

Louis gave her an understanding nod. Understanding that yesterday was not the first time his father tried to manipulate his kids. He thought back to the time just before his sisters left for Australia. Yes, his father had tried talking him into going, but his mother had quickly squashed that idea. Neither she or Louis, at the time, wanted anyone to move away. Of course he would try getting to Fizzie and Lottie. And of course he would've done anything to keep them with him once he got them to actually go.

*His dad was really good at this.*

Did he think because Louis' mother wasn't around now to stop it, he could get him to go?
Louis loved his father, but he wasn't prepared to leave half his life behind for him. Louis was already used to long distance phone calls and skype. What really pinched him was Phoebe and Daisy. He grabbed Fizzie's arm as she walked away. She had her dark hair –like her mothers'-let out, and it crawled all the way to her chest over the pockets of her blue and red plaid shirt which was tucked into her tight blue jeans, topped off with a pair of boots. Louis didn't own boots. Neither did he ride a horse before. Fizzie blended in with the scene and might even be mistaken for a cowgirl. Fizzie was always prepared for anything. Anytime Louis and the twins went to visit them, or everyone went on a trip, Fizzie was always the one to remember to bring- down to the last detail- small but important items. Like bug spray. Like, who walks around with bug spray?

"Fizz... That was a long time ago. You guys have been there for years. Surely it took more than a few horseback riding lessons to make you wanna stay that long?"

"Louis, it's Dad. It's not some weirdo who just came in and swooped us away. You remember Dad. In time I realized . . . ," she looked out at Lottie, "We realized- that we went with him because he didn't want to lose us. But we stayed because we didn't want to lose him. Louis, there's a lot I wanted to tell you but couldn't for fear Mum would find out. Dad got sober, but it wasn't easy. For the first year, Lottie and I had to literally search the flat every day and empty all his bottles in the sink. And call him screaming, pretending there was a burglar outside whenever we suspected he was at a bar instead of work. We lectured him for days about keeping his job he worked so hard to get! It was tough," she shrugged her shoulders, glancing at Lottie, then back at him, "until we finally got him to go to AA meetings. He never let us down since! Louis, we missed you guys so much, but if we didn't stay with Dad . . . ."

Louis thought about that as Fizzie took more pictures of Lottie and Daisy riding. Louis' brain started racing with what-ifs and whys. Why did Fizzie and Lottie have to deal with that alone when Louis was the eldest and should've been there too? Why did Dad subject them to kind of burden? Why didn't Louis see all that happening in Australia?

The answers came to him in tune with the camera flashes of Fizzie's cell phone- Because, he was busy missing him and being angry with the world for him for leaving.

Because he was in Doncaster, facing his own personal battles with his sexuality.

Because if he had gone he would have been no greater help to his father than his father to him. He might've ended up fighting with him over everything.

Because when he was struggling on the inside he would have had Dad the recovering alcoholic, instead of Mum who understood and helped him figure it out.

Louis didn't want to think about how that would've turned out. The Dad he remembered living with was angry and drunk most of the time but he wasn't a bad person. The Dad he knew now, living thousands of miles away was sober for five years and, still hot tempered, but nothing compared to like before. Fizzie and Lottie are happy and bright with good grades in their preppy little school. Just like his dad promised his mother when they left. Louis felt like his life would be shit if he had
been the one to go with his father. Louis had Mum, and his dad had Fizzie- who was like Mum. So they both came out okay. Away from each other. There was no need for Dad to upset that balance. Yes, Mum's gone and the dynamic's changed. And who's to say the twins won't turn out okay for Australia? But he didn't want to go. Is that selfish?

Louis wish he wouldn't worried about them so much.

"Louis?" Louis heard a voice usher him back to the present.

Slouching over to Louis, holding reins her reins and gently pulling Poppy along, Harry's face brightened. "Do you want to try?"

Wanting to box out his thoughts, Louis was on the horse in seconds. He and Daisy rode alongside each other, galloping as Lottie snapped them. Anne and Cord stood in the riding pen with them, alert in case the horses bucked. Louis had never been on a horse before. It felt strange. The horse seemed so much bigger from up here. With care for his injured knee, Louis hopped down a while after, dizzy.

"Ha! Ha! You're not made for the country, Louis! Leave it to the professionals!" Daisy yelled behind him as he watched Gemma stride up to them from the house wearing an equestrian suit to match her mother's.

"Mum? Is it time yet? I have somewhere to be later." Gemma said, tying her long brown hair up. Louis stared at her. She looked strikingly like Harry but more to her mother who Harry also resembled but not that much. Harry must look more like his father, Louis thought.

Anne turned around. "Oh! Yes! Do you all think you're ready for a ride out in the fields!?"

"YES!" screamed Daisy and Lottie together.

Phoebe looked to Louis, a mixture of terror and curiosity on her face. She ran up to him and waited for him to say something.

*Phoebe hates horses apparently, so Dad can't bribe her with that. Phoebe and Daisy need me and I don't need Australia. What am I going to do?*

Anne, seeing Phoebe's expression, came over and knelt in front of her. "I have something to show you and Daisy. You can ride with Louis. And we won't ride fast. What do you say!?"

Louis stooped and tried as well. "Come on. It'll be fun! Don't you wanna see what's out there," He grabbed her up, "Way, way out in the fields!?"

The little girl gazed out into the endless green and obliged.

"Great! It's settled! Cord, help mount up!"

Gemma interrupted. "Mum. Greg is here to check the truck. He already started. And Murrey and his dad. . . Someone has to stay back."

"That's okay! I'll stay and make sure everything doesn't go topsy turvey!" Cord piped as he made sure the horses were well tacked for a gallop in the fields.

Louis, noticing Harry having trouble with his horse, walked over. The horse riled up and neighed at Harry as he tried to attach the bridle. Louis noticed it was the same horse Harry was close to the day before.
"What's wrong with him today?" Louis asked from a distance as the horse tossed its head away from the apparatus.

Harry, frustrated, threw it down on the ground and lifted his hands to the horse. "He doesn't like to be restrained. I haven't ridden him in a while."

Jogging over to them, Cord picked up the bridle and neared the horse. "There, there. . . Scotch is an old buck horse. I'm the only one he'll let tack him!"

"But Harry's the only one who can ride him!"

Louis turned to see Anne standing supervisory behind him. She smiled at him and they both looked back at Cord, now successfully attaching the bridle.

"Damn thing threw me off once and nearly broke my spine!"

Louis found it difficult to picture Anne on a wild horse with her delicate hands and elegant gate, even if she was tall and seemed to be exuberating the toughness of a woman able to hold her own in any circumstance. Harry on the other hand was even harder to envision on a buck horse. On any horse. The lines of his shoulders were so smooth and his waist was so small, and Louis kept thinking about a crate of eggs jiggling, threatening to break as they lay strapped onto something so unstable as a galloping horse. Yet this was their life. And they seemed to be enjoying it. Heck, Louis already felt a high being up there, riding around.

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"I cannot believe what I'm seeing right now!"

"Whoa!"

"Whoa, whoa!" Anne and Daisy on Salsa; Gemma and Lottie on Poppy; Louis and Phoebe on Phoebe the horse; Harry and Fizzie on Scotch, they all gazed out into the beautiful meadow.

Looking behind him, Louis saw the house but a little dot in the distance. He swung his head back around and took in the scene with his sisters.

A wide picturesque field of daisies lay across the meadows, covering the greenest grass Louis only had Harry's eyes to compare with. He glimpsed the boy holding Fizzie's waist tightly- because they were riding a freaking buck horse for Pete's sake- however trained it was- and silently wondered if he might like her. What's not to like? She's pretty, smart, same age. . .God, Louis really hoped he didn't like girls in general, let alone Fizzie -to have to compete with his own sister. He might as well just roll over and accept defeat.

He side-eyed them, hoping to catch in their gazes, passiveness, boredom, or better yet- zero chemistry. But they just looked like two puppies nestled together for warmth or some shit. Not really romantic. Just cute.

Louis shook himself off and berated himself for letting such a stupid thing bother him- but why does she have to put her arm on his? Isn't she supposed to be holding the reins? God! Stop it, Louis! So many important things to mull through and you give way to this? He felt sick of himself as he tied to take deep breaths to release the uninvited jealous blaze.

"So! Do you see what you're named after?" Anne spoke and broke off Louis' thoughts.

Daisy's mouth fell open, and she screamed out in excitement causing Salsa to whinny and shuffle.
But she continued laughing out into the field.

"Do you see that, Phoebe? That's me!" she jumped up and down on the horse. "Are you sure, Aunty, that these are the daisies mum named me for?"

Anne nodded. "Yep. Anytime she disappeared, we found her out here with Phoebe, here."

"She must’ve been pretty nostalgic to name the twins after these things." Fizzie declared.

Louis tried to comprehend it. Louis' mother never talked about this field. She never talked about her horse. She never talked about any of this! She wanted them to go on some trip to mountains on the edge of Doncaster and then threw a tantrum to some old friend via email who she hadn't even spoken to in years but- maybe if she had brought them here to visit growing up then they would have had many more memories here to cherish all this time. Louis would never have refused coming here at any time if he had only known this place. He loved it here already. They all did. So why? Why now? Why not when they were little? Daisy and Phoebe are moving away soon so this is going to probably be their only visit until God knows when.

His unsettled mood must have been contrasting with the other fascinated faces, because Harry reached out and touched his bicep.

"Are you okay!" he asked softly, for only them to hear.

Great... Those baby doll lips again.

He shook his head and shrugged, feeling overwhelmed. He looked to the side of the horse, trying to measure his way down, lest he topple over with Phoebe-the-child. His knee was healing just fine but he didn't want to take any chances with it.

Harry, seeing it, eased himself off his horse and held up his hands to Phoebe. Louis helped her down into his arms before climbing down. Everyone else dismounted as well and Daisy grabbed her sister's hand as they ran through the field, playing.

Harry sat down on a rock in the grass, next to Louis -who was on the grass itself- as Anne and Gemma settled the horses.

"Harry, come back here! Scotch isn't going to stay without you!" Gemma called, worried, as Scotch riled up at the sound of the twins' high pitched laughter.

"Let him go, Gem. I'll just call him when we're ready."

Anne turned around, shocked. "Seriously? Harry, when you're alone out here, its fine by me! But not when you have someone else depending on the ride back!"

Fizzie ran over and grabbed Scotch's reins, walking him over to Harry. He took hold of the reins and thanked her.

Louis took note of the little smile he gave her with it, still searching for extra-friendly fondness.

Harry spotted his quick change in expression and raised his eyebrows concernedly. "So what's up? I bet you were a little nauseous because of all the riding?" Louis tossed his head around. He didn't feel nauseous at all. But he did feel disturbed.

Harry picked up one of the little flowers and started picking off the petals one by one, tucking the horse's reins haphazardly under his arm.
Louis watched him, and then, with one look into his eyes as he made to take off the last petal, Louis stuck out his fingers and picked it off for him.

"He loves me." He said propping both hands on the grass as he leaned back.

The twins were still skipping through the flowers, picking them and squealing, Anne was chatting with Lottie and Gemma, and Fizzie was busy stroking Scotch's mane.

Louis faced Harry again, and... he was still holding the naked flower, looking straight into Louis' eyes. His eyes were somewhere between what-the-heck-did-you-just-say and are-you-gonna-say-something-else, and his damn mouth was opened in the 'o' again.

Fizzie wrapped her hands around Scotch's neck and Daisy yelped out as Phoebe tumbled her on the grass. And just as Louis was about to open his mouth to say –he didn't even know what- Harry whirled around, as Scotch broke away from his slack hold and went pelting for the other side of the meadows.

"Harry!" Anne yelled, and Louis watched as Harry stood up in one of those slow motion things that happened with him since they met.

Harry swung around, brown hair sparkling in the sun, and blew a whistle on his fingers in the direction of the runaway horse.

Loud and acute.

The petal-less flower fell from his other hand, and right onto Louis' lap, literally knocking the breath out of him; and just as Louis moved to pick it up, Fizzie let out a small cry of shock.

He looked to the field and saw Scotch galloping back towards them with so much speed and vigor, like a husky being called for dinner.

The horse slowed as it came near, and stopped a short distance from everyone, waiting for Harry to come and meet it.

"Just where do you think you were going? Were you gonna leave me, Scotch? You know I'd miss you more than anything!" Harry said, striding up to the horse.

He rubbed and kissed the animal's neck. "I know, Love. I have to bring you out here more often . . ."

Anne and Gemma looked at each other and shook their heads.

In that moment of watching the boy giggle at the horse while it made attempts to chew on his hair again, Louis was caught somewhere between reality and the end of Alice's rabbit hole.

What in the world just happened!?

Chapter End Notes

How are all of you? I'm so sorry I took so long to update! I got carried away writing as you will see from my extended chapter lengths. There is a lot I needed included in this story so I hope it still moves along at a reasonable pace. I hate to feel like its dragging
with my ideas. I also waited a bit to post until I had more than one chapter to share with you lovely patient people.
Please comment on this chapter because I'm wondering about it!
Harry's Passion

Chapter Summary

Harry tells Louis a lot about the farm and his role in it. And Louis stumbles on something else.

Chapter Notes

Omg, how was this chapter!? Please tell me!!
I'm making them super long now! Plus I hope it's as emotional as I want to believe.
Thank you all so much for your ongoing support. Comments are welcome!

Louis Pov

"We can't build the tree house, Anne. That tree is gonna fall any minute now. It's not safe."

Louis sat on the bench with Anne in the back yard as she pondered this information. The sun was up and Louis was already sweating through his t-shirt.

"So what should I do with all this extra wood?"

Murrey tried. "You can extend your front porch, or build a new doghouse. . ."

Louis looked at the wood. He knew right away what would look pretty cool in Anne's yard. "Mum always wanted a gazebo. She and Dad used to talk about it but it never happened."

"I like the sound of that!" Harry's voice ringed from the back porch behind them, making Louis jump.

He looked up and saw his sisters surrounding Harry as they were all listening to the conversation. Daisy had a milk mustache so he guessed they just finished breakfast. Earlier that morning, before the sun even came up, Louis was woken up by the sounds of Harry and Anne muttering in the kitchen. He had gotten up and insisted on accompanying Harry as he tended to the animals. Anne tried sending him back to bed, and Harry made him quick pancakes, but he was neither sleepy nor hungry so he had pulled on his jacket and tramped off with Harry to the barn in the wee hours of the morning.

He was feeling rather hungry now, and warm, so he pulled off his jacket and rest it on his lap.

"Yeah, me too! Let's build a gazebo!" Phoebe exclaimed.

Harry added, "A round one, preferably."

Anne thought about it for maybe a second. "Okay! A gazebo it is! But Harry if you think you're going to turn it into a riding pen, you are dead wrong!"
"Sounds like a fun project to me! After you show me exactly where you want it and how big it's going to be, I'll head back to the store and draw out a plan!" John said, as he and his son walked away to discuss the project together.

His head still full of questions about his mother's relationship with Champton Valley, Louis turned to the woman. "Anne, I was wondering if maybe I can see some of the emails Mum sent you? If it's alright with you?"

The words came out small. He only wanted her to hear them. He didn't want his sister's to know what was bothering him. And he didn't want Harry to hear how childish he sounded asking for his mother's letters. He sure did feel like a child. A tiny, distraught child, desperately searching for his lost mother in every square-inch of a place she had not been in ages.

Anne looked down before lifting her head up toward Louis, empathetically. "Sure, Sweetheart. I'll print them out for you as soon as I can."

****

"Hey! You're the captain of the Doncaster Demolishers!"

"And you're the captain of the Champton Valley Hell Raisers!" Louis tried to sound just as hyped as the boy in front of him, but he was already aware of the fact that the blonde-haired boy whose team he played against just two weeks ago was Harry's friend and was expected to come visit today.

They both looked at Harry. "Harry here failed to mention that you two know each other! I'm assuming the Brady Bunch out there are your sisters?"

Louis snorted uncontrollably at that. "Yes that would be correct, though –as hard as that is to see - we're all really related."

Harry snickered.

Louis stuck his hand out, but the boy grabbed his whole arm and moved in for a hug. "Niall. Son of a Minister. One older brother."

Pulling away, Louis caught a glimpse of a proud look on Harry's face. He looked back to Niall whose eyebrows shot straight up.

"How's your knee, by the way?"

"Its coming along quiet well considering. Well I guess I'll take this opportunity to thank you for helping me that day. And congratulations on your team's win."

"Well, It was crazy out there. I don't think we could've done it without Harry here! He never went to any of the games outside of town before, so he was like our good-luck charm!"

Louis felt heat glaze his cheeks, stupid jealousy seeping in again.

"Well, you two have more in common than just football, you know. Like something I can relate to as well."

Niall hit him a what-are-you-talking-about face but Louis answered. "Music!"
Niall stared at him.

"Louis plays the keyboard in his band."

"Except Sweetness." Louis added. "Calvin came up with that. I wanted 'Shady Cabaret' but Stan opposed. He said it was too burlesque."

Harry frowned. "I like Shady Cabaret!"

"I like Burlesque!" Niall dead-panned.

Louis shot his shoulders up, chuckling. "Easy, Church Boy. That information has to stay between the three of us!"

"Well, then I'm trouble 'cause Harry can't keep a secret to save his life!"

Harry nodded in agreement, pushing out his bottom lip. "We should come up with a name too, Niall."

"But we have one! 'Niall and Harry.'" he said with a straight face, pointing between him and Harry.

Harry burst out into a weird, cut up laugh that turned Louis inside out.

*I love your laugh. I love it. I wanna hear it again!* Louis thought, bouncing like a child on the inside, over Harry.

"I like it. It's very mainstream. . .Very professional- Like Hall and Oates!" Louis teased.

Harry covered his mouth with his palms, his whole face exploding in excessive laughter. Louis swore he wanted to hear that sound in his dying breath.

Niall looked up to the ceiling with his fingers on his chin, and said, "Narry. Is that a good name for us?"

"No! That's weird!"Harry laughed out again.

Louis braced himself on the wall behind him and fell into a mess of laughter. Why was this Niall so cute? Not in a -So-cute-I-wanna-go-out-with-you kinda way, but more of an I-wanna-wrap-you-in-baby-blankets-and-protect-you kinda cute. Louis knew he and Niall would get along just fine.

"Yeah, don't forget me. It's Nourry now!" Louis offered.

Niall guffawed. "This is good! This is great! You can help us come up with a song for the concert!"

****

After a few hours of 'practise' - or just rocking out for the fun of it- in the Study where the boys were constantly disturbed by the twins running in and out, shouting as they played catch, they decided to take a break from music and play some football in the front yard.

Louis and Niall resumed their roles as mid-fielders as Lottie and Daisy were put on as goal-keepers. Louis' other two sisters and Harry filled in the other positions while Gemma and Anne stood on the porch, observing Cord and Murrey help Greg the mechanic checkout what was wrong with Anne's pick-up truck.

The game was going well until -
Murrey took his white vest off.

It was hot. Louis didn't argue with that. But dang! The sudden distraction caused Louis to lose the ball to Niall, and Lottie froze in her goal-keeping position, allowing Niall to secure a goal as she and her brother gazed open-mouthed at the muscular sculpted abs of Murrey, who was unaware of his impact. Fizzie was so mad at them that she stomped off the field, past Harry, who turned to see what had caused his team to lose the game. He gave a short nod in realization and ran over to pick up the ball.

"I think that's enough footie for today!" he said, dashing in front of Louis, blocking the view of his gaze.

"Louis, do you wanna go help me get the sheep back inside? After we get some water, that is."

Louis slowly came back to earth as he heard his name being called. "Oh- what? Yes! That is- a fantastic idea, Harry!"

Harry threw the ball to Phoebe and grabbed Louis' shoulder, leading him inside for a cold drink.

****

Opening the gate to the pastures, Harry climbed up one bar of the horizontal wood fence and leaned over. They left Niall in the living room playing scrabble with Louis' sisters, who were rather intrigued by him.

He called the sheep by name, and one by one they came waltzing through the gate; Betsy, a huge brown fluffy ewe, a little slower with her weight.

"Do they ever stray? Where are their tags in case that happens?"

"Normally they are supposed to have tags but we don't sell them anymore. Haven't for years."

"Why not? And why do you have so many of them, then?" Louis said, as Cliff ran business-like around the sheep.

Harry smiled nervously as he closed the gate behind the last one. "Um, you're gonna laugh."

"No, I'm not!" Louis smiled.

Harry pursed his lips trustingly. "Well, my mum got some to rear for mutton, and I sort of formed an attachment. I begged her not to sell any. She didn't listen to me though. She sold all except two, and they just kept multiplying on us until this."

The two boys bumped shoulders, walking behind the sheep as they strutted to their pens.

Louis pointed at Betsy who was slowing down the whole group. "I think that one's having too much grass. Are you sure that's all they eat?"

Harry cracked a toothy smile and scratched behind his head. "She's pregnant."

Louis' face stretched out in shock, and he took a second look at the ewe. "Looks like she's about to give birth!"

"Yeah, that can literally happen any minute now! Mum's a nurse. She doesn't work anymore, and it's not the same as giving birth to humans, but it helps in delivering. I've delivered quite a few lambs"-Louis interrupted to point in his face- "What?"
Louis let out giggle spirals, and answered, "You said lamb!"

All Harry's teeth appeared. "Don't tell your sisters," he said before continuing, "It's gross, yeah, but beautiful when you actually hold them and they just spring to life in your hands. It looks like hard work from the outside - and it is - but I love it. It's my passion - taking care of them. I was thirteen when my granddad got sick and we had to come stay here to help him."

Louis stopped dead and they stood facing each other as the sheep lay down on their hay beds for the evening. A cool wind blew the boys' hair across their faces, and Louis tossed his out of his eyes.

"You didn't grow up on the ranch?"

Louis saw Harry's smile fade just a tiny bit. It was almost unnoticeable.

"No. We used to live in a cottage about a mile from here. When we came to stay here, Mum took over the ranch. And back then it was just horses. We had a lot of staff and it was fun watching them train the horses and stuff for shows but... there was a buck horse I really liked - Rapid Mane. He was a real show runner. My granddad trained him and he was like, a prized horse. Well, anyway, when my granddad was still well and ran this place he booked Rapid Mane for a show, and the top cowboy at the time, Robin Cartwright, rode him. He got injured -"

"Robin?"

"No, Rapid Mane. Well, Robin too but he got over it. No one knows how it happened. It just did. He bucked so high he trampled over himself. But..." Harry's eyes fell to Louis' chest right on the spot where his third button lay at the opening. And, looking back into them, full of meaning and compassion, he felt his blood rush straight to the spot they rested on. "Instead of nursing him back to health, they said he was no good anymore, and Mum had to get him put down. It lost the ranch a lot of money. Eventually, Mum decided to close the Rodeo Ranch and open up a Dairy Farm instead. Granddad wouldn't have liked it one bit but I was glad. I just don't see why Rapid Mane had to go. I looked at his records and he could've lived out the rest of his life normal, just with a limp if someone cared enough to help him. I mean, I understand the business part of why it happened. The cost of surgery and medicine wasn't worth it for a lame horse that couldn't be booked anymore. Training horses is fun but there's just that dark side to it that shouldn't have to be. I'm actually spearheading an animal rights campaign at school that started as my Term assignment and can potentially go legit and make a real difference in the future. My teachers say I have a strong case against the ill-treatment of horses in the Rodeo business."

Harry slipped on a pair of rubber gloves and looked at Louis as though trying to decipher his thoughts. "Don't say it."

Louis observed as Harry examined Betsy to see if she was anywhere near ready to give birth. "What?"

"I'm a geek, I know." Harry laughed, looking up at Louis. He smoothed the wool on the ewe's side and stood up. "She's won't be ready for about a week."

Louis brought his hands up to his mouth, speechless as Harry dumped the gloves in a bin. "No, you're not- well, technically it sounds geek-ish but, you care about things." – he pointed to Betsy as an example- "You really want to make a change and that's admirable." Louis smiled proudly, moving his eyes around Harry's face.

"Well, there's only one Rodeo Ranch in operation in this part of the country right now, The Cowell
Ranch run by Simon Cowell, he's been my granddad's rival for years. Their horses used to compete for shows. His nephew, Nick, is in my year, and for his Term assignment he decided to build a case against mine. He said I had no grounds judging how a rodeo ranch treats animals when the Twist Ranch has been in my family for three generations. He also stated that dairy farms are just as abusive. I mean, to an extent, yeah, but it's nowhere near the kind of torture horses have to endure on a typical Rodeo Ranch. Guess my campaign went right up his ally and he took offense. His uncle granted me full access to ranch for my research though, he made sure that day was a field trip! Mrs Cowell even offered me ice cream! And they locked the butcher house. But I still took pictures of it. Nick was pretty good in his case but I ultimately nailed him. Our teacher suggests we reintroduce our arguments for S.A.Ts next year." Harry lightly punched Louis in the breast, "If it works out, I could be going to your college too."

Louis measured the odds in his head. The odds of how many times he and Harry had the chance to meet. First of all, their Moms were friends and the boys should have known each other and the two should have known each other since at least toddler stage. Then there was the game. And now, given that if he passed on Australia, he may have possibly been set to bump into the gorgeous boy on one fine day while roaming the halls of his future school.

Harry continued, "Of course Nick made it clear that his uncle is gonna pay for him to go anyway so. . ."

Louis let a snort. "This guy sounds cocky and rude to me!"

Harry snorted too. "He sure is. Especially when it comes to defending his uncle. When he started talking shit I told mum about it and that's when she really decided to stop selling the herds. She really hates anything to do with Cowell and his ranch. She actually told me to bury Nick at finals." -Louis laughed out loud- "She wanted to neuter the sheep to stop them from multiplying but-animal torture- so I didn't let her. I do everything for them, Cord helps but his job is really to care for the horses. I would love to open back up the Rodeo Ranch one day. At least for Mum because she loved it. But the laws need to change. Until then, we have Winnipeg the Pony, who rents out for shows and parties, and Salsa the show horse, who brings in most of the income by just strutting around and looking pretty. They're both booked for the upcoming Rodeo Show on Saturday, but we volunteered to lend them to the fundraiser fair next week."

Louis had noticed earlier that morning, a man had come up to the house and Anne had sent Harry to fetch a few crates of eggs, which she then sold to the man. On seeing it Louis had felt a strong need to help. A rush of symbiotic willingness to be a part of things.

"Well, I'm going to help you take care of them while I'm here!" he said enthusiastically, pointing to the sheep.

As Harry picked up a shovel to finish his chores, Louis welcomed a new feeling in his chest. Admiration. The boy next to him had already enchanted him with his guitar and song writing skills. And left him in shock that there really were horse whisperers. He doubted there was space in his heart for anymore of Harry's winning qualities, which kept adding up fast.

****

"Harry, why do you have Louis doing your work!?!" A disappointed sounding Anne said, as she entered the Barn a while after and saw the boys scooping up dirty hay.

"Louis put that down! You don't have to do that, Son."

Louis didn't stop. "Its okay, I want to help." Louis really didn't mind helping Harry clean up the
barn. He figured the faster they finish the faster they could get back to working with Niall on the song before his dad came for him.

Anne shot him a confused look, then glared at Harry some more. He had stopped what he was doing and looked at her pleadingly.

"Harry, can I have word with you." She as she walked only to the door a few meters away.

"Mum, I –" he started, lagging behind her like a stray puppy.

"No, Harry. Just what do you think you're doing? He didn't come here to do your work! You're taking advantage of his kindness. You brought all this on yourself, now - don't look at me like that-it is your own fault. Finish up your work by yourself!"

She then turned toward Louis who was sheepishly eavesdropping, shovel in hand. "Louis, the girls are waiting for you at the house. Come along, now."

"I'll walk back with Harry-" He looked at Harry. His mouth and eyes were drastically changed from minutes before when they were alone.

He kept his gaze on Louis' shoes. "You should go back up. I'll finish here and come-"

Anne made a sudden movement and Harry jumped. "Why are you talking to him like that!? Where is all this attitude coming from? If you want to direct it at me, go ahead but don't take it out on Louis!" She turned to the older boy again. "It's getting dark out here fast. Are you sure you don't want to come back now, sweetheart?"

Louis saw Harry's eyes roll; and smiled down at the hay. "No. We- he's almost done anyway."

"Okay." she said, a little disappointed, walking away.

Harry, overcast now, started shoveling with more purpose and vigor, clearly vexed.

Louis pulled his shovel he had behind his back - having hid it from Anne's view- and scooped up a pile of hay.

"No!" Harry said, a little out of normal vocal range, holding out his gloved hand to stop Louis- to which he did freeze. He looked at Louis slightly hurt expression. "It's just- I'll probably finish quicker without you distracting me."

Louis furrowed his eyebrows. "I told you I wanted to help you-"

Harry slapped his hand on his thigh and blew a heavy sigh. "If you want to stay, fine. But don't pick up anything!"

"See, that's not fair-"

"Please. Think of it like...you're helping me by keeping me company."

*Okay. he's upset. I don't like this. Please don't be upset?*

With small, tentative steps, trampling the hay under his sneakers, he walked over to Harry and stood directly in front of him. Harry looked back at him as he glared into his eyes in the dim light of the building. "Does she hit you?"

Harry's face changed as he found massive offence in this. "No! Why would you think that!?"
"Because you were jumpy when she was here?"

"Look, no! My Mum and I- She's a good person, okay? It's not like that."

"I know that. I just . . . I want to understand . . . I want you to know that you can tell me anything."

Harry snorted. "You mean, like when I asked you about your dad and you didn't want to talk about it?"

Louis let the shovel fall and folded his arms. "I don't see how it's the same thing."

The middle end of Harry's eyebrows forced their way together. "You're right. It's not the same thing. It's far from it!"

Louis opened his mouth to retort and Harry threw down his shovel.

"Fuck this." He said, walking out.

**Okayyyy. Fault number one. . . He has an attitude to match mine. But that's more of a similarity, than a fault. So there. We have something in common! **

As Louis kept a few paces behind the angry boy on their way back to the house, Cord trod up to them. His thick fingers lay on Harry's shoulders. He had himself just finished up in the horse stable.

"Harry, you wouldn't happen to know anything about Gemma's new boyfriend would you? Overheard her sweet talking to some guy on the phone earlier."

Louis spread his lips across his face and looked up at Harry. He genuinely thought Cord and Gemma were a couple. Apparently Louis is not good at spotting couples, taking into account his ridiculous jealousy the day before being squashed by him overhearing Fizzie telling Lottie she found Cord to be cute -though he didn't catch what kind of cute.

Whatever the heck kind of cute it was, he was relieved it wasn't Harry.

Harry nearly yelled at Cord. "I do. But no. I promised her not to tell anyone. Especially you! But you'll know soon enough, come weekend!"

****

After saying goodbye to Niall, the boys went to wash up. Harry usually took longer to shower so Louis figured he'd talk to Anne while he waited for use of the shower.

"Anne?" he said as he sat on the chair next to her on the back patio.

Fizzie had insisted on making dinner that night and they could hear her muttering the recipe for Basil Stewed Pork to Gemma in the kitchen.

"Please don't be mad. I want to help Harry. I feel like I know this place. Even though I've never been to this place before, I feel like I'm a part of it. I want to help with the gazebo as well. I'm not going to sit around and be a foreigner. I want to be involved."

Anne leaned in her chair, eyes not on Louis, and he heard the chair creak. She pulled her brown cardigan tighter.
"Okay, I can understand that. I'm trying not to assume Harry put you up to this," she said in a questioning tone.

Louis shook his head decidedly. "No. I want to. I really do!"

"Alright then. But don't over do it! I don't want your father berating me when he finds out. I can only stand so much of that man," she said as Louis came over to hug her.

"Oh! And, Louis, I left the letters for you on your bed!"

Louis hurried to his room where he secured the stack of papers in his dresser, and grabbed a towel, hoping Harry had finished and made his way to the bathroom.

Halfway there, the bathroom door flew open and out came Harry with a towel around his waist and one drying his hair, causing Louis to freeze in the middle of the hallway staring at him, rubbing his wet, newly shampooed, hair drying it with both hands which meant-

No hands holding up the towel around his waist!

Harry jumped when he saw Louis which made Louis jump as well for fear the towel would come off in that moment, but it didn't, and Harry just blushed and told Louis he scared him, and disappeared into his room, which he had to narrowly pass Louis to get to.

A now Harry-less hallway did nothing to slow Louis' heart rate which was full on racing and threatening the muscles that contained it.

****

"Murrey, you must stay for dinner! I insist. Harry get a chair from the patio." Louis dashed ahead of him and retrieved the chair.

Harry stood midway, looking back at his mother to make sure she saw that he had at least made an attempt to get it and that Louis got there first.

Louis tried to make eye contact with the boy to gave him an I'm-sorry-can-and-we-just-be-okay-again smile, but Harry diverted to every area of the kitchen as Fizzie dished him some stew- and what's up with that, anyway?

Murrey smiled seedily at Gemma as Cord pulled a chair out for her.

"I'd love to stay for dinner!" Murrey accepted gratefully, eyes on Cord, watching as he tucked the chair in for the girl with no thanks.

"Heard Aiden Grimshaw's gonna compete this season. The Cowell's are taking over the competitions. Word is they're expanding business out of town soon!" Murrey said, eyeing Gemma, who shot her head up from her pork.

Anne turned up her nose. "Those termites don't know when to quit! Yes. Let them mosey on out of town! If I never see a Cowell or a Grimshaw in my life again, It'll be too soon!"

Murrey cracked a smirk Gemma's way as she darted her head back in her pork. More like buried it.

Murrey side-eyed her as he continued. "But my uncles are ready for the Rodeo this year as usual. I signed up for the trail course but you ain't getting me on 'dem wild bucks. Leave it up to Pops and uncle Wyatt!"
"Gem, you could compete your trail. I bet you still have it." Cord piped, dotingly.

Murrey snorted. "Nah! She'll be cheering on the little wannabe cowboys from the side-lines this year! Isn't dat true, Gem?"

Spoon clinking loudly on her plate, Gemma gave him a warning glare, and he returned it with a devilish smile.

****

The twins screamed out in glee. Bellies still full from dinner, Louis gave them about an hour before they fell asleep on the couch and he would have to carry them upstairs.

They always did that. Sometimes it'd be him, sometimes it'd be Mum. When they were younger it was cool, but as the years went by their sizes did not stay the same as their habit, and it wasn't cool anymore. But as annoying as it was, just like his mum, he never found the courage to wake them and make them sleepily climb to bed.

As he bent over to mimic a lion attack, Louis saw something peeking out from the hem in the back of his jeans.

Something pink.

In all the years that Louis knew he was gay, he hadn't come across pink briefs or boxers before. He never really fancied those things for himself, but it did seem like a gay thing to wear them. Or panties. It could be panties, which the very thought of was sending sharp messages to Louis' own privates. Louis had only dated a couple guys, Liam included, and didn't really know just what he was into. The few times he was with a guy he hadn't tried anything kinky per-say. If this is what Louis' kink was to be then Louis welcomed it with open arms. It certainly felt like a relief to see that this is another side of this complex, marvelous, captivating being called "Harry."

Maybe Harry is gay.

Harry's ass sank down next to Phoebe on the couch along with the chances of Louis seeing the pink underwear again until he was ready to get up again. Louis dragged out a smile to play it cool but the image was already stuck. Cemented in his brain for all eternity. Was there anything about this boy that did not take his breath away and left him wanting to know more?

There, in the ranch-style house, Louis discovered his first kink.

*
Harry POV

"Oh, great! It sounds spritely!"

"Yep. It's running smooth. Just keep it of the bumps and you'll be fine."

Greg threw Anne the keys to the old blue pick-up truck, and she caught it in one hand while holding the Thursday morning newspaper in the other. Louis' sisters woke up late as usual and were still having breakfast at ten in the morning. Harry, Louis, Anne, and Gemma were on the front porch looking on as Greg pulled in the yard with Anne's newly fixed truck. He had taken it for a test run to make sure everything was working.

Harry hopped down the stairs and handed him his pay. They thanked each other, and as he made his way back up the stairs he saw the keys in his mother's hand as she absently held it up while reading the front page headlines.

Harry froze. Gemma froze. Louis looked confused, because the keys were directed at him.

"Mum?" was all Harry had the breath to say. He watched as Louis stood so still, peering back at him, obviously for a sign that it was okay to take them.

Anne jiggled the keys impatiently, looking up from the newspaper, reflections of daylight on her spectacles blocking the view of her eyes.

"Louis, Sweetheart. You can drive around town wherever you want. Take in all the sights. Your sisters and I will move around in Gemma's car." she said, in a chipper tone.

Louis' face lit up like a party bulb. Harry was glad Louis was excited about it, because he was not. And looking at his sister, she wasn't too thrilled either.

Harry's furrowed eyes zoomed in on the keys. Harry wasn't old enough to drive yet and even if he was he wouldn't really have anywhere to go, except maybe at Niall's, but-

Harry wouldn't say he was jealous, just. . .completely livid. Harry's earliest memories were of playing hide and seek in that old truck with Gemma, and driving around with his mother. She didn't seriously just give it away to Louis!?

First she accuses me of taking advantage of his kindness. Then she gives him the truck?

After he had gotten up that morning and was surprised to see Louis already up and cleaning the pen, he had told Harry he made it clear to his mother that he wasn't going to sit around on his ass the whole time during his stay. It had been early and Harry was still mad at the time, but as the morning got brighter and hotter it sank in how Louis stood up for Harry and insisted on helping him with his chores. And now Harry was all geared up to apologize to Louis for walking off on him and ignoring him last evening. He was currently trying to build the courage to tell the boy what he wanted to know about his broken down relationship with his mother, but the way she spoke to him while giving him the keys, like he was her pride and joy or something, Harry could not help but feel like he was being replaced.
With a deadly glare directed at Louis, Gemma grabbed the keys from her mother like a wild animal, and threw them at Louis, walking away. They ended up slamming into his chest where he caught them, still shocked. He gathered himself just enough to throw his arms around a beaming Anne, thanking her in a ramble.

"I know exactly where I want to go next!" he declared, and looking back at Harry, big grin taking over his face, "Are you coming, Harry!?"

Harry snapped out of his thoughts to see Louis' eager eyes on him. Feet still glued to the spot, his words caught up on his tongue.

_He's taking me? Of course he is. Who else would he take? I have to show him around. Me. Nobody else. Wait- he wants me to ride around with him all day!?_

He stared at Louis for a while, before catching himself. "Sure." He managed.

****

Harry kept his eyes on Louis, observing -or rather, supervising- the way he touched the steering wheel. The way his fingers curl up tightly around it making his knuckles protrude, defining his whole arm in general.

Eyes moving up to his facial profile; eyes so focused, cheekbones so structured. Harry got stuck in a daze. And Louis, taking a chance as he took his eyes off the road to glance over to him, caught him looking.

"What?" he said, flashing his eyes back on the road.

"I didn't say anything." Harry answered, a little too fast. A little too rudely.

"Harry, you've been quiet the whole time. What's on your mind?"

What's on Harry's mind? _In it? On top of it? Hanging in the back? Dangling at the front? Dancing on the ceiling._ A lot. A whole party of things were plaguing his mind. Top of the list: He still could not believe his mother just gave Louis her truck keys and told him to go wherever the heck he wanted.

"She likes you. She's not like this. Ever." He blurted out, blinking at himself.

Louis flashed Harry a confused look. "What do you mean?"

Harry's eyes dimmed but Louis didn't see. How was he to even start to explain what he meant? That his mother just made the ultimate gesture nobody was expecting her to make?

He did not answer right away. He let minutes pass by in silent thought, watching the older boy focus on the road. He turned sideways in his seat and took in the old dusty smell of the faded blue backrest that had at one time matched the blue paint on the outside of the truck which was equally faded, needing a paint job as rust, and dents, and age withered it's original splendor.

"This was my Dad's truck."

Harry immediately started to feel a painful lump build up in his throat. He tried willing it away, as the older boy's head turned his way again. "Cord's been with us for years and she never let him borrow it. Gemma is the only one to drive it besides Mum. She took her first lessons with it. I thought I was going to be the next one to drive it."
Harry's mind went back to when his sister first attempted driving the old truck while his mother sat in the passenger seat and Harry sat in the back seat screaming at her not to crash it.

He let out an accepting sigh. "If Mum let you drive it, that's something."

Louis pulled over on the side of the road, near Harry's school. The sun was hotter now and the building was not in range to give any needed shade as the rays shone through the windshield.

"Really?" Louis asked as he cut off the engine.

Harry nodded. He knew Gemma was mad at their mother as well for bypassing him and giving Louis the keys to their Dad's truck. Both her, and their mother knew how bad he wanted to drive it one day. But it made sense. How else were they going to get around? Gemma's car cannot hold all of them at once.

Still, Harry should at least be taking his first driving lessons in it by now.

Louis leaned sideways into the seat to mimic Harry's position. Then, after a moment of silence, in which Louis seemed to be thinking as he absentmindedly gazed at Harry's chest, he looked into Harry's eyes, his dark hair digging into the soft headrest, the blue of his eyes so intense it was scaring the heck out of Harry.

"Have you had any lessons in it?" he said, boring into Harry's existence.

Harry, taken aback, shook his head as his eyebrows stretched toward his hairline. His body still leaning sideways into the seat, he rubbed his arms. He had on a denim jacket in the mid-morning heat and he wanted to take it off, but he felt so naked in Louis' gaze.

How did Louis know his mind was precisely on taking his first driving lessons?

_This is just like what happened the other day._

Harry had been constantly replaying in his mind what happened in the meadows. . .It was as if Louis had been reading his mind that day, and stole his words right out of his head.

_He loves me_ . . .

Harry knew Louis was gay and had probably picked the petal off for himself and his own devices that had nothing to do with Harry at all. But why not get his own flower to pick off then? Why pick off his? And why utter the exact words that Harry was saying in his head at the same time. ‘He’ loves me. . .And who was _Louis’ He_ ? . . .

_It was my flower. So, technically your ‘He’ should be me!_

_You were my ‘He’, Harry thought, slowly blinking, eyes on his lap, but you wouldn't know that now, would you? Would you? You couldn't possibly have been reading my mind to know that I had a 'he' and not a 'she' in my thoughts?_

Harry narrowed his eyes at Louis almost daring him to read his thoughts, and, Louis blinked once and smiled at him!

_Oh! This issoconfusing|justwannatellyou|reallylikeyou|andendthisslowtorture!_

Yes. Louis is apparently psychic, and Harry is naked, and . . .Inadequate- That's another way he feels, remembering Louis gawking at the shirtless Murrey the day before. Harry was so mad he
wanted to hit something. Better yet, he wanted to shove a barrel over Murrey and send him rolling
down the hill and out of sight.

Of course Louis would like that kind of physique. Why not? Was he Louis' 'He'?

\textit{If so, that's not fair. You should have gotten your own flower to pick off of instead of picking off my}
\textit{last petal of hope and leaving me naked with a question mark on a sentence that should be clear . . .
.He loves me?}

\textit{Why in the world would he love me?}

He wished the boy did not have such an effect on him- and feels it may be a result of his
inexperience with any boy- but he did. He was so angry that Louis stared at Murrey's abs and had
rushed to get him a chair for dinner even though the man was capable of lifting a whole stack of
chairs, let alone one (He placed equal loathe on his mother for even suggesting he stay for dinner
in the first place.) He did it even after he tried telling Louis more about himself, hoping they would
get to know each other better and he would forget how good-looking Murrey was and focus on
him.

How can someone make you feel so naked and seen one minute, and then make you feel invisible
the next?

He felt maybe he had moved so far from his own self, that he had become invisible. That maybe
Gemma was right. He needed to think about himself for once. Maybe Louis didn't see him clearly
enough because he was still hiding. He had not the courage to tell his crush that he even liked boys
at all, he figured Louis might just see it. But he clearly did not, so Harry decided to ween himself
back into whatever he almost was before his mother had made him stuff it away in his closet- Both
physically and figuratively speaking. He had started last night by trying on one of the underwear
his sister had bought him. Looking at himself in the mirror, he had been relieved and surprisingly
grateful his mother had put Louis downstairs in the Study and not in his room. How the heck would
he explain if Louis had walked in to get a towel? What if he had seen it in his drawer or stuck
between the sheets or pillows? If Louis was to walk in, he would have seen Harry spin around in
his pink panties, lazing on the bed while reading a book behind closed doors. Harry wasn't ready to
show Louis all his glory- \textit{what kind of of a stalker...}- But Harry did want Louis to see him. Him.
Not some stupid muscular straight guy.

It had been such a long time since Harry had done something so reckless. So selfish. Sure, he wore
nail polish on a daily basis, but straight guys do that too. But as for girly underwear? Harry had
taken a few deep breaths and hopped down the stairs for dinner, wearing the panties under his
jeans. He had felt rather strange but liberated. That is until Louis grabbed the goddamn chair for
the big bloke to sit on. Then he felt stifled. And inadequate.

\textit{And then he threw me an apologetic smile to boot! Of all the nerve!}

Harry didn't care how hot it was now or how much he was sweating. He wasn't taking off his
jacket for Louis to quietly compare his inadequate frame to \textit{Meaty Murrey}.

Sitting in his father's old truck with Louis, who came out of nowhere and got to drive it before him,
Harry was suddenly angry again, and didn't want to talk to Louis about anything anymore, let alone
his mother- who was equally getting on his nerves lately.

Straightening in his seat, Louis started tapping a drum-roll on the window edge, and tapped a
cymbal on Harry's lap, making the end clashing sound with his voice.
Harry felt the impact ring through his entire being. Why would he tap Harry in such an sensitive spot?

"Well I'm going to teach you! And you can't say no like yesterday! We can start today if you like, but right after we check out the lake you told me about. I've been looking forward to it!"

****

Louis jumped down from the truck, his sneakers raising dust on the dirt track. He bore the expression of someone seeing fireworks for the first time. Harry remembered going to the beach for the very first time with Niall and his parents a few years ago, and he can relate.

"I don't think I've ever seen anything so beautiful." Louis said, pattering forward and pulling out his phone to capture the wide sunny, bright-colored landscape. A huge lake lazied across a green and yellow field, reflecting the golden blaze of the smiling sun. There were no signs of buildings or animals save the birds that were scandalously chirping and fighting each other in the air before flying off into the the trees that partially shaded the lakeside.

Harry came up a short distance behind the boy. He was snapping away at everything in sight, shifting swiftly, and forming his own definition with his butt firmly rounding in his tight jeans, as he changed to lean on his other foot. Harry could take a picture of that.

"Come, Harry! I want a selfie with the lake behind us!"

Harry etched closer and shoved his hands in his jeans pocket. He fumbled a bit, nervous of taking a selfie with Louis knowing it meant a closeness he did not know if he could be able to brave long enough to pose for the photo.

"No, not there! Over here!" Louis laughed, encouraging Harry closer. Louis pulled Harry in for the picture, and he had no choice but to take his hands back out of his pockets and hug him back as they smiled for the camera.

Harry took a few pictures with Louis only, and Louis took a few with Harry only, and they walked along the lake front with Harry sharing stories of him and Gemma there as kids.

"We used to jump from that branch- when it was still attached to the tree, that is." Harry shared, pointing to a huge long branch that had fallen over the lake.

He sat on the grass, taking in the smells of the still lakeside; the dead leaves that fell and stuck to it's edge, mulchy and muddy; the grass as the early morning dew had dried up and left a sweet scent on it; Louis, as he slumped down next to him, whatever deodorant he was wearing joining the mix.

Sprinkles of sunlight from between the leaves of the tall trees surrounding the lake dancing across his face like confetti, Louis stared grinning at a flock of ibises grazing the top of the water as they took a quick drink before continuing over the trees on the other side.

And then Harry wasn't angry anymore. Not after the kind boy had offered to give him driving lessons. Not after looking at the genuine happiness painted over his face when he saw the lake. The lake that he was alone at now with Harry. Just the two of them enjoying it. Maybe now Louis will focus on Harry without interruptions or barn work getting in the way.

"Harry, my Mum wrote about this lake, but... It's- I can't even describe it. I love it. It's so quiet. So different from where I grew up. There are community pools and stuff, but..." Louis looked around and took in the scenery, "One could get nostalgic after about a week away from this place, but..."
I've only been here a few days and I can't imagine pulling myself away. . . from here. . . from the farm. . . from Champton."

Harry was proud of the way Louis felt about Champton Valley. Harry felt the same way.

"I love it here. I want to go on a plane to somewhere different just to experience different cultures, but I would never want to permanently leave. I don't think your Mum wanted to even leave in the first place, much less stay away all this time. I hope you find something in the letters that will help you understand."

Harry observed Louis' eyes changing shape accordingly as he spoke. He obviously did not know that Harry had overheard him ask his mother about the emails the morning before.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't eavesdropping or anything-"

Louis shook his head and smiled, his hand brushing Harry's on the grass. "I'm glad you did. I feel like I'm combusting with all these questions and no answers." he said, looking out into the water, "I don't want to upset the girls, so I'm glad I can talk to you about it. I just . . . I wanna know. I need to know why she didn't have us come back sooner."

Harry knew he wanted answers. He hoped he would get them reading the emails, or maybe when his mother was ready to share whatever information she knew about it. But in the meantime Louis can enjoy just being here. *With Harry.*

He finally took off his jacket. But resting it on the grass, he felt Louis' eyes bore over him, and he suddenly wanted it back on.

"Great idea, Harry! Let's go!" Louis said as he dragged off his sneakers and jumped back up. He started stripping off his white t-shirt and olive green cargoes, securing his phone in the pocket. Harry let out a snort as the boy almost tripped over his sneakers excited to get in the water.

Louis grinned back, red splotches joining the confetti canvas on his face, and drew Harry's attention to his own nerves. Harry had put on boxers that morning and was secretly gliding on the wind of relief as he pulled his own t-shirt off. But if he felt naked before, he felt like a *jellyfish* now. Every part of him transparent and readable. Louis would be able to see every ounce of bashfulness in his gaze, and feel the heat in every pint of blood that pumped through his fast beating heart.

Hands shaking like the tree leaves, Harry pulled off his jeans, revealing his pretty ordinary, completely normal boxers, but Louis was already pelting towards the water.

"Come on, Harry! The water's amazing! Just tell me one thing!" the boy shouted back at him as he sank in up to his shoulders.

"What!?" Harry shouted back, walking up to the edge and sticking one foot in.

"Tell me there aren't any crocodiles in here!"

****

At dinner that night, Louis was ecstatic in describing the day he and Harry had. Harry smiled, astounded at Louis comparing the lake to a timeless portrait with which great care was taken to capture every beautiful detail. Louis' face lit up talking about Harry's aversion to the cold water and how he squealed when he went in.
He talked on and on but all he was saying could be summed up like this: Louis loved the lake. He had a blast there. He had a blast there with Harry.

He darted his eyes to his mother to see her reaction.

"Harry can't be in the cold water too long," she said blankly, then offering Louis a warm smile, "It's good you went down to the lake. Your mother and I went there a lot when we were children. Can you believe we used to walk there?"

Harry dipped his head back to his plate. Of course she doesn't care that Louis had fun with me. Or that I had fun.

He had begged Louis not to tell his mother about the driving lessons he would be starting with him tomorrow- as it was too dark by the time they had left the lake to start. He was excited beyond words at Louis's offer and didn't want his mother squashing it. He knew what she'd say- ("I didn't give him the truck so he could serve you like a slave with it!")

He was nervous about being that close to the other boy, who will most likely have to touch him -a lot- during lessons. He hoped he could be able to stay calm those times. Since the older boy had arrived at the house they had made skin contact at a normal-to-slightly-extra level, but it still fed a furnace inside of Harry that took too long to die down every time.

"You're taking us tomorrow! I wanna go swimming!" Daisy piped.

"Yeah I'll take you guys. Harry, is the tree branch still hanging over it?" Gemma said excitedly. Harry loved that she remembered the times they nosedived from the thick branch that had hung over the lake.

"Even better, Gem, it fell over the lake like a bridge and we both fell in," he pointed between himself and Louis, "trying to cross it."

Everyone laughed at that. Louis giggled with wild eyes at Harry, and covered his mouth full of food.

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Chapter End Notes

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A/N: I absolutely loved writing this chapter! Please tell me if this chapter made sense to you because I'm really wondering if Harry's thoughts are as transparent to you as he feels they are to Louis. lol

Oh yeah! The Animal Song by Savage Garden is a song I rocked out to as a kid and its part of my inspiration soundtrack, though I did NOT write this chapter with the song in mind. I Just thought it fitted in perfectly. Love you guys!
The Painful Song

Harry's POV

The next day the whole household went to the lake for a picnic at lunchtime. Cord went with them, insisting on taking his fishing poll. Louis had to hide Honey the fish from Daisy, who wanted to carry her everywhere. He begged Harry to help him make up something convincing as she threatened to throw the biggest tantrum if she didn't get her way.

"She'll get scared when she sees the fishes on the hook if you take her!" Harry had offered.

"She'll get nostalgic for the water and want to leave you and join the other fishes in the lake!" Louis himself tried. Harry rolled in laughter at Louis' plight as Daisy did not buy any of it.

Later that evening, after they had fun swimming, and Cord had caught one little fish- only twice the size of Honey (And Cord made everyone swear not to say a word to Murrey as he'd never let him live it down)- they went home and got ready for rehearsals at the Community Center. Anne had gotten the twins roles in the Play, Lottie on for general concert makeup duty, and Fizzie and Gemma to help her sew costumes, and they were all to be there at promptly 6.00 p.m. Harry and Louis were meeting Niall there, and though they hadn't gotten any closer to a song, Harry was just grateful he was even getting to hang out with Niall. Louis also expressed enthusiasm at seeing the blonde haired boy again, who he described as a walking arcade of fun.

Indeed, when they arrived, Niall pranced up to them and pulled both their hands into the large hall where groups of kids and adults were busy preparing for the concert to be held next Saturday. Niall lead Louis straight up on the stage and beckoned him to resume their singing. Harry stayed in front of the stage, watching them as Louis took the microphone from Joshua, who was in charge of the sound system for the concert and needed someone to do a sound check.

Niall connected his bluetooth to the stage speakers and grabbed a microphone himself. "Might as well do a proper sound check!" Niall's voice boomed through the large hall.

As the opening keys of the song pulsed through the building, Harry was petrified. There was no way Niall could have known. Maybe sometime in the past, Harry had told him about it. But even so, he doubted telling him about the impact of the song he was encouraging Louis to sing the first lines to. Harry had not heard that song in years. Only now as he heard it being sung by Louis and Niall, he wished he had not. He wished that song immediately cut off and never play again. Because all he felt with it now was excruciating pain. All it ever accompanied was pain.

This was the song he had to constantly listen to whenever his mother refused to leave the house, or even the couch for days. This was the song she would cry to and play over and over again through the house until whatever dumb sentiment it carried had outdone it's duty and overlapped into torture, or was abused to a point where it stuck in their heads, and souls, and left them sick. This is the song that scarred Gemma so bad, she would run away every time their mother played the little cd their father had put together for her shortly before he died.

Their parents' song.

The song they fell in love to while performing together at another community fundraising concert.
when they were just teenagers. The song they danced at their prom to. The song they danced at their wedding to. Harry faintly remembered enjoying listening to it when he was little. Listening to his parents' voices singing the duet together on the cd. Listening to his father's voice.

It was not the only recording they had of his father, they had videos of him riding horses and winning rodeo competitions, he had family videos of his father holding him and playing with him as a baby. But his mother could never bear to look at the man's face, and he didn't even know where in the house they were kept.

Harry tried slowly moving his legs, and then his arms until he got them folded in front of him. Breathing deep, he forced a straight face as he looked up at his friends on the stage.

Louis was belting out the lyrics of the love song with so much soul and passion. Niall sang his lines flawlessly before Louis took the chorus again, and-

He sang it different! A small yet - BIG difference. He had changed the gender specific noun in the song from a feminine to a masculine one!

Harry darted his eyes around to see if anyone else in the room was watching just as open-mouthed as him. Most of the crowd were busy chatting and taking instructions for their roles in the concert, but in between were a few wide eyes that had caught the problematic lyric change and were looking to the stage for culprit who had said it. Louis' eyes fell on him, and Harry widened his to signal him and Niall to get off the stage. Louis got the message but Niall was still bowing proudly to the scarce applause from a couple of unknowing kids.

Somewhere to his left, Harry heard murmurs and snide remarks coming from some town women as Louis and Niall came over to meet him.

"That was so much fun! I never did solos in Except Sweetness." Louis said. "Zayn and Liam are always singing duets. I bet we could give them a run for their money Niall!"

Niall was ecstatic. "That was fantastic! You were great! Just say yes!"

Louis put his hand delicately to his chest. "Are you proposing, Niall?"

Harry suddenly spun around and started looking frantically darting his eyes all over the room for Gemma. Niall and Louis were oblivious, and Harry was glad. How can he even start to explain that his mother used to play this seemingly harmless love song non-stop whenever she was on the verge of a melt-down over missing his dad and it affected them all?

"Ha, ha! Say you'll perform with us!- OH!" Niall started as someone fell into his eyesight.

"Shawna! Over here!"

A tall girl came up to them and slid under Niall's arm. In a long beige, lily patterned, halter dress, with a black leather jacket over it- obviously Niall's- she had her long brown hair up in a loose ponytail and a pair of red converse on her feet peeking out from under the long dress. She smiled at the boys, and Harry could see every last one of her huge braced teeth. The few times Harry had seen her around school, she always had the same super shy grin that seemed to holler for approval. Although she had been going out with Niall for almost three weeks now, she still gazed at him wordlessly like a kid who just got their first unexpected valentine.

Niall introduced her, and Louis offered her a warm embrace. Harry awkwardly extended a one arm hug, distracted by Gemma's whereabouts. She was capable of taking care of herself, but still he worried.
He spotted Gemma at the entrance. He quickly excused himself and took off towards her.

He stopped and stood in front of her, waiting for her to say something. She feigned obliviousness as she stared back but quickly blinked away the attempt, shifting to walk again.

"I'm fine, little bro." she emoted, dropping a lazy arm over his shoulder. Harry caught a whiff of cigarettes on her breath as he watched her eyes go pale for a second, and sighed.

She broke off the hold when she saw the back of Lottie's yellow sweater mingling with some locals, and Harry, still concerned, made his way back to Louis and Niall.

Taking a spot next to Louis, he couldn't help but hear a small protest at the back of him. Louis arm jammed into him to make room for Niall to come close to tell them something. The town women murmured some more.

"Louis, say you'll sing with us in the concert!" Niall repeated, "As soon as we get a song done. You can sing with me and Harry!" Niall said, leaning in, his hair brushing Harry's nose.

Louis, sweat shining on his forehead, was at a loss for words. Shawna stood there wearing her gummy smile, and Harry was beginning to think it was painted on.

"Yes, he's very good!" the girl said, never closing her mouth for the syllable changes. Harry tried to process Louis singing with them at the concert, but the murmurs were distracting him now. He turned around and saw the women whispering and glaring at Louis.

"*The Reverend's son is socializing with him!*"

"*The city houses all kinds! No space for that here!*"

"*He better not be included in the concert...*"

Harry opened his mouth, a hot retort searing over his tongue, ready to be released without thinking first. But someone beat him to it-

"You let me know when you're done casting those stones, Susan. I have a few right here I have no problem throwing at you!"

"Are you honestly telling me that that wasn't something to be alarmed about!?" the woman replied to her reprover.

Cracking a wry smile, Anne briskly adjusted her coat. "The only thing I'd be alarmed about, if I were you, is the fact that Roger's bar every Friday night for the past six weeks is no place for your precious Josh, who spends every Sunday morning adjusting the P.A system for the Reverend's sermons."

Harry blinked rapidly as his mother stood merciless in her gaze toward the woman, who was speechless now. She had to have gotten that timely information from Murrey- He never keeps his mouth shut about anything. Louis and Niall looked on silently as Harry made a quick check to see if Joshua himself had heard the conversation. Lucky enough, he was busy fixing cables on the other end of the stage, completely oblivious. Harry looked back at his mother, unable to grasp what just happened.

His mother had just defended Louis to her peers. No. His mother had just *fearlessly* defended Louis' noun change of her wedding song to her church going peers.
That night, after the girls had gone to bed, and the boys had helped Cord prepare Winnipeg and Salsa for the rodeo show the next day, Harry took a shower and skipped down the stairs. He spotted a very solemn Louis sitting on the floor in front of the couch, looking at something on a paper. He looked so engrossed in what he was reading that he only looked up when Harry's feet landed at the bottom of the stairs in a light thump.

"Um. I'm sorry. I was just going to make some tea. You want?" Louis nodded. Harry could see the tiredness in his stare as he blinked up at him.

"That would be lovely, thanks."

A while after, Harry walked back in with two steaming cups of tea, and edging in front of the loveseat, not wanting to invade his space as he quietly read, Harry offered Louis a genial smile, and set them down on the coffee table. He still hadn't gotten over what his mother had done. He knew perfectly well that Louis deserved to be defended because he didn't do anything wrong. But the way his mother lashed out at the people she pretty much grew up with over Louis - a boy she barely knew anything about except for the fact that apart from him being her friend's son, he was gay. Harry would have never in his wildest dreams seen that coming. He admired the older boy's bravery and pride, but he found himself holding out a special admiration - and to extension, hope - for his mother.

He juggled with the alternate outcome if it had been him - by some miracle - who had stood on the stage in front of all those town folk and had sung that lyric change. Harry knew these people his whole life, so maybe his mother defended Louis out of understanding that he didn't know much about the way they lived in Champton. Harry, on the other hand, had no such excuse. He knew exactly how things operated in Champton where being openly gay was concerned. Better yet, he knew how things operated in his own home... Louis absentmindedly picked up his cup and lightly blew on it. Harry watched as he took a sip and swallowed.

"This is delectable!" he said, smile cracking as he lowered the paper, wiggling the toes on his stretched out legs.

Harry gave a hearty blink in response and sipped his own tea. He noticed on Louis' right lay a stack of papers on the floor.

"So, what are you rea-"

"So, what was that to-"

Louis and Harry spoke at the same time. Both boys went into a pond of blushy giggles, then it died down and they lingered in the awkward moment.

"What was it you were going to say?" Louis asked ever so quietly, a sparkle in his eyes, reflected there by the lit bulb of the standing corner lamp, lighting up his eyes and somehow lighting the path for him to see into Harry's.

And Harry feels naked again.

Funny how light helps you to see things clearly, perfectly, and emphasizes their beauty even, like the midday sunlight over the lake, but you can never look at the source or you'll go blind.
He shook his head in short fast zigs, letting heavy air out of his nostrils. "You first."

Louis drew his lower lip between his teeth. "Well. . . I was going to ask what happened back at the Center with your Mum and that lady."

Harry released a long pensive sigh, then shrugged, eyes absently on the gentle smoke exuding from his cup. "That was just another example of my Mum taking a sincere liking to you."

Louis broke into a smile. "Well, I am grateful. She reminds me a lot of my Mum. She would have done the same thing."

Harry sipped his tea. . . Louis sipped his tea. . .

"Are those your Mum's letters you have there?" Harry asked, index finger sticking out from between his teacup handle.

Louis picked up the sheet at the top of the stack. "Yeah. I'm so curious to know what happened, but mostly I just. . . wanna. . . It feels like she's here. Talking to me. It's weird because they aren't even addressed to me but-"

"It's not weird. You have something at least. Something she wrote, said, and felt. My dad never kept a diary. I wish he had, though. I'd know how. . ." Harry said, looking down into his cup as he tapped on the side with sad fingers.

"How, what?"

Harry looked at the corner lamp. "Just, how he felt on a daily basis, you know. About his life, and job and stuff."

...About me, Harry added in his head.

Louis peered up from his cup. "What did he do?"

"He was a horse trainer/ bronc riding champion and contented with Robin Cartwright back in the day. He worked with my Granddad on the ranch. This was, like, the biggest rodeo ranch in my Granddad's days. He's another one I wish had a journal. You'll see tomorrow what it's all about."

With everything that happened after hearing his parent's song again, Harry felt overwhelmed, and even though he never met the man, he missed his father. He wished he had more time. He wished he had even as much time as Gemma did because she remembered him even though she was very little when he died. But Harry was a baby, he wasn't even old enough to speak, much less form a sentence to address his father. He always wondered- every single goddamn day- if things would be different had his father lived to see him grow. Would he be proud? Would he be more accepting of Harry's queerness than his mother? Would it even be an issue at all in their household?

With the rodeo show tomorrow, he also found himself thinking about his grandfather. He knew his grandfather. He loved his grandfather and had overflowing respect for him, but he feared going would make him miss him even more. And not to mention how he felt about the way the animals are trained for such a show.

No. Harry was not too excited about about the show. As a matter of fact, he was only looking forward to cheering on Salsa and Winnipeg.

"I can't wait to see what Liam is always on about. You're right, though. I have all these letters from my Mum to cherish. But it'll take me forever to read all these, though. By the way, I don't want any
of my sisters to know I'm reading these. They are unpredictable as you saw when you came for us. . ." Louis said with a drawn out breath, sounding tired.

"Okay, I promise I won't say anything. I can help you read some, if you like." Harry offered. He also wanted to understand his mother's friendship with Louis' mum and why she took to Louis so much despite him being gay.

"You would? That- Thanks. If you're sure." Louis said sounding pillowy.

Harry rest his cup down and rubbed his moist hands on his lap, his eyes on the papers. "I am. You've been helping me so much. I want to."

The tiredness in Louis' eyes was almost immediately lifted and replaced with colorful bubbles of excitement. Harry attributed it to the tea most likely kicking in, but hoped somewhere in the back of his mind that it was his offer to help that had caused the boy's face to light up so Christmas-y.

His fingers fiddling between the stack, Louis took out a few pages and handed them to Harry.

They sat quietly sipping tea as they read the letters. Harry held his page with both hands, eyes moving engagingly from word to word as they typed into his mind.

Dear Anne,

Both sets of twins are doing quite well. The babies are gaining weight by the day. Louis keeps pinching Ernie and setting off his sisters to do the same! I think he's still in shock that he has a brother now.

He takes him for walks a lot, and just yesterday I had to call him, worried, because he had been gone for hours. He had taken Ernie to Stan's house and his parents didn't want them to leave! I later phoned Mrs Lucas to thank her for changing Ernie's pampers and guess what? She said it was Louis who changed it! I would have never in my wildest. . . He really is a proud big brother.

He thoroughly loves Dorie too and is always putting Ernie down next to her, "...because I don't want to upset the 'twin bond' too much with my 'brothers bond'." he says.

He's especially happy today because his friend, Liam, finally came out to his family. For weeks he's been talking to him, trying to help him build the courage to tell them. He's told me how worried he was about him. Considering what happened between them, I'm glad Louis was able to move past that and be there for Liam now. I'm so happy for Liam, but I'm super proud of my amazing son. He's grown into such a brave, strong, compassionate person that I sometimes marvel that he's my child.

Fizzie and Lottie are coming to spend a weekend with us in a few weeks just as soon as Mark gets leave from work. I cannot wait to see my sweet girls. I'm going to take lots of pictures. Update you soon.

P.s- How are Gemma and Harry?

A smile brushed Harry's face as he read it. The vision of Louis and his baby brother sent little fuzzy balls of tingling fond dancing in his belly.

He pulled himself together as he reread it.

Louis helped Liam to come out?
They're that close?

What happened between them?

Louis' mum was okay with Louis being gay, and proud of him?

Louis' mum asked about me and Gemma?

The letter was from two years ago. When Gemma left for college...

Swallowing back the lump that sneaked up the back of his tongue, Harry folded the paper, feeling invasive. Louis needed to read this. Louis needed to see how much his mother loved him and adored him.

Also, he felt like: Why wouldn't his own mother want a son like Louis? Not only did she accept him. but, she defended him in public. The same public Harry was forbidden from wearing lipstick and pink shoelaces in, by her. The same public she wanted to hide him from. The real him.

She liked Louis better. Harry even liked Louis better. Reflecting on the letter he just read, Harry wished he was Louis.

Deep inside, a part of him had felt like he wanted to tell Louis about his own sexuality, felt like it may be the right time, but these poisonous thoughts diffusing through his mind, dominant, invoking fear, he suddenly didn't want the real him to come out anymore. He wanted that Harry to stay locked away forever.

**

Chapter End Notes

Please tell me what you think of this chapter. A lot of stuff (emotions) went into it and I want to know what stood out to you and... Are you guys enjoying this? You guys are really supportive. Thank you so much. I love you guys!

1000 days without 1D! We're still the biggest, strongest fandom ever!

Journey's Faithfully is my chapter soundtrack and also what I imagined to be Harry's parents' song while I was writing. It could be any song really but somehow that one fed my writing inspiration.

#LarryIsReal
The Rodeo Show

Chapter Notes

Okay, this chapter is super long. I hope that is a good thing and you enjoy it because it's my personal favorite at the moment!
I listened to Ever The Same by Rob Thomas while writing some of this stuff. I drew emotions from it. Hope you like.
Would you recommend this fic to a friend? Vote and comment!

**

"I still can't believe Niall asked me to perform with you guys. I think if I do, I'll just play the keyboard in the back though."

Harry shot him a distinct look. A look that said "Yes that's probably a good idea after all the drama you stirred up yesterday." Louis wanted so badly to ask Harry what he thought about what he sang. Wanted to bring to the surface all he was spinning in his head, from the first time he met Harry, to the pink line peeking over his jeans the other night. He wanted so bad to know, but he couldn't just blatantly ask. Sometimes Louis knew. For a second when they locked eyes. And then he didn't. Because even when Harry's red flushes and deep searching stares say a lot, it's just that. It's just that they don't say anything at all about anything to do with the weird, slow drumming game they played, without some kind of conversation to break the oxygen bottle and draw breath again between them whenever they were alone. It was Saturday and with one more week to go before he left Champton, he prayed he would get through in one piece concerning his feelings toward Harry, especially if the boy didn't feel anything remotely close to what Louis did.

"Don't be ridiculous. Your voice is... refreshing!" Anne quipped, sliding next to her son, opposite Louis, just as Gemma staggered in the kitchen and started pouring herself some coffee.

It was five in the morning, and just as it's been all week since they arrived, it's just Louis, Harry, Anne, and an occasional Gemma in the kitchen having the earliest breakfast Louis had grown accustomed to in such a short time. As he sat down to have what Harry made – and Harry always makes this amazing early breakfast, securing the girls portions for when they got up, always around eight-ish, nine-ish - he wondered how he did it every morning. All of it, the cooking, the barn, the pens, feeding and cleaning everything. It seemed that since he came there Harry had so much responsibility, too much for a boy his age.

"Anne, I'm really sorry if I caused any unnecessary trouble yesterday. I should've thought it through."

"No bother. She had it a long time coming. She was always spreading gossip and scheming in high school." she pointed her chin to Harry. "Even had her sights set on their father. Serves her right to shut up for once."

"You went to school with Gemma and Harry's Dad?" Louis’ gaze drifted to Harry. He was perfectly concentrated on his sandwich, not looking up or even flinching at his name being mentioned, but as soon as Louis shifted back to Anne he felt those huge eyes flicker on him like a torchlight.
"Yes, I did. We were in the same year. I had Gemma when I was seventeen. Got married straight out of high school."

Louis did a math on that. His mother had him at eighteen, right after she left Champton, and if Gemma was two years older than him, then that mean his mother was one year younger than Anne. Anne told him before that Johannah only came back for her father's funeral when Louis was already walking and talking, and Harry was only a couple months old (he had probably met baby Harry at the funeral and he was too young to remember).

That was the last time she came to Champton Valley? Why didn't she come back for Anne's husband's funeral? Or Harry's granddad's?

"That, uh, that song you sang yesterday on stage, it was my wedding song, Louis." Anne smiled as she fiddled with her closed knuckles beside her plate.

If Harry's father died at twenty-one just a few months after Louis' grandfather died then-

"How did he die?"

Anne crashed her fork down and stared blankly at him. Louis immediately regretted the question as the table went silent. He didn't mean for it to come out so straightforward. So frank. Just...as he was thinking it the words just slipped right out of his mouth and onto their breakfast. His eyes diverted to Harry who looked by at him.

He knew Harry saw the predicament he felt he was in as he turned and glared at his mother in a way Louis hadn't seen before. He had seen him annoyed at his mother before but this look was different, dark. Harry looked like the evil version of a superhero. He looked like a reverse Harry. He saw his eyes dart toward his sister and exchanged looks with her before settling back in darkness at his mother. He shifted forward, t-shirt reaching into his plate as his torso pressed into the table, head tilted toward the frozen remnant of the woman.

"He had an aneurysm." He said with a little head shake, not taking his eyes off her. He gave the last word emphasis like he was repeatedly pronouncing it to an annoying delinquent teenager who keeps forgetting all the time, as if reminding her, as if she had forgotten, and it made her spin around and face him so fast, like a TV show camera changing frames.

Anne was white and motionless as if buried under his words.

Breath pushing the words out with not knowing what he was sorry for, the fact that that's how he died or the fact that he asked such an obviously private uninvited question. And Louis would know about that well. He made a mental note to think before he says, does anything to do with such a sensitive topic in the future.

Jumping out of her cocoon, as if touched with 'jolly' dust by a magic wand, Anne slapped on a smile and blinked at Louis. "Anyhow, that song- Louis you have a beautiful voice. I can't wait to hear what the three of you come up with."

Louis glanced at Harry again and – WOW! His expression went...Darth. Harry's eyes went from dark-super-villain to I-can't-wait-for-you-to-die-so-I-can-dance-on-your-grave without even moving, without even blinking, as if sure, totally sure of his feelings, almost willing it to happen that very second. Louis felt sick. He wished he didn't see it. . .didn't glance just then, because, just then, Harry rose up and was out the back door, slamming it behind him, crashing Anne's composure as she jumped with the sound and went into a quaking fit, nervously clanking the plates together as she collected them for the sink.
First instinct to run after him, Louis looked at Gemma mouth open to excuse himself, and was met by her panicked look as if blowing him out the door with her eyes, and he snapped his jaw shut closed and backed out the door.

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Creeping up to Harry, and standing awkwardly at the back of him, Louis felt something cold and worrying hanging in the air around him. He said nothing when he saw Louis' arms folded looking at him, so Louis started helping him with his chores as usual, quietly.

"Harry, what's wrong!?!" Louis found himself blurt out, while they waited for Betsie to stroll out the gate to the pastures.

Harry jumped down from the fence and started walking toward the stables. Running behind him, Louis felt like a puppy. Like Cliff. A little again and he'd be licking Harry's fingers as his tail wagged behind, just like Cliff.

"She didn't want me to finish." He said, quiet, stopping without turning to face Louis. Louis wondered if he should walk up to meet him or if it would be too invasive, because his voice sounded like he wasn't sure if he should even be talking about the topic. As if any move Louis made or, Cliff made –because the dog stopped with Harry and just stood there looking up at him, waiting patiently for him to start walking again- would distract him and cause him to break off his thought and transition into the next order of the day.

"It's not how he died. . . It's the way he died. He was saddle bronc riding. There was this big competition coming up and the doctors warned him it- Told him it wasn't-" He choked up and paused to swallow. Louis took one step forward, his boot – a bit big for him because its Harry's- thudding on the ground, causing Cliff to look back at him, his huge black ears turned upwards.

Then Harry turned around and focused his gaze on Louis' chest. "It was dangerous for him to be riding at all. Anything could trigger it. He didn't listen. He wanted one last ride before he was done. He risked it and...fell off the horse and just didn't get up."

Louis' chest crunched in a ball. "I can't imagine what that must've been like for your Mum. I mean, she had to have been there?"

Harry looked him in the eyes. "She was, we all were, according to my granddad. She just tossed me into someone's arms and ran to him. Gemma ran behind her and saw him up close before Mum screamed at someone to take her. It's fine, really. My granddad told me when we came to stay here...just, she never did."

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"Louis, have you been to a bull ride Competition?" Anne inquired, checking the peaches in the lane to see which ones were the freshest.

Harry snapped his head back. Louis stifled a laugh.

Harry was trying to decide on a brand of Worcestershire sauce, while Louis pushed the trolley. Gemma and the girls had wandered off to another lane. They had all agreed to make a quick trip to the grocery store together as they had a couple hours before the rodeo show started.

"I have, actually. Mum and Dad took us once, in Tescott. All of us."

"Mum, there aren't any bulls in the show today." Harry said, irritated as he put his selected brand in
the trolley. "There aren't any bulls in Champton, for that matter."

His mother broke into a laugh. "I know that! Johannah and I went to a rodeo in Tescott once too, and saw a bull ride. Our dads took us when we were little. Dad said uncle Em wanted to see if it would be lucrative to include bull ride training on the ranch. They didn't, though. It's almost the same thing as Bronc Riding, except, Bronc Riding is more fun, and Bull Riding is more dangerous, rough." –Louis raised a hearty eyebrow for only Harry to see. Harry fought back a smirk as he forced a frown- "Just wanted to make it clear for Louis to understand!"

"Well, I sure understand now!" Louis giggled.

Anne caught him and let out a snort. "Oh! You!"

Harry looked at both of them disapprovingly and pushed the trolley down the lane while they cackled behind him. Louis jogged up to him and took back the trolley, as he drifted off, looking at cheese. "Come on, Harry. Lighten up!" Louis smiled.

Then he split-secondly decided to ask, "So, do you think bronc riding is more fun than bull riding?"

Harry turned his head. "What?"

A woman walked by and Louis waited for her to pass them before he repeated. "Bull... riding...."

Harry dropped the mozzarella in the tray, eyes narrow. Louis watched him unblinking, shame creeping under his skin, flirting with the boy so candidly. Hoping for what? He's not going to just jump in your arms and snog you in front of all these shoppers. Louis' brain said. That's not a bad idea, though. Louis answered back.

"Well, we learned a lot of stuff watching Granddad work... Gemma was into the sports. She used to take part in the junior trail course. She trained with the staff but since we closed the rodeo ranch, she stopped..." Harry answered, looking away. He bit his lips and tapped nervously on his elbows, and Louis got the sense that there was more he wanted to say on the subject, but then he spun on his heal and started walking down the lane again.

Louis finally blinked, slapped into futility, his initial unrewarded intentions redirected. "So if you weren't so pro animal welfare, you'd be on those courses too?"

"I competed one year..." Harry trailed off of his sentence and stretched toward the bottle of vinegar on the top shelf. Louis, being slightly taller, reached out and retrieved it for him.

"If I wanted to do something in the sport, I'd want to train horses without hurting them or causing discomfort. It would be difficult, but not impossible. I've only ever done trick horse training with Salsa and Winniepeg. Gemma and Cord are going to do tricks with them today, though. I'm not up to it."

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Louis, I lost my dad before I even knew him. And it's just that with the rodeo show today...It reminds me of him, and my granddad." He bowed his head, and Louis couldn't see his eyes, but his tone strummed dispiritedly.

"It's not a big deal. It's going to be fun." He said quickly, shrugging himself off.

Louis dropped his shoulders. "How am I supposed to have fun knowing you're miserable?"
"Don't mind me. I'm just being stupid."

"No, it's not stupid. You're overwhelmed. It'd be pretty stupid if you weren't. You have feelings. It's okay to miss them as much as you do." Louis looked down at his fiddling fingers, his Mum popping up in his head again.

"Yeah, but I'm raining on your enthusiasm. I don't want to do that. Just don't worry about me. Okay?"

Yeah, Harry. Fat chance.

*****

"Well, guys before we go inside the arena, I've been saving these as a surprise. Fizzie I know you already have one on but if you will?"

Anne said, opening the lid of Gemma's car trunk, and pulling out a stack full of-

"Cowboy hats!" Phoebe beamed as Anne started passing the hats around according to color and size. Daisy started jumping up and down and Louis had to quickly leap forward and grab Honey from her. Fizzie took off hers and put it on an elated Anne's head, as she took the other one from her excitedly.

Anne closed the trunk and led them through the crowded car-park of the rodeo arena, towards the front of the building. There was a massive crowd coming in for the fundraiser rodeo show about to start. Louis and Harry had arrived in the truck, while Anne drove the girls in Gemma's car. Gemma had been missing in action since she gave her mother the car keys while they were still in the grocery store that morning and ran off to the arena to help Cord attend to Salsa and Winniepeg, according to her.

"Louis, look at me! I'm a cowgirl!" Phoebe shouted before bursting into song. "Because we're readers! Readers! Readers of the open range!"

"Open range!" Louis sang with them.

On hearing him, Harry's signature giggles jiggled in the air. "You actually watch that stuff!?"

"I've got five little sisters and a little brother, what can I say, they keep me young!"

Harry was beside himself. Louis dipped his head to follow Harry's bent torso as he cascaded in laughter. Phoebe joined in, and Louis heard her suddenly go quiet, as a pair of warm palms appeared in front of him, covering his eyes.

"Shhh!" he heard a voice from behind him instruct as he clutched the unanticipated fingers, prying them open.

"Uh, Niall?"

"Try again, Louis!" Niall voice sounded from somewhere behind Harry, who was standing on the opposite side of Louis. The eye-blocker then let out a snort and suddenly Louis knew exactly who it was.

"Liam!" He whipped around as the palms released his eyes, and threw his arms around an equally
elated Liam who was dressed in a white long sleeved denim shirt, tucked in his blue jeans with a brown star buckled belt and cowboy boots to match. The brown ombre' Stetson on his head fell off when he moved to embrace Louis and ended up lifting him off the ground.

Niall, in his immaculately white Stetson, strutted up to the two and went in for a bear hug. "Aw, you guys!"

The three of them peeled away and Louis shot Niall a rhetorical look. "You know Liam too!?"

"Of course, I know, Liam!" "Of course I know Niall!" Niall and Liam said at the same time.

"I came looking for you after the game. I went to your bus and they told me you hopped another one!" Liam said to Niall, as Louis picked up his hat, brushing the dust off.

"Yeah, I went with Harry's bus." Niall said, matter-of-factly, as Louis carefully placed the hat back on Liam's head.

"Oh! Hey Harry!" Liam said, waving, but Harry turned his back just then, and seemed to be distracted by Daisy and Honey the fish.

Anne motioned the girls to move along as the crowds grew larger heading into the arena, and as they all neared the entrance, she passed Harry the last two hats, a brown and a peach colored one stacked together. Tagging behind Harry, Louis observed as he placed the brown colored one on his head, then turn around, looking for him. He looked so young and handsome in the cowboy hat that went perfect with his red and black checked shirt, which was draped over a moss green t-shirt with a white buggy printed on it, paired with black jeans and all his rings, bracelets, and neck accessories.

Liam and Niall chatted off to one side, as Harry punched the dents in the peach colored Stetson, standing in front of Louis.

"I'm on flank-man duty today!" Louis heard Liam telling Niall, as Harry placed the hat on Louis' head, tilting his own head to see that it was level, not looking into Louis eyes, not even once, eyebrows slightly pushing towards each other, lips slightly opened in a focused pucker. Louis stood unable to move, looking into Harry's eyes, wanting, wishing he would connect his gaze just once. He was sure, even if his lips won't move, and his breathing momentarily non-existent, he would show Harry everything in his eyes and hopefully the boy would return it with equal intention. Or at least half. Louis was okay with half.

As Harry stepped back, finally glancing at him before moving his gaze to the loose gravel that covered the car-park, what Louis caught was the same red flush he always did from Harry whenever he looked into his green eyes a little too long and he looked back a little too longer. Surely that had to some kind of 'enough', more than half, but less than three quarter of Louis was hoping for.

He also wanted to share comfort in his gaze and cheer the boy up a bit for the show, but Harry was now glancing at Louis' jeans, somewhere around his pelvis. "Aren't you going to take a picture?"

Louis gasped, finally inhaling, and dug into his back pocket as Niall and Liam gathered around him.

"Would you like me to take it for you?" Harry asked, digging his heals in the gravel, as Louis searched for the camera icon on his phone.

Louis raised his head and responded by reaching out and pulling Harry in between him and Niall,
with Liam enthusiastically closing in on his left. He lifted his phone and looked into the screen; Liam flashing his debonair smile, Niall's grinning cheeks mushed up to Harry's slightly pink ones, and Louis -looking pretty good in the peach Stetson, which went with his Cobalt blue short-sleeved shirt - cracking a teasing tongue face, causing Harry to smile even wider.

"Say 'cheese!'" he slurred out, as his fingers found the capture button. Looking up at the lens, he swore he saw Harry flash a millisecond-of-a-second Darth-glare toward Louis’ left, just before the camera flashed. As they made their way inside the arena, he checked the phone to see if it came out in the picture, but as he looked down all he saw were four friends wreathed in smiles and cowboy hats.

***

Inside the arena, Liam patted Louis' shoulder and broke away from them as they heard his name being called. Louis turned to see Murrey quickly waving to Liam as the boy hurried over. He followed Harry and Niall as they made their way through the crowd. Niall also excused himself as he spotted Shawna's head above the waves of people, leaving Harry and Louis to walk up to Anne and the girls alone.

Leaning into the edge of a row of seats, with her beige cardigan in hand, Anne was chatting with a cowboy, about middle aged, with a pot belly and a broad charming smile. The man had taken off his hat and was holding it to his chest with one hand as he drew laughs out of Anne, who Louis noticed, was blushing. Louis raised an eyebrow at Harry, but he was staring surprised at his mother's laughter. When she saw them, Anne's expression turned serious, and she quickly straightened her composure.

"Louis! This is Mr Robin Cartwright. He's a rodeo gold member, and an old friend of your grandfather's."

The man slapped his hat back on and quickly offered his hand for a shake, beaming broadly. "How very nice to finally meet the long lost grandson of the legendary Emmett Davidson!"

Louis smiled politely and shook his hand. Harry, on the other hand, slid both his hands into his back pockets and turned away distractedly when Robin had sought his greeting as well. Louis guessed it was because of how the boy was feeling in general, and not because he disliked the him, because Louis didn't sense anything off about the man.

"Well, y'all enjoy the show now! It's nice to see you again Anne! I do hope I run into you again!"

The man chimed, garnering one more giggle from her, before moving off into the crowd.

Cord hustled up to Anne, scanning the group. Shoulders broad, he looked dapper in his blue denim shirt and signature Ivory Stetson. "Where's Gemma! I thought you said on the phone she was on her way here!?"

Anne flashed a suspicious look. "You didn't meet her?- Cord shook his head, confused- "Well, where the hell is she!?"

Then someone tapped her shoulder from behind.

"Hey, Mum!" Gemma had appeared, out of breath, her hair tied back in a neat ponytail, wearing a huge brown trench coat, closed up around her. Louis noticed she was fidgeting and uneasily shifting from one foot to another, as Anne eyed her strange choice of clothing suspiciously. He diverted his gaze to survey his siblings.
"One, two- where's Phoebe!?" he asked, eyes moving over the crowd.

Anne spun around and lay an assuring hand on his back. "Phoebe dragged Fizzie off to find the hotdog vendor."

Daisy gasped and shoved Honey into Lottie's hands. "Fizzie!! I want extra ketchup!" she bellowed, hands propped on either side of her mouth as she darted off. Louis had to run five meters after her, and grab the back of her bright purple jacket, dragging her back to Lottie before she disappeared.

"Eeeew!" Lottie protested, jerking backwards into the crowd as the fish's water splashed on her yellow shirt.

**BUMP!!**

Lottie pitched sideways, her high ponytail wagging behind, and Honey the fish went flying into the air. She let out a shriek as she went tumbling onto Daisy. Just then, a yellow-brown sweater-sleeved arm reached out and grabbed her by the waist, stopping her from ultimately crushing Daisy to the ground. As she looked up to her rescuer, the sickening sound of the fish bowl, not so lucky, shattering to the hard cemented floor of the rodeo arena, caught the attention of surrounding rodeo spectators.

Louis hurried to cover Daisy's face from the sight of Honey flapping up and down over the wet broken glass.

Suddenly, a dark-haired boy, who had turned around just as the bowl hit the floor, quickly grabbed the sanitary cup in his friend's hand, throwing out the former contents, and dived to the distressed fish, scooping it into the cup. He got up and pulled a bottled water out of an unsuspecting middle-aged man's hands, startling him, and demonstratively filled the cup in a manner like he was proving a science experiment, or performing a magic trick. Daisy leaped up to her feet, and Louis watched as the boy handed her the cup with his eyes dead set on Harry.

A relieved and grateful Daisy clasped the cup protectively. "Thank you!"

"No problem." He replied, not looking at her. "See, Harry? Animals are in danger everywhere we go. It's a natural part of life. What do sharks eat? Or Bears, for that matter? You're not going to hold them in contempt, are you? We all care about their well-beings, but unfortunately we can't save them all, can we?"

Louis witnessed Harry's cheekbones concave as he clenched his jaw in desprise. He immediately copied Harry's expression as he realized this boy must be Nick Grimshaw.

Louis ran his growing glare over the boy; A pink-and-white-plaid buttoned-up collar peeking out of the already choked up neck of his dark grey 'dad' sweater, loose khaki trousers with black suede flats, with short greasy too-black-for-black hair slicked back and stopping behind his ears, no cowboy hat. He looked pathetic and drab, and reminded Louis of the little sad boy in Meet the Robinsons who grew up to be a conniving villain.

As Harry opened his mouth to respond to the douche-

"Oh, Trey!" A pretty, long-haired woman in high-heeled cowboy boots and a loose frill-sleeved blouse over her stretch jeans, hovered over the other boy in the brown-yellow sweater who had now pulled Lottie up.

"Are you all right, son?" She asked worried as she tried to smooth his hair with her thin long red nails. This boy looked slightly softer than Nick, with hair only a few shades darker than Harry's,
matching his mother's long tresses. He had on the same outfit as Nick, just different color scheme, but something about the boy contrasted to Nick not only in color. He seemed meek and timid, cool. As he batted away his mother's hands, Louis noticed that his modest gaze never left Lottie's timorous one.

"I'm sorry. I should have watched where I was going." He blurted out to Lottie, ignoring his mother's question.

The man who's bottled water was snatched by Nick, stood tall over the scene, glowering over the group, until his eyes met Anne's.

"Anne! What a surprise. Haven't seen you in a while. I know you are well acquainted with horses but I see you're finally ready to interact with humans as well. Finally crawled back to the land of the living?" the man said, beaming down at her, his dark eyes scathing as he removed his hat. He unimpressively wore a white t-shirt under an unbuttoned camel-colored blazer, blue jeans, brown boots, and a black Stetson with small silver stars banding it. His short, once dark hair, was laced with shameless grey.

"Anytime you're ready to cut a deal on that ranch of yours...Was never a fan of the competition your father garnered but you are sitting on a good piece of land for rearing horses. Too bad you're wasting it on- What are you doing with it these days? Oh, yeah, you're providing milk for 1.3% of the town? Now, those cows don't need to go through all that torture dehorning, artificial insemination, separation from their young... Isn't that right, Nick?"

"Sure right, uncle Simon!" Nick agreed, as the man reached into his blazer. He flicked his stubby fingers and a little card manifested between them.

"Hand it over to me, let me make more sense with an industry that don't mind taming a few wildins' to make a profit that actually makes sense. Your dad and his granddad," he said, glancing at Louis so briefly he doubted he even properly saw him. And how did he know who Louis was? "actually had it right. Lucky for me," he spread his arms vulture-like around the arena to show grandeur, one foot cockily tipping out in front the other, "- and bad for you- except for their good looks,"- Simon brushed his eyes over the mother and daughter, Nick flashed his eyes over Harry- "-, they didn't pass down any of the good business genes!"

With a crooked smile, showing a shiny tooth, he brandished the card in front Anne. Her eyes pierced Simon's face and the card with contempt, and she held her ground, not moving to take it. "We're quiet fine. Have no intention of selling the ranch to you or anybody else."

And Louis saw Reverse-Harry again. This time it was blazing at Mr Simon Cowell and Nick, who lagged obediently at the man's side, quiet with a smirking smile directed back at Harry.

Gemma, standing awkwardly in the middle of them, gave a pursed smile and apologetically took the card, tapping it on her fingertips. Simon, eyes beaming down at the girl, dropped his hat back on, tipped it to them, and slithered away, with the boy who had bumped into Lottie, and his mollycoddling mother following closely behind.

Louis shook his head, steaming. He never had so much abhorrence for a person in his life, and he didn't even know the man.

"Gemma, what is wrong with you? Why would you take that? Chuck it!" Anne rattled raspingly, as a lady walked up with a broom and started sweeping the glass. Louis took the broom from her and quickly scooped up all of the shards, apologetically before he returned it. He turned to find an intrigued Harry looking at him wide-eyed.
"Louis, we are not on the farm. People will think you're a worker!" Anne rasped as the janitor waltzed off with the broom and dustpan, and its Darth-Harry again. Louis couldn't help but let out a snort of endearment in which Harry looked at him confused for a second, his cheeks going red again, before glaring at his mother again. Boy, Harry changes faces faster than a chameleon changes color. And it made him even more interesting and endearing to Louis.

The crowded stadium shifted and jostled as everyone sought to find a favorable seat. The atmosphere much reminded Louis of his games, particularly his last game- which was not a good thing. Just as Anne was berating her daughter, the now sanitary-cup-less boy appeared from behind her and stuck his face out to Gemma as the girl slid under his arm and pecked his lips. Louis, seeing Anne's face, caught a visual of what he was feeling: Stomach upset.

The boy was about Gemma's age, medium built, short greasy dark hair with a dirty-blonde streak in front. He had on a tight black cut-up jeans with a plaid yellow short-sleeved shirt left open over a loose black t-shirt. His eyes were cold and distracted, smile cornered and seedy... Something about the boy did not sit right with Louis at all. Something miscreant lurked beneath his brow, and made Louis want to shove him away from Harry's sister and talk some good sense into her.

"Aiden, Mum. Mum, my boyfriend, Aiden."

Out of nowhere, a huge denim boulder, with an ivory Stetson on top, bounced up and almost knocked Louis straight into Harry. As a matter of fact, Louis had to hold on to Harry to brace them both.

The denim boulder then came to a berserk halt in front of Gemma. "You got be freakin kidding me!!"

Anne pulled back her upper body and Gemma flinched. Harry, clearly sensing another inevitable scene, stepped up to Cord, green eyes big and demanding. "Don't do this here. We can talk about this at home, later!"

Anne burst the balloon of laughter waiting at the back of her throat. "Don't make a scene? This is a scene!" she said pointing up and down Aiden and Gemma. "No, wait, scratch that! This is a debacle!"

Harry sighed, and Louis felt his shoulders sink, next to him.

Anne looked at Gemma with disappointment swimming in her eyes. "If she wanted us to talk about this at home she would've let me invite him for dinner like I suggested. But then she knew I'd never allow it, had I known who I was inviting! This is exactly the scene she had to have seen coming!"

"Gemma, you going to allow your mother to speak to me that way!?"

This time it was Cord who laughed. Then, all of a sudden, he cut himself off ,mid-laugh, and lurched for Aiden's collar, grabbing it with both hands. Both Anne and Louis grabbed him and tried to pull his weight off of a cowering Aiden, while Harry shielded Gemma from the boys' flaring elbows.

"Cord! Pull yourself together!" Anne shouted as Gemma huffed at Cord. Louis had his arms around Cord who angrily shrugged him off and turned his back to everyone, mentally keeping his calm.

"TO KICK OFF THE EVENING, WE HAVE THE SADDLE BRONC RIDE!" the rodeo commentator
suddenly blared through the speakers.

Louis glared at Aiden as Nick came hobbling up to them.

"What are you looking at!" Aiden snarled at him.

Louis made a sudden move, and Harry's arm timely slapped him on his chest, pressing into him, and securing him from lunging at the vile boy.

Nick also threw him a seething look as he grabbed Aiden's shoulders, pulling him away from them. "Come on, Aiden, you're next. We don't have for this."

Gemma stood awkwardly watching them paddle away as her mother's eyes bore down on her. Louis turned away from the heated glare to see Niall deterring spectators from a group of seats, obviously keeping them for Harry, Louis and Anne, as Fizzie, Lottie and the twins were already climbing into the rows with Shawna.

"Gem, you coming!" Aiden snapped, as he stopped to implore her with his angry eyes.

Harry turned to Gemma and raised an eyebrow. "Gem? He calls you Gem?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "The world doesn't revolve around you, Harry!" She then stepped off and shot Cord one last glare before she tailed away with Aiden. Anne puffed at her and clenched her fists, holding herself back from grabbing her daughter by the hair.

Louis saw Harry's hurt look and shifted himself closer to place a hand on his back. "Let's go sit. Niall and the girls are waiting."

'...BARREL RACE, PONY TRAIL, SPECIAL APPEARANCE BY SALSA THE SHOW HORSE...' the commentator's voice boomed through the speaker, calling out the list of imminent performances, as the crowd chattered, everyone settling in their rows, snapping pictures and preparing phones and tablets for videos.

"What was that all about?" Louis queried.

"That... was the Grimshaw cousins, Nick and Aiden -who is dating Gemma- and their uncle Simon. His sister married Gregory Grimshaw, they're Aiden's parents so technically Simon's just Aiden's uncle. Nick is Gregory's brother's kid, so he's not really related to Simon, but he grew up on the ranch, none the less. And Simon's son, Trey, he's a year behind me. He's actually not like any of them. Took more to his Mum's side, I think."

'LET'S SEE IF THE DARING AIDEN GRIMSHAW CAN HOLD ON FOR EIGHT SECONDS ON DANCIN' FIRE!'

Louis' teeth edged, and he exchanged eye-rolls with Harry as Aiden slid on the bronc in its cubicle. The gun went off and the bronc charged forward, bucking its hind legs with power and maddening agility. Louis watched as the horse shook and trampled with Aiden holding on desperately, and suddenly started cold sweating, his hands trembling. He flinched as the animal twisted its torso frantically hoping to throw off its rider, and suddenly a sick feeling gathered in his stomach, and he started seeing flashes of a scene similar to this one of loud crowds and cheers. The saddle bronc ride paired with the crowd's cheering was insensately making Louis unwillingly envision the car crash that had been happening during his equally electrifying game. The feeling rose higher in his chest as the assailable rider finally being thrown off at seven-point-nine seconds.
"LOUIS!?" he heard someone call behind him as he took off, darting towards the huge oak double doors they all came in from. He ran, forehead drenched in cold sweat, until he reached the fence parting the arena from the neighboring property. Ignoring the people around him, chattering and busy to get inside, he limply leaned over the wood fence and heaved. His eyes clouded by wet saline. He pressed his fingers on the spot between his nipples.

Out of the corner of his eye, he peeped silhouettes of people passing to get in, to go out, and he raised his head, spitting the bitter taste out of his mouth.

"Louis!?" he heard, as he tried to stand straight, feeling his stomach forcing its way out of his throat. A hand came to rest on his back, near his shoulder, and he turned to see a pair of huge green eyes full of deep unsettlement. He held his breath in as it was difficult to breath with his stomach punching into his oesophagus.

'...TEAM ROPE!' the speaker resounded, through the yard.

"I'm fine." He croaked as he felt Harry's hand squeeze him.

"I should've laid off the spices, shouldn't I?" Harry said in a small bumble, about the new recipe' he and Fizzie tried for lunch earlier.

Louis appreciated it. He turned and rest his arms on the wooden fence, leaning over again, and closing his eyes. It had less to do with the spicy dish, more to do with him having a serious panic attack. The rough ride of the cowboy on the bucking horse, being tossed around and flung off like an object thrown from a toddler's hand made him sickeningly think of his mother's accident and how it must've been for her being shaken to oblivion in the tumbling vehicle. But how could he put that into words for Harry to understand? For anyone to understand? His face crumpled into a painful mould, and he hoped the tears would stay back for a while until he was alone in his room.

"It's not that Harry. It's all the shouting and the commotion, the excitement." He bit his bitter lips, and swallowed, "It's just too much. I didn't know it'd bother me this much. Go back inside. I'll be there in a sec."

Harry folded his arms, grumbling. "This is Mum's fault. She shouldn't have made any of us come. This whole thing is traumatizing and it's not even the real thing. Just a light show for charity. This is hard for me and I'm accustomed to a full day of a grilling rodeo competition. Grew up in it..."

Louis wiped his tears away as they fell. He wanted to cry out loud but he fought that back as best he could while his was hidden from Harry's view.

"I'm gonna tell her we're leaving now!" Harry grunted, a worried tinge in his tone.

"No! No, Harry, please, I don't want to disappoint her. Winniepeg and Salsa still have to come on. The girls are enjoying it. I'm not walking out on them. We're not leaving!" Louis demurred, a hand extended to stop Harry, without an added look, his reeling stomach not allowing him to stand up straight.

"She's not gonna mind. She'll understand if you're sick. She can't make you stay if you're- "

"I'm not sick!" Louis fumed, shoving his face in his sweaty palms, elbows digging into the harsh crevices of the unshaven bark of the tree-branch wood fence.

"Louis!? Is everything okay!?" A voice suddenly bellowed from the entrance behind Harry, and
Liam appeared, hurrying past him. He feathered his hands on Louis' biceps, rubbing up and down.

No, Liam. No. Stop. Stop babying me... Louis thought, as he stood up straight, quickly wiping away all tears from his face.

"Come here!" Liam said, strong and comforting, familiar. Wrong. Wrong. Get away Liam, I can't do this again. I can't cry in your arms like some broken animal. Okay, I am broken, but you make me want to let it all out and I hate that. I can't... Not in front of Harry.

Threatening to throw down every attempt he had to hold back his pain, Liam's arms extended and slithered around Louis. He turned his back on the dusty-brown-haired boy and ran his hand through his own dark, neatly moussed hair, disrupting the hairstyle.

"I'm fine, Liam I just need a second. Will you please just give me a moment, both of you."

Liam backed away until he was flush at Harry's side. "I'll be inside. If you need me."

Louis saw him look at Harry and linger for a second, peradventure the boy would go back inside with him, but Harry stared back at him without moving. He then saw Harry's eyes glaringly follow Liam, as the latter eventually turned and walked away. Harry then shifted his gaze to Louis and he saw the boy's eyes soften. It was almost dark now but Louis did see that. Darth-Chameleon Harry.

There was a difference in the way he looked at Liam and the way he looked at Louis. His eyes were still drowned by emerging tears but he swore he saw that.

Dipping his fingers into his breast pocket, Harry pulled out a little peppermint sweet as he walked over to Louis, and tucked it in his jacket pocket, giving it an additional little pat. He turned to walk away, and all Louis could manage to say was "Thank you", before Harry turned back to smile at him. He turned on his heal and strutted back inside, leaving Louis alone to gather himself.

Fumblingly pulling out the peppermint and unwrapping it, Louis stuck it in his mouth. The mint's essence mingled with his bitter vomit taste before engulfing it and replacing it with minty freshness all through his nostrils, clearing it.

He took his time as he walked back to the entrance, holding his chest as it was still pulsing, though calmer, now that the peppermint had sunk in. Inside, he quickly found the others and slid back in his row, between Harry and Niall.

"Everything all right, mate?" Niall shouted over the crowd, his hotdog immediately replacing his words as he downed half of it. Louis looked away as his stomach gave a tiny lurch, not wanting anything to do with food-to-the-mouth at the moment.

"I'm fine, Niall. Just needed a bit of fresh air." Harry kept his eyes on Louis as the next part of the show begun.

'ON THE JUMP TRAIL WE HAVE WINNIEPEG THE PONY AND HER TRAINER, CORD JAMES!'

Harry started clapping and Louis sisters stood up and started cheering like mad, blowing whistles and hooting, when the rest of the crowd was simply clapping lazily. Louis shot Harry an apologetic look as half the arena turned to them. "They're used to this at my games. I'll have to fine tune that."

Drawing an admiring smile, studying Louis features, Harry then gave a fiery look and suddenly leaped up. "Go Winniepeg! WHOOOOOH!"

Louis sat aghast, looking from Harry to Niall as he too followed Harry, shouting at the ring.
The pretty blonde colored pony strutted around the ring with Cord at its side proudly waving to the crowd. The crowd 'oohed' and 'aahed' as he led the pony through the obstacle course and over the jump trail. The pony skipped and jumped with ease, and reminded Louis of a ballet his mother took him to once. It was like every aspect of the show reminded him of his mother in some way or another.

As Cord took a bow and gave credits to Winniepeg at the end of their act, the girls jumped up and cheered with the now more enthusiastic crowd. Harry blew whistles and hoorayed, and looked down at Louis, who had painted on a mere smile while clapping and gazing back.

"What's wrong? Are you upset again? We should leave. I'll tell Mum-" Harry asked, dropping back down to face him.

Louis blink-sighed. "No! I'll be okay. Salsa still has to come on."

Harry nodded quickly and turned to face the ring.

'AND OF COURSE WE HAVE SALSA THE SHOW HORSE HERE TO SHOW US A FEW TRICKS!'

Salsa strolled into the ring flanked by Gemma, still in her trench coat, and Cord, and swished around, proudly showing off her shiny black coat. The crowd clapped on as the horse mimicked Gemma's demonstrative nods and Cord orders for her to whinny and sit. But then when Gemma stood a few feet away and twirled her fingers for the last trick, Salsa did not obey. The horse just stood there motionless and uninterested.

The girls sat on edge, and Harry scratched his head. "What's wrong with her? She knows this one!"

"She must be thirsty or tired." Niall offered, concerned stare on Harry.

Anne bent her head backwards toward Harry. "Harry, get in there and help them!!"

Harry made no hesitation as he flew out of his seat and shot for the edge of the ring. Gemma and Cord looked relieved to see him as he leaned over the safety barrier.

"Salsa!" he called, raising his hand high in commandment. The horse turned to him, and he started twirling his middle and index fingers the same way Gemma did a few minutes earlier. Salsa saw it and turned, and started spinning around slowly on the spot, her luxurious tail swaying magnificently. The crowd let out noises of awe. Niall and the girls shouting like boars. Louis was jaw-dropped and just... jaw-dropped. Then Harry clicked his fingers and Salsa stopped to face him again. He then turned his fingers in an anti-clockwise motion, and the horse started spinning in the opposite direction, her teeth showing now as she tilted her elegant head to show off her wondrous shampooed-and-conditioned mane, receiving loud gasps of astonishment and fascination from the crowded arena, never stopping until Harry clicked his finger again after the crowd gave a good loud cheer.

Harry then clapped his hands once, shot his arm into the air, and shouted "Up!" And, low and behold, the horse hefted up on her hind legs and twirled herself around to the sounds of Harry clucking his tongue while twirling his fingers, drawing the loudest crowd praise yet. Meanwhile Gemma beamed broadly and stupidly as she faced the jubilant crowd, pointing her hands appraisingly at the horse. Harry shook his head confusedly at her before he started back toward his seat.

As Harry slumped back in his seat, he shot Louis and Niall a relieved look while his mother
clapped at him, and Louis was suddenly and dynamically yanked from the rabbit hole, straight into Harry's wonderland.

"Oh, boy! This is the make or break!" Niall explained as they watched Liam and a couple of other flank men run into the ring, removing Winniepeg's previous obstacles and replacing them with bigger, more complicated ones.

Louis felt Harry's body tense as he pushed off of the backrest, eyes attentive and slightly narrowed as Liam helped the men lay a very tall mountain obstacle in the middle of other smaller hoops and hurdles and check to see if everything was properly fastened to prevent accidents.

'HOLD ON TO YOUR SEATS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! NEXT WE HAVE THE TRAIL OBSTACLE COURSE WITH GEMMA STYLES, DAUGHTER OF OUR LEGENDARY BRONC RIDING CHAMPION, GAVIN STYLES! AND SHE WILL BE PROUDLY RIDING IN HER LATE FATHER'S HONOUR HERE IN OUR ANNUAL RODEO FUNDRAISER! WATCH AS SHE ATTEMPTS THE BACKBREAKING EIGHT FEET MOUNTAIN JUMP! VERY FEW HAVE SUCCEEDED! AS A MATTER OF FACT THE ONLY PERSON FROM CHAMPTON VALLEY TO MAKE THAT JUMP HAPPENS TO BE HER MOTHER, OUR 1989 JUNIOR CHAMPION, ANNE STYLES! WILL HER DAUGHTER MAKE THE JUMP TODAY FOR CHARITY!?'

Waiting at the ring entrance, as Liam and the other men scattered out of the ring, up on top a tall horse sat Gemma, a well tailored equestrian suit fit for champions with a logo on the breast that said 'Cowell', complete with a riding helmet, eyes burning with focus, comportment bathed in determination, all geared up and ready for her performance.

Harry's mouth fell open as the commentator spoke, and Anne, who was sitting in the row in front of Harry, snapped around in her seat.

"Harry, did you know about this!?" she sputtered as her hair swished back and forth between Harry and the ring, her face in a mixture of shock and worry. "Harry!? Do you see that!? That-that's my obstacle! When in the hell did she have time-"

Harry shook his head, searching for words. Louis rested a supportive hand on his shoulder. Anne kept frantically looking back for Harry as Gemma rode around the arena warming up for the jump.

"You mean she didn't tell you guys what-" Louis began to ask. Harry interrupted with a quick shake of the head and lurched forward to wrap his arms around his mother's neck, as she had stretched her arm backward for him to take it, watching intently as Gemma picked up speed.

"She did. She only told Harry. Heads-up for later when you get back to the ranch!" Niall whispered in Louis' left ear.

Louis threw his focus to the ring as his sisters quietly sat with agape mouths, rightly so, Louis concurred, because eight feet was an astonishing height for even the tallest, stealthiest horses to jump.

As she rode around, Louis noticed a change in her demeanor. She seemed now...hesitant to make the jump.

The crowd was so silent you could hear a pin drop, and Anne's hand was so tight around Harry's elbow, Louis swore he saw every vein protruding from her fingers as she stared unblinkingly at her daughter. Lottie sat still next to Daisy who almost took a sip of Honey's water as she forgot it was the fish she had put in the seat cup-holder and not her drink, which was actually placed on her right and now being slurped by Phoebe, who was seated comfortably between her and Anne. Fizzie sat
with her hands clasped together at her mouth on the other side of Shawna who was squeezing Niall's left hand as he dipped into his popcorn with the other.

Then Gemma looked up at the stands and caught Harry's eyes. Louis knew that look. It's the same look his four sisters gave him when he opened his bedroom door for them on the day of his mother's funeral. The look they each sneak at him in between small happy moments like when they rode the horses on the ranch, or when they went to the lake, or when they played football with Niall. The look that said "I need you", "I can't do this without you." The look that Louis always responds to with a smile drawn from the deepest parts of his own broken heart, and a hug he hoped will absorb every ounce of pain and despair from them.

Harry must know that look well too, and just like Louis he too must need to respond because- Because he immediately ripped himself away from his mother's grip and stood up, gazing back at his sister as she locked her worried looking eyes on him. Then, in the silence of the crowd, Harry put his hands around his mouth and shouted. "Come on Gem! You can do it!" He then started clapping rhythmically while shouting. Taking queue, Fizzie jumped up and started clapping in time with Harry, followed by Niall, followed by Louis shouting "Oi oi!", Daisy roaring like a lion, until the whole crowd was eventually cheering and egging her on.

Anne too stood up and started coaching her. "Come on Gemma! Keep him moving, sweetheart!"

Louis glanced Nick a few rows below glaring back at Harry, only he wasn't glaring, more like...gawking.

"I believe in you!" Harry yelled as the newly inspired, toothy girl picked up speed, the horse dashing around the arena, going, going, until he leaped in the air and over the eight-foot mountain obstacle.

'GIVE IT UP FOR THE CONQUERING GEMMA STYLES! YOU JUST MADE YOUR PARENTS, AND WHOLE OF CHAMPTON PROUD! NEXT UP WE HAVE MURREY PAYNE ON THE SHOW TRAIL!'

The crowd roared, everyone leaping to their feet, Niall's popcorn flying into the air as he picked up Shawna and spun the giant of a girl around. Louis clapped as he witnessed the feat, but the boisterous crowd got the better of him, and he sank down in his seat, cold sweating, and remembering again.
Hey everyone. I'm sorry I took so long to update. I have a habit I write further chapters before middle ones etc because I like to get it down as it comes in my head. So don't worry I have future chapters down already. In The Background by Third Eye Blind fed my grit for this chapter. Wow. What can I say about it? I love those guys. This song and certain other songs on that album feed my emotions for most of my writing throughout the story but I particularly wanted this song here for some reason...Comments??

"Mum, I don't see the big deal! Now you know!" Gemma shouted, pacing in the living-room.

They had gotten back home from the rodeo show a while ago, and the girls were now upstairs settled in bed. Louis sat on his bed with his feet on the ground and his face in his hands, still feeling queasy. He sprung to his feet, in his boxers, and opened the door, creeping out to see what the shouting was about.

"It's not about knowing and not knowing. It's when! Timing, Gemma! You should have said something before! Telling him I wanted nothing to do with him, and _my daughter_ is dating his nephew!_ Gemma, you made me look like an idiot!_" she then turned to Harry. "Did you even see how he smirked at me!?"

Louis knew Harry hadn't seen. Louis did see, though, the way Simon smirked at Anne when they were exiting the arena, while in the corner of his eye, he saw that Harry was busy keeping an eye on _him_ in case he wanted to throw up again.

He peeped from behind the staircase as Harry opted to nod, acquiescing her.

"And what is this about that jump? You practised on their _ranch!?_"Anne said snidely as she stuck her finger scornfully at the logo on Gemma's riding coat.

"Yes! So what? Harry, tell her! They have the best horses, the best facilities, the best trainers!" Gemma pleaded, counting on her fingers.

Anne threw her hands in the air. "Yes, and I'm proud of you, but you could have said something. You were wrong, and I'm not going to let you go out with that weasel any longer!"

Louis sighed. The conversation was exactly the one his Mum should have had with him about that cancelled camping trip. Maybe if she had let Louis know he was doing something wrong by choosing football over his family...

_Yeah. . . but I still lost her._

Suddenly feeling claustrophobic, he reversed into his room and pulled on his stonewashed jeans and a loose black sweater. He then crept over the distressed floorboard, to the kitchen, hoping not to be seen. Once there, glancing back to make sure no one noticed, he gently gripped his fingers on the chrome doorknob of the white, blinded backdoor, and slipped out.
"Louis?" Harry called, only a few minutes later, from somewhere above his head. Louis had slid himself in the little wooden nook under the backstairs to take a smoke, his fingers warm and wet with new tears and snot. Outing the half-used cigarette, he covered his mouth and hoped Harry didn't hear him sobbing in the dark. He saw flashes of light move around the dark lawn, and knew Harry was scanning the yard for him. He then heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and soon Harry's head popped under, staring at him concerned, with the torchlight directed slightly to the left of his face.

"What are you doing down there?" he said casually, as if asking how someone's day was, while Louis raised his arm and blocked the sharp glare with the thick sleeve of his sweater. Louis knew Harry had already seen his tears and was probably trying not to make it too obvious. Louis appreciated that so much.

Flicking off the torchlight switch, Harry ducked under and fumbled to sit next to him, the ball of his right shoulder brushing into Louis' left. He had taken off his jacket and though Louis had on his, he could feel the soft movement of the boy's muscles as he jammed into his side. Louis pulled in his nostrils. "I- um – I just." The words stuck. Louis really didn't want to talk about it. He just wanted to sit and brew in his agony and torment.

"Sorry about that in there. Mum has years of pent up rivalry acting up. She's making a big deal out of nothing. thought it'd be over since we don't even train broncs anymore, but apparently," he pointed backwards, "...not. They'll probably go on like that for a while, so if you want company I can stay. If you wanna be alone I can go ..."

Louis started crying again. "No, Harry. Stay ...I just- I talked about the stupid game for weeks. I warned her that day not to be late and she r- she rushed because of me."

"She was speeding?" Harry asked softly.

"No! But she left work early to get to see me play." Louis didn't even recognize his own voice. It was a broken whisper. "If I hadn't insisted- "

Harry grabbed his hand and pulled it onto his own lap. Louis felt the nervous twitch as Harry settled his palm over the back of his hand, flat on the boy's jeans. Glued to the spot, Louis palm was scorching over the soft and firm flesh.

"No...No. She wouldn't have missed it either way." He sighed. "I always wonder what it would've been like if my dad hadn't made that ride. But he died doing something he loved. Something he was willing to risk his life for. It's not the same thing, Louis, but your mum loved you. Think about it like- she died happy to be on her way to see you play football."

Louis squeezed Harry's hand. "That doesn't make me feel any better, Harry. I feel much worse."

Harry nodded sympathetically, looking down onto his lap. Then, on a whim, he took Louis' other hand as well, and pulled him up. "Come on, I wanna show you something!" "Where are you taking me?" Louis asked as they tread across the lawn, towards the stables.

Harry grabbed his hand again. "Come on."

They entered the stable and Harry walked over to Scotch's stall. The horse dipped its' Giant head and lightly touched his outstretched hand. Louis strolled over and watched as Harry smoothed both his hands over the horses' face and neck.
"I don't think I told you before... Scotch was my dad's horse." Harry said as he petted the animal. "I told you I never knew my dad, but..." he kissed Scotch's nose. "I still miss him a lot. I never knew anything about him. Mum never talked about him much, and Gemma barely remembers herself, but Scotch knew him longer than all of us."- the horse whinnied, brandishing its huge mint-shaped teeth- "Whenever I wanna know something about him, like, his voice, or... his attitude, or just stupid stuff like his walk... I ask Scotch. Isn't that right, Scotch boy?"

Louis swallowed a new lump in his throat. "And what does he say?"

Harry looked at him and smiled before turning back to the horse. "Well, he says a lot of things; My dad had a low, manly voice- and a laugh to suit, which is why he liked my mum's wild honeyed laugh, when she used to laugh, that is... When they were dating he'd talk about her to Scotch during grooming. And he never liked to use wax. He and Scotch always disagreed on grooming."

He made the simple quotidian details- he obviously had imagined- sound noteworthy and fascinating. And Louis couldn't help but feel for Harry. He had only lost his mother two weeks ago. Harry had to spend his whole life without his father. Louis envisioned sixteen years' worth of his own pain and what that must've been like for the boy, and sighed heavily. Harry glanced at him for a laugh, but Louis was forlorn, only meeting it with fresh tears.

Harry stifled his unrequited cheer. "Louis... I don't miss him so much when I talk to Scotch. I feel better..." He trailed off before releasing Scotch from their nuzzling. "Maybe...", he started toward the adjoining cubicle. "You can ask Phoebe the Horse a few questions about your mum. Try it." he said, rubbing the horse's mane as she trotted up to them and dipped her long head over the stall door.

Louis stared ruminantly at the horse. "I wanna know if she forgives me. I can't go on without knowing that."

Harry nodded empathetically, and tilted his head to Phoebe the Horse. "I bet she knows the answer to that. I'll give you some privacy."

"No wait! Don't- Don't go."

Ripping himself from Louis' back, on his way out, when he was suddenly stopped by Louis' hand clasping his as he sat on the bench, eyes still on the horse.

"I thought that coming here would fix things. I love it here. I feel at home here, but- but that just makes it all harder."

Louis' throat seized up just then, and his brief comportment broke into a million pieces of heartache drenched in tears, dripping into his hands and on his jeans. He felt Harry's arm reach out from over his left shoulder, and shield him from falling forward, grabbing the right side of his waist, his hair tickling his ear as his chin gently pressed into his neck. If his nose wasn't stuffed up with infusing, blocking pain, he would smell the sweet companion to the light wool-like tenderness that was so close to him now.

"If I hadn't been so self-centered she'd be here. We'd all be here together. I feel so guilty. Here I am, loving it here and she can't." The words scraped out in gasps as his throat fought hard to keep them inside. "And another selfish moment I questioned her. I was angry with her for not coming back with us sooner. I blamed her. I'm the most selfish person ever. She's not here and I'm still being selfish! I hate myself-so-much!"

Ripping himself away from Louis, bringing himself around to face him and ducking to look up at
him, Harry placed urgent hands on his knees, squeezing them. "It's not selfish to want to know the truth!" Harry abruptly stopped talking, Louis looked down at him through his tears, he had looked away, his face meditating on his unsaid words. He looked back up at Louis and started over.

"If you don't get the answers you're looking for then at least you know you have us. This is your home too. No matter what happened in the past with your Mum...or my Mum, you and Fizzie and Lottie and the twins always have a family here. And whether she got to come or not, it's because of your Mum. She wrote that letter hoping to bring you here, and even when she didn't make it, here you are. But Louis, I think, I think if it bothers you this much then we need to at least try to get answers. We should start with my Mum. She has to know something. She's the one who invited you here and she's the one your Mum wrote to all this time without her replies..." Harry paused, "Mum has to know why. Let's go ask her now!"

Louis pulled in his nose and wiped a shaky but newly determined hand over his eyes. Nodding his hot, sweaty, tear streaked head, he allowed Harry to take his hand and lead him out of the stable.

**

Treading hand in hand, the boys heard Gemma and Anne's voices from halfway across the lawn.

"I'm not going to stop dating him! That's none of your business!"

"Gemma, they are using you!"

"Why are you yelling!?" Harry yelled at them both, as he and Louis dived back into the living room.

Anne went on. "You proved your point. Now put an end to this before something happens! You don't know them... I do!"

"She didn't close the ranch because of money problems. She closed Granddad's ranch because she's selfish. She's not even sorry that she did it!" the girl fumed. "She didn't care that I was training!"

Louis wished he knew what was going on. He didn't understand why the argument had escalated. He looked upstairs to make sure the girls were not listening in. He hoped they were sleeping.

She turned to her mother. "You have Harry making zero sense here with these animals when we could be in business!"

"I resent that!" Harry fired, from Louis' side. Anne stood behind the couch, huffing with her arms folded, looking vindicated that her son was on her side.

"She wasn't helping you when she stopped all the productivity here, Harry." Gemma spat. You think you're doing something good!? You're wasting your life doing all that just so she doesn't have to accept responsibility!"

Harry rejected it with a head shake. "What's wrong with you? I supported you when you told me you were training again! Even when you said you were dating Aiden. I was ready to defend you! You know what? We heard you yelling, and I told myself Mum was giving you a hard time. I was coming here to stick up for you!" Harry blazed, face hot, and eyes watering.

"Yes, exactly because it was your fault in the first place! You and your animal rights shit!" Gemma said, flinging her arms. "Since when is owning a fully functional rodeo ranch something to be ashamed of? Harry, it's not just me. Look at what you did tonight! Horses are in our blood!"
pointed at Anne, "She was using you and you let her! You let her strip everything from us!"

"Why are you blaming me for that? Mum was sick! She couldn't keep that ranch open! She wasn't Granddad. None of us are! Gemma, you already know these things... Why are you talking like this?" Harry's voice broke. "They've gotten to you, haven't they? Simon? You heard how he talked to Mum. And you're saying something similar now!"

Sick? What do you mean sick? What happened to her? Louis thought, trying to piece the argument together-which wasn't working.

Gemma, peevish, raised her palm. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. Both of you are attacking me instead of supporting me!" She then stormed up the stairs to her room.

**

Anne pressed her finger tips to her forehead, a fist on her hips, as Harry ran after his sister. Louis stood at the kitchen doorway, awkwardly watching her. She heard his hip bone click as he shifted, and looked up.

"It's okay, Sweetie. They always sort it out. I'm sorry you had to witness that." She said, batting a hand at the staircase.

She crawled over to the armchair and slumped down. Her temples were concave and Louis saw a vein on her forehead that wasn't usually there. Still in her outfit from today, she yawned and held her hands as she laid back her head. "Gem?" Louis heard Harry call from outside his sister's room. Harry sounded desperate and despaired. ...like how Louis was feeling.

Harry had dragged him inside to find out about his mother. To help him, and now Harry had his own problem to focus on. But Louis was surprisingly still pumped from Harry's speech in the stable and equally desperate for his own answers about his mother.

Slowly moving to the couch, he slumped down and twisted himself to face the stressed woman.

"I know this is probably the wrong time – and you don't have to tell me now- but- please Anne, I want to know about my Mum.

She popped her eyes open and observed his sticky tear stained face, now noticing his state. He waited unblinking as she studied his face. She suddenly shifted to sit up straight in her chair and her eyes moved around in their sockets, unsure, thinking.

Then she took a deep breath.

"Best start from the beginning." She said, eyes glazing over Louis' curious face. "I was adopted... My mother left me hungry on the church steps when I was eight. Never saw her again. William, took me in and he raised me. He wasn't married so it was just us. He used to train horses on uncle Emmett's-your granddad's- ranch. They were best friends,"-Louis nodded, remembering his grandma's words- "I'd come over with him and watch him train athletes with their horses. At first, I had a hard time adjusting to my new life, and was a bit jealous of Johannah. She had both her parents and this amazing farm with horses, and I was a nobody. But then a year later her mother died -she had cancer- and...Johannah took it so bad, she got depressed and she stopped talking to anyone so uncle Em started shifting all his focus on helping her, and so he put my dad in charge of the ranch. We moved in here not long after and uh, in living here I got closer to Johannah -and she hated me but I'm the only one she talked to at all so I got her to open up- and she eventually got better. And while we were living here, my dad would buy her these gifts and stuff to cheer her up
after losing her Mum, and uh, I would get jealous again and yell at him that she had a dad to give her things and he would yell at me and call me selfish and ungrateful, and I blamed her for me not having nice things. I was pretty petty back then. So...this is so hard for me to say."

–Louis shook his head, "It's okay. Take your time." He stretched his hand out and held hers. They were sweaty and warm, and twitchy but she squeezed his and brought her other hand over them to reinforce the hold.

"Uncle Emmet and Dad had a falling out." She continued, "Uncle Emmet didn't like me and Dad fighting all the time, said it was bad for Johannah, and Dad, defending me, reminded him that I was the one who got her to talk again in the first place, so they argued... and we left the house. My dad got a job at the Cowell ranch and he stayed there for years. The good part was that Johannah and I remained friends. We grew closer and I would come visit the ranch regular, but Dad never came back with me until...Until years later when uncle Em needed someone to train this new wild horse he got, Scotch." - she and Louis smiled knowingly at each other- " Nobody could ride that thing. Dad came and tried but he couldn't even get near it. Like I said, even I tried. One day I brought Gavin over and he just, softened the thing! It was a miracle really. I guess you have to be born with it because Harry was the only one he connected with after..." Anne trailed off. "Well, anyway, my dad saw his potential and started training Gavin for saddle bronc riding. My dad was the best and Gavin had the talent so naturally he won all his competitions. He grew close to Dad and uncle Em. They were like family to him. They said he was like the son they never had, cause' it was just me and Johannah." She sighed, "Well, after Johannah left for college, things remained normal here until uncle Em died of a heart attack. Gavin had a competition coming up, and one day he had a really bad headache and he passed out and well, they said he had an aneurysm and he shouldn't be riding. But he wanted to make the ride in uncle Em's honor. He shrugged off the doctor's advice. He said that anybody who jumps up on a wild buck weighing more than a thousand pounds is going to be in danger anyway, so he went."

-Louis squeezed her hand tighter as her voice wavered- "I blamed my dad, I blamed uncle Em, I was angry at Johannah." Anne was in tears now, "I basically took it out on the world. Louis, when you sang that song, on that stage, it took me back. Took me back to when things were simple. Gavin was still here. Johannah was still here, my dad, uncle Em... If they were here, they would all be so proud of you."

RING...RING...RING!!!

"I'll get that." Anne offered, wiping her tears as she jumped up. Louis sat processing what she just told him, while she answered the phone on the kitchen wall.

"Oh no! Arrested!? Oh no! No!"

Louis sprung up from his seat, just as Gemma came flying out of her room.

"Mum! It's Aiden! He's been badly hurt!"

A minute later Harry appeared at the top of the stairs. "What happened!?"

Anne answered, emerging from the kitchen and grabbing her keys -Gemma's keys, which Gemma fought her for possession of- "Cord got arrested for attacking Aiden! We have to head to the station!" –Harry opened his mouth to invite himself but- "You and Louis stay here with the girls!" - Harry's mouth snapped shut in a sulking frown.

Gemma grabbed the keys away. "Mum, no! I'm going to the hospital!"
Anne rolled her eyes. "Well I'm going to the station!" She accepted defeat and turned around and almost walked into the truck keys as Louis was already holding them up to her. "Thanks sweetheart!- Welcome to the countryside!" she added in a petulant murmur.

As both women disappeared out the front door, Louis looked back upstairs, but Harry had already retreated to his room.

**

Louis knocked sheepishly on the door. It cracked open and brown curls appeared, then pink matte skin, then Louis looked into the saddest, forlorn, green eyes covered in a red, watery veil, and his heart bled. He wanted to ignore his own pain and repair Harry's. If his own aching heart were any good, he would rip it out and give to Harry to replace his own hurt one.

Harry opened the crack an inch more to look over Louis' shoulder, hopeful. Louis himself turned around, and looked back to Harry, realizing he must have been looking for Gemma to make up. The boy's eyes grew wetter as he looked to the wooden floor.

"I'm going to make some tea. Would you like some, Harry?" Louis tried. He saw his eyes move around in its sockets, thinking, never lifting his head. Holding out his hand, wanting to charge in and hold him in his arms- and legs, if that would make Harry better, warmer, safer, happier- Louis instead waited for Harry to take it.

A tear fell to the floor as Harry blinked, and the door opened wider, and wider, until Louis saw Harry's whole frame. Shoulders droopy, shirt now slightly unbuttoned and crumpled, Louis guessed from crying curled up in his pillow, he lifted a tentative hand and placed it onto Louis' open palm as he slowly stepped out of the room; and Louis squeezed it. Steadied it. His heart beating stronger than the second before.

Harry's lips disappeared and the skin between his brows contorted as he tried to speak, but he ended up nodding his reply instead.

"Come on, Harry." Louis whispered, barely audible, trying to be as gentle and supportive as he possibly can at the moment. He wasn't even sure if Harry heard it, but they were moving now, together. Louis knew not if he had slowed down for Harry, or if Harry had adjusted his speed for Louis, but their feet moved in perfect sync as they glided down the stairs to the kitchen.

"So you knew about Gemma all this time?" Louis said, sweetening the tea, determined to put aside Anne's words for later and focus on being there for Harry. He decided by Harry's state that he should leave something so heavy for the next morning, especially with Cord getting arrested.

"Yep. Kept her secret. Defended her. Only to get screwed over."

"That must've been a hard secret for you to keep all this time." With a soft clang, Louis rest the teacup in front of Harry. His hands closed in on it and he picked it up and took a small sip. Louis eyed him, hoping he made it as good as Harry did the night before. Harry took another sip, and another, and sighed to himself.

"It was. But she's my sister. I'm always going to keep her secrets and support her, even if she hates me." Harry smiled to himself as he clasped his hands around the warm cup on the table, Louis watching silently, "I didn't know she made that jump for Dad. She surprised me. She's been training for months. She only told me when she came home for holidays. She wants to compete next year, in the competitions. I'm all for it, but you saw the way those Grimshaws are. And now Cord... I hope it's not serious. Cord has this...thing for Gemma. They used to date, and he's like..."
What's the word?"

Louis shot himself a guilty look from his cup. "Obsessed?"


Louis' turn to snort. Harry had a positive definition for that? He wondered what Harry would call his (Louis') secret stares and lingering smiles, and him (Harry) turning his head soaked in blushes at awkward moments between normal conversations. Whatever the definition, Louis hoped it wasn't the negative 'creepy'.

**

"She told you that?" Harry asked, looking at Louis, or through Louis, as his gaze was not focused. Louis couldn't help but feel uneasy, like he said something, or did something wrong. He knew how much Harry's father meant to him, and even though Harry had already known about how he died, Louis felt he had to retell it to Harry the way Anne told it to him.

Harry held Scotch's reigns in his gloved hands and lead the horse back to his stall, face pointedly avoiding Louis. The sun was up now and Cord had not come out of the cabin for the morning yet since Anne bailed him out of jail. He had punched Aiden several times in the face and knocked out one of the boy's teeth sometime after the show when he was supposed to be loading Salsa and Winniepeg to be transported back to the ranch, and an unforgiving Aiden- or Simon- moved for a restraint order, so Cord was not in a happy place, Harry and Louis understandingly commencing his work for him.

"Harry..." Louis began. He didn't want to say the wrong thing, Ask the wrong thing and cause him to get upset and walk out. Harry wasn't exactly boiling, but he was quiet as he took off his gloves to pat Scotch's huge head, caressing a finger over the white line between his eyes straight down to his nose. His looked so small next to Scotch's giant one, but for some reason they looked perfectly in sync, like they made sense when they stood next to each other, like a two fitting puzzle pieces. Even the horse's coat was almost the same shade as Harry's bouncy curls. Louis stepped back and placed his hand in his back pockets. He remembered the conversation he had with Harry the night before, and suddenly felt intrusive. Harry must've needed privacy to talk with his horse.

"I better go see if the girls are awake. They should be up by now." Louis muttered, walking out.

As he made his way across the yard, Harry stormed out behind him, boots thudding loudly, and Louis turned to look at him. He gaped back at Louis with irritation swimming over his eyelids.

"Why did she tell you!? She should've told me...a long time ago!"

"Harry, what's the big deal? You already knew!" Louis could not place this contempt Harry had for his mother concerning how his father died. He did not understand it.

"What's the bi...- I found out from my grandfather! Not her! She... she never told me!" Harry spatred, pointing to his chest.

What is this? A contest? Was Harry jealous or something? Strange thing to be jealous for...

"You said yourself, she was there. I can't even begin to fathom what that must've been like for her. I'm just saying, it must have been hard for her to talk about." Louis said, piecing together- from what Gemma said-or yelled, and from what Anne had told him- that she probably suffered from
some kind of depression because of the trauma. Louis read too many of his Mum's books. Listened too many of her lectures. Louis related, even predicted this depression for himself.

Harry spurted out a sardonic laugh.

Why is he so mad about this? Wasn't he defending her getting sick, to his sister last night.

"And maybe your Mum felt that way too! That didn't stop you from digging for answers!"

Is he serious right now!? What is he even talking about? My Mum is dead. I swear I can't keep up with you, Harry!

"This is not the same thing! Completely different situation, Harry!" Louis shouted, hand demonstratively flaring."In case you forgot, I only found out about this place after she died, so I didn't even get the luxury of digging her for answers!"

Wait- did I just yell at him? Are we arguing? Oh My God, we're arguing.

"Why am I telling you all this? We talked about this already. Just-Explain it to me. I want to know, because you're upset, and you're the one who made me brave enough to ask her about my Mum in the first place. I can't have you upset about this now." Louis said, softer now, flapping his arms frustratedly in the air.

Harry eyes changed from irritated to some kind of apologetic shame, with another freakin blush in its wake. Then that changed into an amused raised eyebrow, with a tiny smirk cracking like an eggshell on his lips-all in five seconds. Louis stared back at him. Just Great, It's Chameleon Harry again.

"Harry! Louis! Come on. Get inside!" Anne bellowed, running down the back stairs. "Go get dressed! We're going to church!"

Harry whirled his head around and staggered backward in shock and confusion as they watched her march towards the cabin. From the look on Harry's face, Louis concurred that this was not a typical occurrence on a Sunday morning.
A/N: OKAY I REALLY TRIED TO GET THINGS FLOWING. I FEEL LIKE THIS NEEDS TO GET TO THE POINT. I'M GOING TO BE PICKING UP THE PACE FROM HERE. I DO NOT CONDONE SMOKING, THIS IS PURELY FICTION. IF YOU'RE READING, PLEASE TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK OF THE STUFF GOING ON IN THIS CHAPTER. TALK TO ME GUYS. ALSO OMG THAT INTERVIEWER THAT JUST OUTED LARRY. Twitter is blown. lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


Louis laid wrapped up in the blanket, cradling his sister best he could, as the little girl wailed incessantly. He tried everything. He gave her snacks, he tried singing. Harry even came in the room and played a song- or five, to which she kept quiet, only sobbing. But when he got tired she started wailing again. He started playing again but Louis stopped him. He felt Harry shouldn’t have to go all out and then have her still hate him for no reason. I mean- It wasn't his fault. It was Grimshaw's.

It had been a good morning. They had all dressed and gone to church with Anne. Harry even lent Louis a tie, and put it on for him, during which time Louis almost suffocated himself for lack of breath trying hard not to stare at a concentrated Harry who had stood only nine inches away from him as he tied a half-windsor knot for him in his room. Yes! In Harry's room. Which for some reason, Louis had never been in. Taking into account he was already nervous and weird because he was gay and going to church. He had wanted to ask Harry if it was a good idea but he hadn't told him yet... that he was gay. He knew Harry already knew because of the sound check song in rehearsals- which had involuntarily slipped out his mouth like that- but he still felt like they should talk about it. Harry was his friend.

Yes. So that's the main reason.

Oh, who was Louis kidding? He wanted to tell Harry, and hoped he told him the same thing about him too. Which was weird because Harry was helping him get ready for church.

"I go quite regularly. It's nice. I get to sit with Niall and his brother in the front row during the sermon so I don't fall asleep."

Louis had hoped to God, he didn't sit in the front this time. He hoped he sat in the back, way back, with Louis. And he was about to tell him so when- There was a knock on the slightly opened door that had a huge poster of Jon Bon Jovi rocking out on it.

"Come in!" Harry had said adjusting Louis' collar, as he took the chance to peer around the room. It was pretty neat for a teenaged boy. The same curtains Louis' room had, a nice bouncy bed- Louis stop it!- a few clothes baskets full of neatly folded clothes stood next to the built in closet with typical air vents on it's cherry pine wooden doors, but Louis only knew because of the bumps under the plastered posters of U2 and Britney Spears. Wait. Britney Spears?

Lottie had scanted into the room and lunged into Louis, almost toppling him onto the bed, terrified.
"LOUIS! Honey- dead!- dead Honey-Honey honey- DEAD!!"

As if the news had an ironic purpose, Louis had finally inhaled in a large gasp sending air-and life-back into him as he darted around frantically like a fish out of water wondering how to avoid Daisy murdering everyone. Which was seriously funny because after the service Louis and Harry drove back in the truck laughing the wildest craziest laughs ever known to man because Reverend Horan could not have chosen a worst day- or best day, according to their laughter- to give a sermon about 'Living Water', periodically placing booming stresses on the word 'life' every time he said it.

They had tried placing the sanitary-cup on top of the dresser so she would just think it was being hidden by Louis as Harry tried to explain to her why fishes were not allowed in church. Of course the relentless girl got Gemma, who was too caught up thinking about her precious Aiden to catch the whispers and dashing around earlier, to unawares pull the cup right down in her little face, revealing the smelly dead fish floating inside.

"Oh no! Daisy, he's dead! I'm so sorry!" A horrified Gemma had screamed, as Daisy stood petrified.

She had ultimately made them late for church, and once there, she between Louis an Anne, and Louis literally had to stifle his laugh every time she jumped when the rev stomped around bellowing "Life!", which caused Harry to pinch him in the arm while fighting off his own hackle by closing his eyes and biting his lips in desperation during the sermon.

So yeah, it was a good morning. The rest of the day, not so much since Daisy ended up crying as soon as she saw Louis enter the front door, all smiles with Harry after they got back. "You're happy Honey died!" she had cried. "You hated her. You hid her from me all the time!"

So Louis had not left her side since they got back to the farm. Harry and Phoebe had scrambled out to the yard to dig a little hole to put the fish, and Lottie offered the shoe box from a slippers Anne had given her as a gift when they had first arrived.

In the small window of opportunity that they had to talk about how the fish died- Daisy fell asleep from her crying for like five minutes- Louis, Lottie, and Harry came to the conclusion that the cup Nick had put Honey in had alcohol in it.

"It was Aiden's cup. And Nick didn't rinse it before he put her." Louis had seethed.

Harry had been more self blaming. "Yeah, we should have changed it and put her in another bowl after the show!"

"We were all tired. I just hope she forgives us!" Lottie had piped.

"This is Grimmy's doing! All that talk about not saving animals...He did it on purpose!" Louis had quipped vengefully.

"The cup was too small, duh. Don't blame Aiden for this!" Gemma had said, passing them on the stairs on her way out to the hospital, producing an eye roll from Harry. Those two still weren't cool yet since their argument the night before.

The funeral was big. Niall even attended after coming over with Hershey's chocolates to cheer up Daisy. But Lottie was the one that surprised Louis the most. She seemed genuinely sad at Honey's passing and shed a tear when Harry covered up the box, even surprising Daisy, who was finally ready to bury the hatchet and ended up having to comfort her big sister as they shared in their grief.
The sun was down now, and as Daisy sobbed in his arms, Louis read her a book Anne had bought her in a last attempt to appease her.

"The Days of Laura Ingalls Wilder," he read as he lay flat on the bed, head next to Daisy's, swinging his feet playfully. After a few minutes she knocked out and Louis took his chance to go help Harry, who had gone off a while ago to the study /Louis' room with Niall to work on a song. The faint sounds of the guitar had stopped a few minutes ago and Louis guessed Harry had stopped to do his chores.

He hit the bottom of the stairs and glanced at Anne and Fizzie busy at the sewing machine with the costumes for the children's play in the corner of the living room. He made a left toward the kitchen, but Fizzie, knowing where he was headed, redirected him to the front porch in the opposite direction.

Pushing the door, he saw the back of the boy sitting on the steps quietly looking out to the distant road beyond the large front yard.

"What a day, huh?" Louis said, as he squatted down for a seat, giving Harry a few inches of space on the width of the steps. It was dark, the only light coming from the front porch, but it was blocked from Harry's face as they sat with their backs turned to it.

"Yeah. Hectic, I'd say. Mum really surprised me, though."

"How so?"

"She doesn't go to church. She never did before."

"Seriously, never? Are you sure?" Louis jokingly poked.

Harry laughed. "No. I can't remember the last time at all. Granddad used to take me and Gemma. His folks were pretty religious, so..."

"That's interesting. Is that why you wear that ring?" Louis said, voice low for only him and Harry to hear even though they were alone outside. He had left the door open a crack out of bad habit and sighed to himself as he remembered his mother constantly reminding him to close the one at theirs'.

Harry's face branded hot red as he moved his fingers over to look at his ring. He ran his blue-nail-polished fingers over the engraved words and looked up blankly at the lawn. "I guess it could be a reason. The Reverend is always lecturing me and Niall about not selling ourselves short so I guess it stuck with me."

Louis smiled. One more thing to admire Harry for.

"I guess it does help, your grandfather being active in church? He must've given you loads of lectures as well."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, we used to have our own little conversations, just us. I'm technically not related to him but he was my Granddad, you know. I always felt like he knew me better than anyone else. He understood me. He kept telling me to never stop being who I am for anyone no matter how different. Grandparents are supposed to be partial that way, I guess."

*Why does this sound familiar?*

Louis furrowed his eyebrows. "My mum used to say the same thing!"
One thing about that morning in church had been running across Louis' mind all day; The way Harry's body tensed when the Reverend mentioned the importance of accepting people for who they are no matter what sexual orientation, political views and such, during his sermon. But he didn't know how to approach the subject. Maybe he misread it. Maybe Harry's back was cramped. He decided to leave it for another conversation because they still needed to clear the reason why Harry was so upset about his Mum telling Louis about how his father died.

"Um, so your Granddad told you about how your dad died when you came here to stay with him?"

"Yep."

"So I'm guessing you asked him first."

"Yes, I did. I never knew how before that. She never said he what he died of or how it happened. Louis, my Dad was pretty well known but I've never heard it from anyone, not even an eavesdrop, and like I said, my granddad was pretty easy to talk to and I guess at the time I was fed up. I needed to know why..." Louis pieced it together, what he was saying.

"...why your Mum was so sad?" he said, offering a hand on his back. Guess that's why he was on about digging... he thought to himself. He hated Harry sounding so fragile. He wished the boy would rest his head on his chest and let him kiss his forehead and wrap his arms...Okay, Louis needed to stop. Stop with the stupid out of timing thoughts that don't belong in his head right now. But why not? Why can't they belong? Especially if it could make him feel better.

"She never understood me. And I thought I understood her, until..."

"Until what?"

Harry turned to face front and licked his lips, his cheekbones moving to form his dimples without smiling. Louis could not look away. He glared his eyes over everything, his eyebrow, his ear, the necklaces on his soft, freckled neck. Harry didn't answer Louis, so he didn't press. He took a deep breath, inhaling Harry's sweet coconut smell, and feeling high off of it just like a cigarette. Then he remembered he had smoked his last one the night before under the back steps.

"You know, I could use a cigarette right now. Do you wanna go with me to find an open shop or something?"

Harry's eyebrows shot up and his eyes went wild. "Okay," he said getting up, "but the only place open this hour is Roger's bar."

"Ooh!" Louis teased, getting up on his Tom's and flipping his hair, as they headed inside to tell Anne.

"Mum! Niall left... something... here, so we're gonna go for a drive, okay!?" Harry yelled as Louis grabbed the keys from the next to the front door. Anne nodded back from her sewing machine, Fizzie flashing a quick smile as she dipped her head back down to her sequin arrangement.

Snorting uncontrollably, as they opened the truck doors, Louis shook his head at Harry. "Why did you lie!? You been to church today, you!"

"Mum! Niall left... something... here, so we're gonna go for a drive, okay!?!" Harry yelled as Louis grabbed the keys from the next to the front door. Anne nodded back from her sewing machine, Fizzie flashing a quick smile as she dipped her head back down to her sequin arrangement.

"Why did you lie!? You been to church today, you!"

Harry snickered back. "If you heard me correct, I said he left something here. Niall leaves a lot of stuff here!"-Louis let out an unrecognizable laugh- "So technically..." – Louis burst out in a hacking laugh again- "Technically I wasn't-I wasn't lying!" Harry giggled, as they pulled out of the yard.
"You're taking me to a bar after we went to church. Ha!" Harry laughed out loud, as they drove down the long country road, the evening wind blowing their hair.

Louis gave him an amused look. "Technically, sweetie, you're the one giving me directions."

Oh God. What did I just call him? Louis thought, as Harry's mouth snapped shut mid-giggle and gave him a googly-eyed look that only lasted a second due to the flashing building lights on his face as they passed through the town.

"It's right here," Harry said, a few minutes later, finger pointing over Louis' nose to the Neon sign over a small building where music was blaring and people were outside chatting and hanging around.

"You stay here. I'll be right back, okay? I'm just going in and out."

"Okay." Harry said, throwing him a head toss as he pulled out his phone to keep himself occupied.

Louis pushed the bar door open and immediately met with the smell of cigarettes, sweat, alcohol, and some kind of weird barbecue. He looked around the dark room at the men playing pool and pushing money in the jukebox and some snogging couples in the corner. The sounds and smells stubbed him and he felt like he was in a different town altogether. It was a contrast to the quiet meadows on the farm where the only sounds were cattle, crickets, and Harry's acoustic guitar.

He walked over to the bar counter where the bartender was pouring a group of guys some shots of alcohol on the other side. It was the only source of light in the room besides the lively jukebox and the flashing blue and red neon through the window. He turned around for a minute and saw Greg the mechanic, and off in a corner having what looked like a serious conversation were Murrey and Joshua.

"Can I help you, young man? You don't look old enough-"

Louis spun around and was ready to show his ID, but was caught with the way the bartender was looking at him; he stood frozen, with piercing blue eyes glaring at Louis like he had just seen a ghost. Louis rolled his eyes over the man; He was middle aged, almost bald and had his thick stubby fingers spread out on the counter, light blue shirt over a white T, with a small towel over his left shoulder. The man's eyes remained locked on Louis.

Okay, totally creepy...

Louis thought as the man's gaze suddenly shifted somewhere over Louis' shoulder. He turned to see why, and was almost knocked off his socks as a nosy-faced Harry appeared standing closely behind him.

The bartender grumbled. "Now I know he's not old enough to be in here."

Louis eyed the man, who had seemed to have come out of his trance now. "It's okay. I just need to get a pack of cigarettes."

The man gaped at Louis for another five seconds before turning abruptly to get a pack of cigarettes from the counter behind him.

Louis turned and gaped at Harry. "I can't believe you came in here!" he laughed. Harry grinned and bashfully held his arms as he took a tentative look around. Then, almost brushing Louis with his nose, he swung his head back, all high eyebrows and sparkling eyes.

"Buy me a beer." He muttered to Louis. "I've never had a beer."
Louis faced contorted in a confusion between 'what?' and 'Aren't-you-the-most-adorable-thing-on-the-planet.'

[Bartender clears throat]

Louis and Harry both jumped out their bubble to face the bartender who was tapping the pack on the counter. Louis broke into a smile as he held up his index and middle fingers.

"Two cold beers, please." He said, wild euphoria setting in his bones. He followed Harry's gaze to the pool table, but just then someone came and blocked his view.

"What are you doing on this side of town, school boy? Gem know you're here?" A rascally looking Aiden said, slapping Harry on the back and sounding stoned.

Louis shot him a death glare. "That's simply none of your business, lad." he chirped as he slid the money for the beer and cigarettes.

Aiden breathed out a laugh, and Harry had to pull his head back to dodge the smell of alcohol and raw gum as he was missing two teeth to the front left of his freshly busted mouth. His left eye was also in a merciless state, being partially closed by the punch he earned from a take-no-shit Cord. Louis remembered Cord's explanation that morning when he had finally come out of the cabin all dressed for church; Aiden had come up to him after the show and showboated that Gemma belonged to the Cowell ranch now, and nothing could have gotten Cord more angered as someone assuming Gemma and her talent was an object to be owned.

Aiden stepped up to Louis, his face ready to spit out a smelly retort, but a thick hairy hand came in between him and Louis, pushing him away from the latter.

"Cord's the one that has the restraint order, chap. I, on the other hand...don't." A now hovering Murrey commented, placing emphasis on the last letter.

The bartender piped in as he clanked the two beers on the counter, "We don't want any trouble in here. Take it outside!"

Louis grabbed them, and the pack of cigarettes, shooting Aiden a menacing glare as the banged up boy slithered away to a corner of the bar.

"You're wild! That was awesome!" Louis said, while later, bursting out of the bar with Harry on his side. The two sprinted back to the truck and started off again, giggling like maniacs with the night breeze blowing cool on their faces.

"Seriously, you amaze me, Harry. You're so mature," Louis teased as he set the beers down in the drink holders. "I ought to start teaching you to drive already. Let's start tomorrow, yeah?"

Louis made a mental note to put aside everything for at least an hour to start lessons with Harry. Since he had offered to teach him things had been a bit hectic with rehearsals and the rodeo show. Harry had been so excited about it and Louis didn't want to delay it any longer given he only had a week left before he and the girls headed to Wales to see his baby brother and sister. Louis felt like he needed to make the most of his time here, now that he got an explanation from Anne about his mother-which still didn't explain everything- and he and harry got their issues out of the way.

Harry agreed with a hearty nod.

Louis sighed a smile. "So where to next?"
Harry shot him a confused look. "You mean like, you wanna go somewhere?"

"Actually I don't wanna smoke on the farm. It feels disrespectful. How about...we go to the lake?" Louis said excitedly, tapping the steering wheel to Harry's phone's playlist. There was an empty space in the dashboard where the radio was supposed to be. Harry had told Louis since the first day he got the truck that it stopped playing years ago and they never had the time to replace it. Louis had made a note put it on his list of things to do to say 'thank you' to Anne for letting him drive the truck in the first place—*and taking Harry to a bar at night, almost getting into a fight, and buying him beer!* He tried to push away the guilt seeping in.

He looked over to Harry; his eyes gave away a terrified flicker, and his heart leaped. "What? Is it dangerous at night?"

"No- I don't know. I've -never been- at dark, so..." Harry stuttered as he took the beer to his mouth. Louis took every opportunity to flash glances over to him from the road. "Well, then! Looks like not only will you be having your first beer but you'll be having your first swim after dark!" Harry opened his eyes from his first chug, face crinkled from the new strong sensation. Louis cackled at him.

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The lakeside was...dark. Very dark, and Louis had to keep the truck lights to see anything at all. Still he dragged his clothes off and ran straight into the lake in nothing but his boxers.

"Come in, Harry. It's warm in here."

"I don't know..." Harry said, folding his arms around himself.

"Oh, come on. One dip. How many times do you get to spend a day like this? Let's end it on a fantastic note! Come on! Swim with me!"

Harry stood thinking for a moment, then, taking off his clothes, he sheepishly etched in, feeling the water with his hands and feet.

"Oh, just get in!" Louis ordered, causing Harry to make the final steps of sinking in up to his neck.

They wallowed around in the water, Louis looking at Harry, unable to take his eyes away from his face as the light of the distant truck hit him. He dipped under the water and swam around, poking him in the waist.

"Hey!" Harry yelped, as Louis shot back up, wet hair covering his eyes. He pushed it away and stared at Harry some more.

Harry, noticing the staring, looked down at Louis' chest. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Louis raised an amused eyebrow. "I don't know, I'm still trying to figure out why a church boy who wears a purity ring would want to, say... lie to his Mum, go to a bar, and drink beer on a Sunday night."- Harry rolled his eyes, a grin appearing- "You're lucky I find that...intriguing." Louis continued.

"I don't know, I always wanted to know what beer tastes like. I've never been in a bar before either. You were an easy target." the younger boy teased as he started crawling out of the water.

"Whoa!" Louis boomed, following him onto the bank. "Shame on you for taking advantage of me
Harry let out an indescribable happy sound that made Louis want to grope him. They walked to the truck and took out their towels. "I know I told you I never wanted to leave Champton, and I don't, but sometimes it can be a bit...confined. I may be the only sixteen-year-old who hasn't had a beer before. Sometimes I want to be...normal, I guess."

The night air blew gentle over Louis, causing a slight shiver against his wet skin. He wrapped his towel around himself and leaned on the side of the truck, looking out at the dark lake, with only the sound of crickets and the smell of Harry's clean towel as he watched the boy rub his body dry. A pang rose up in his chest just then. An understanding of what Harry meant. Louis felt like that once. He still did sometimes, though not as much as he did before he came out. Yet even so, the times he did he still felt horrible, it still hurt knowing that the acceptance Reverend Horan said was essential for society wasn't as prevalent as one would like. He had no idea if he was going to be okay now that he didn't have his mother to talk to, but he felt the urge to tell Harry that he was going to be okay. He knew what his mother would say about his sudden need be there for Harry. She'd say that it's his natural instincts because he was a good person who cares about others and can't stand to see people in pain, especially people like him, who were different. But he wished she was here so he could tell her what Harry was doing to his heart, that he was the only thing making the loss of her bearable.

He looked at Harry as he grabbed the two beers, handing Louis the full one.

"Let's make a toast. To Honey the fish, of course." Harry chirped, clanking his bottle into Louis' and taking a swig as the older boy tilted his head watching fondly. "While she was here she made my summer pretty interesting. Never a dull moment with her, and even today she went out with a bang."

Harry screwed his face up as he wiped his red beer soaked lips, and Louis looked on concerned, with a slight smile creeping on his face. The night was perfect. Harry was perfect. Every minute he spent with Harry saying the things he said, doing the things he did, he fell deeper in love with him. So then, as he waited for Harry to get over the taste, Louis involuntarily lifted his arm, letting his thumb and the back of his knuckles brush over Harry's left cheek. His chest beat hard and heavy, painful as he watched Harry's reaction; his eyes fluttered and he gasped through his nose as his right shoulder jerked backward. Louis watched the skin between his eyebrows crinkle as he sought to process what had just happened, and suddenly Harry jumped to the left to face the lake, holding his stomach, and kept etching little by little until his back was facing Louis.

Feeling completely panicked at what he just did, Louis looked down nervously and stupefied at the beer in his hand. Things were going so good. Why did he have to do such a random, stupid thing to scare Harry away? Louis heart was beating fast, but it was also feeling something he'd never felt before; Want. Louis wanted Harry, so bad, he could feel his insides pounding away at his skin to get out and run to him and latch on to him like his was the body where they truly belonged.

"I feel sick." came Harry's voice, shaking, small, shocked. Louis wanted so bad to scant over and rub his back, or live in him.

The evening was slowly getting late, and thus colder, and Louis felt a shiver as the breeze blew over his wet skin. "I knew I shouldn't have bought you this, It's all my fault." he said, apology lacing his tone as he dropped the bottle on the grass regretfully.

Harry spun around, his arms clasped onto each other, obviously cold, his wet hair hanging in little dripping groups of strings over his flushed forehead. "It's not your fault. It's mine. Just don't tell
Mum...please?"

The words came out shaky, and his face looked as though he was in the same pain that Louis was in. No...No... "No Harry! I won't say anything. Not just to save my ass, because I really do deserve to get yelled at by your Mum," - Harry held himself tighter and twitched his head to face the lake and back- "I'm only keeping quiet about it because you told me to."

Louis shifted and walked to the driver side of the truck. Realizing that he had not taken a smoke from his new pack yet, he lit one and puffed as he leaned on the door. Harry's phone lay in the passenger seat still playing, and Louis smirked to himself as it could not have been the worst time to be playing a Ray Montagne song. His insides drumming, he swore it could be heard over the song. He listened the entire thing, torturing himself as he puffed away.

Harry jumped in the truck as the phone started playing an upbeat tune. They said nothing for the whole duration of the song, until it stopped and the phone started playing Stuck On You by Lionel Ritchie, and Louis' insides flipped.

What the fuck? Is the universe trying to torture me!? Louis thought, as he dropped the cigarette, mashed it, and got into the truck with Harry. Then, as if he had heard him, Harry abruptly cut it off, throwing Louis a sideways googly-eyed glance that made Louis uncontrollably snort out loud, causing Harry to cover his embarrassed laugh with his palms.

"Stop!" he giggled at Louis, punching him in the bicep.

"Harry Styles, you are so quirky..." Louis declared, starting the engine, the wind hitting his hair as they drove off.

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Anne sat at her corner table, eyes concentrated, with stiff fingers running the cloth through the machine, the sound ringing through the living room. Fizzy had left her and gone to bed and she looked rather tired herself.

"Mrs Horan said you didn't come over there at all." She said, not looking up from her work.

Harry's mouth dropped open as he looked to Louis, who stared back, just as stupefied. Fiddling with the zipper on the end of his jacket, he tried to explain. "It's my fault. I needed a pack of cigarettes."

The sewing machine stopped. Anne looked up from her spectacles, studying Louis' face, almost waiting for him to finish. He stood scared as hell if Anne were to start yelling at him after what happened with Harry earlier. He hated how things seemed to fall apart in a matter of hours.

"Harry you took him to that bar!? What were you thinking!?"

Louis breath stuck as his head flashed between Anne and Harry. "No! It wasn't Harry's fault! I-"

Anne cut him off. "Louis, did you even know where that is?" Louis had no idea where the bar was before tonight, and he knew she was trying to make it Harry's fault they went. But looking at Anne, so trusting and so angry, he couldn't lie to save Harry. "No."

"Harry, why do you do these things? Every time I turn my back you go and do these things to let me down! I was really counting on you to show a good face in front of Louis and the girls- Louis go get ready for bed, you don't have to hear this-"
"It wasn't Harry's fault-" Harry shook his head as he shoved his hands in his trouser pockets.

"Yes it was. It was my fault and I'm sorry..."

Louis shot him a horrified look. Why was he taking the blame? Louis was the legal adult here.

"Well, Louis, it can't be your fault. You don't know this town. How were you supposed to know there is a quick-shop opened twenty-four-seven just up the road?" Anne said, pointing in the opposite direction from where they had gone to the bar.

Harry pulled his hands out and folded them defensively, sporting a sulk as he turned his face to the kitchen, away from Louis.

Louis gazed at him for a minute, then burst out in a boisterous laugh, holding his stomach and bending over. Harry jerked sideways, startled, then eventually grew a laugh himself, joining Louis.

"Easy target..." Louis blared out between his giggles.

Anne pulled off her spectacles and stared at them laughing in their bubble, completely baffled. She rubbed her forehead in confusion and waited for them to settle. "Harry, go get ready for bed! Louis, a moment please?"

Louis nodded. Harry didn't move. He was all serious again. "Mum, I said I was sorry-"

"Harry, it's been a long day. I still have some work here to do so making me talk!"

He pushed back on his sulky face and murmured a resentful 'goodnight' as he stomped off upstairs.

With one last smirk at Harry, Louis slid himself in a little chair across from Anne. She looked up at him from her spectacles. He somewhat felt like a small child being glared down by an intimidating school teacher deciding what punishment to give him.

"Look, Harry's a good boy, but I worry sometimes about him." Anne sighed. "I don't want him going down the wrong road-so to speak,"- Louis stifled a laugh as he found that extremely funny-"I try to keep him sheltered here, and sometimes I think he feels... stifled. I'm glad he has you to look out for him. The boys around here are always getting into some kind of trouble as you've seen with Cord."

"I understand. It won't happen again. I promise."

"It's not your fault!" came a muffled voice from the top of the stairs. Anne and Louis looked up to see Harry standing there in white pyjamas with some childish pattern on it, holding his toothbrush to his mouth. He hit them an embarrassed look before diving back to the bathroom. Louis sucked in his cheeks and buried his face in his palms. Anne looked at him for brief second, the tiniest smile escaping her before raising her hand to 'shoo' Louis off to bed.

He jumped up, composing himself and stretching his arms up, sleepy.

"Oh! Louis, I printed out some more of the letters." Anne said, nodding her head toward the stack of fresh paper on the table, as he turned to his room.

He scooped them up appreciatively. "Thanks, Anne."

"Your mother and I used to sit in church and snicker, drive our Dads crazy. I don't know, I guess with all this stuff about Gemma, and Cord, and since I told you about my past-being adopted, I
guess I felt a bit overwhelmed and needed to, you know..."

She trailed off and batted her hand at him. But Louis knew. He knew what she meant. Grateful. She needed to get back to a place of gratefulness for the life she was given. Louis couldn't help but relate. He felt the same way having stumbled on this amazing place, with people that felt like home. Louis knew exactly what he was grateful for.

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Chapter End Notes

Oh my. You all know that look Louis gives Harry when he's fonding. The sucked in cheeks. lol. omg baby Harry. Im so soft.
Third Eye Blind's Deep Inside Of You was heavily listened to while writing the lake scene. Can you feel me?
ps- There's a reason I made Anne adopted by William.
And what about that bartender, hmm... But I may reveal these things very much later on, probably part two of this story...

Next chapter coming up soon. (not Louis' type of soon I hope!)
The Lake Argument

Chapter Notes

Happy 28th guys. I'm happy to be updating today! I wish Louis and Harry a wonderful anniversary with lots of champagne and rose covered silk sheets. Strong by One Direction is the song here today. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Louis woke up to his alarm clock at exactly 5:30 am and wiggled around to lie on his back with his head slightly agar on the bed. His mind raced back almost immediately to the night before. He rubbed his hands on his face, the tiny crack of light creeping in in the sky through the window calling him to go out and tend to the animals he had grown to love as much as Harry did. He hoped by some miracle that Harry had forgotten what happened at the lake. But he didn’t really want that. Anger crept up in him that he had to wish away a moment that he did not regret. He wanted Harry to come out. He was angry with himself for wanting it as badly as he did. All of people, Louis should know how hard that is to do. It was hard for him. It was hard for Liam.

He sat up and pushed his face in his palms, remembering how impatient he had been with Liam and how he had dumped him for not being ready to hold hands in public. Sure he made up for it by helping him to come out eventually but he hated that he was starting to feel that old insecure Louis surface again. He needed to shove that Louis back down in the deep shadows of his past and leave him there. Harry did not need to see that Louis. Not Harry who was so kind to Louis from day one, and showed him around and kept his company, making him feel like a living person again. He loved him so much, but the hard part was that with that love he knew had to come sacrifice and patience. He had to sacrifice his own longing and wait for Harry to open up to him. But how could he when they hadn’t even had that talk yet. Louis still hadn’t told Harry much about the fact that he liked boys. It hadn’t exactly come up in a conversation and there was no way he was going to just tell him without him asking first.

Mulling over his thoughts, he groaned as he tumbled out of bed and headed straight for the kitchen. The smell of bacon hit his nostrils as he entered, and he offered a chirpy ‘good morning’ as he sat down. Harry drowned a sleepy ‘mornin’ and proceeded to place a hefty plate of breakfast in front of Louis, not looking at him.

Things were pretty normal while they did their chores. later, as he was just finishing up the chicken coup when he heard a familiar voice call out to him. Coming round the coup, he saw Liam dressed in jeans and plaid, and a helmet, taking orders from a serious looking Murrey who was also prepared for work as he powered up his electric saw.

“Hey, Louis. I came out to help with the gazebo! Murrey told me all about it. You had a really good idea. We’re all excited about it!”

Louis grinned as he hugged Liam, slapping him on the back. As they pulled apart, Harry passed them on his way to the stables. “Hey, Harry!”

Harry shot Liam a distinct glare as he offered a hurried wave in return before disappearing.
Liam gave Louis a look as he saw it too. He shrugged it off as he walked over to the spot where Murrey was starting up a frame for the gazebo.

“Somebody’s jealous. He’s usually a friendly guy.” Liam observed. Louis’ eyebrows sunk downward in contemplation.

“You do know he likes you, right?” Liam quipped, lips disappearing inside his mouth as he nodded agreeing with himself.

A grin broke out on Louis’ face. Finally, someone he can talk to about this Harry thing.

“Yeah, I get the sense sometimes but we’re not- It’s not like- We haven’t talked about anything yet. He’s not- He hasn’t even come out yet.” Louis struggled, as the sound of the saw covered his words.

Liam still heard him, and gave an understanding look as he folded his arms. “Louis, you and I both know how hard it is for someone to even admit to themselves that they’re different. Harry’s only sixteen. That’s the age I came out to my parents, remember? I don’t think Harry’s come to terms with it yet.”

“I’m not even sure if he’s actually gay. I’m trying really hard to be patient. But what if I’m waiting in vain?”

“Harry’s gay.” Murrey interrupted suddenly. The boys looked at him as he stopped sawing to continue speaking. “He’s not confused or anything. He knows who he is. He’s just afraid. But not of what people will think. Look, When Liam came out to us, we were thrown at first. But one by one we came around. Not everyone has folks like that. Anne’s a great person and all, and I believe had the circumstances been any different, she would’ve accepted Harry for who he is, but- I shouldn’t be talking about this- but she’s the main reason why he’s still hiding.”

Louis shook his head confused as the saw started again. “I don’t understand. She accepted me. She’s nice to me. Even at rehearsals, Liam you remember I texted you guys about it. She stood up for me.”

Suddenly a voice came from behind them. “Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answer to. The secrets in this ranch go way back to your granddad’s days.”

Louis felt a sudden chill as the words met his ears, and they looked to see John standing there with his hammer, eyeing them eerily. He had just arrived and was ready to work. Louis and Liam exchanged confused looks and Murrey gave his father a look like Don’t-go-there, Dad, as he stopped his sawing once more to look at the gazebo plan.

That’s weird. Louis thought. What the hell is he talking about, secrets?

“So you’re absolutely sure he is gay?” Louis inquired, whispering to Murrey out of John’s earshot, still trying to wrap his head around certain things.

“I’ve known Harry since he was baby. I’m best friends with his sister, and Cord. Liam’s not as close because he was always moving back and forth between my aunt and his dad until he moved permanently. He’s like an outsider!” Murrey said, throwing an arm around Liam’s neck and ruffling his hair with the other as the boy yelped in protest.

Louis knew Liam’s past already. But Harry’s gay. He had just gotten confirmation that Harry’s actually gay. Just as he was processing all this, Harry appeared from in the stables and came striding across the lawn to them.
“Louis, can I talk to you for a minute?” he said as he neared them.

Louis shook himself out of his trance. “Sure.”

They started strolling together and stopped a few feet away from the others. “It’s just that the girls are reciting their lines and I can’t concentrate, and they can’t concentrate, and you guys are really loud out here, and… We really need to get this song finished. Niall’s also busy so I was wondering if maybe we could hang out at the lake—just for like, an hour?”

“Of course! You don’t have to ask. Let me just grab my jacket and keys.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you out front.”

Liam gave Louis the raised eyebrow and Louis gave him a pressed-lipped, tilted-nod look before running across the yard to the back steps.

*** “What are you doing?” Harry asked, slight fear in his tone as he heard the engine cut off. He stared at Louis as he pulled the keys out, dropping it on his lap as he got out of the car. They had stopped in the lonely road with only a short distance to go before they reached the lake. Harry could see the dirt track that forked off the road leading to the patch of trees that blocked the lake from visibility.

Louis came around the truck and dipped his head down to Harry as he opened his door.

“I’m giving you your first driving lesson.” he said, offering his hand for Harry to climb out.

Approximately ten minutes later. . .

Louis lunged into Harry’s side, crushing him into the door, his foot stomping on the brakes just as it was about to run off the road near a herd of cows. The boy let out a yelp as his elbow jabbed into the window lever. He slowly opened his tightly shut eyes and peeked at Louis, giving him a sorry, sad puppy face as his eyes bore down on him.

“You definitely have a long way to go. I hope I can do as much as I can to help you before this week is over and I have to leave.” he said, trying to sound like a high school teacher as he eased off of him and put the gears into park. He didn’t want Harry feeling any more uncomfortable than he was at Louis just jamming into him.

Harry quickly jumped out and they took their usual places as they drove back down the lonely countryside, to the lake. Harry wasn’t bad at all. He had successfully driven them about a quarter mile before the almost disastrous incident.

He parked the truck in the usual spot and they trampled on to the lakeside. Harry sat on the log and started playing a tune while Louis sat with the songbook examining Harry’s lyrics.

After a minutes the guitar suddenly stopped. Louis looked up from the songbook.

“I’m sorry.” Harry said simply. Louis eyes darted around confused.

“For taking you to a bar.” Harry said, tugging remorsefully at the strings with his guitar pick.

“That makes you fun. Never be ashamed of that. Of anything.” Louis said, meaning so much more than the bar thing now that he talked with Liam and Murrey. Now that he knew for sure that he may have a chance with Harry. There was no reason for Harry to feel ashamed or apologize to Louis for being himself, and Louis needed him to know that. He wanted to forget about the part
where he literally made Harry sick and just have fun again like that.

“I had so much fun. Liam said Murrey told him about the bar bit.” Louis grinned, “That was so lit. I would’ve totally punched him. Good thing Murrey got in when he did. Anne would’ve flipped. Liam said we should all go back together.”

“Well, Liam’s going to be around for a while. Probably up until you leave.” Harry answered, rather cold.

“He seems to enjoy hanging out with you.” Okay. Where did that come from? Louis smirked to himself, getting pinching satisfaction from Jealous Harry. He also felt a little scared as Harry had tethered on the verge of Louis and Liam’s relationship, meaning he was close to the subject of Louis’ sexuality. This is it. Looks like we’re going to have the conversation now.

“Liam and I were… I don’t wanna use the word dating because we never actually went out on a date together in public. More like hang out and watch TV and ended up snuggled a little too close until we just… I don’t wanna use the phrase ‘messed around’ because its harsh.” Louis said, the words coming out so quickly he wondered if Harry had even understood any of them.

Harry snorted out loud and Louis smiled bashfully, covering his face with his palm. "Things were – it didn’t work out and he fell for Zayn, who is one of the best friends I could ask for.”

Harry nodded, not looking at Louis.

“It can’t have been easy, seeing them together.” He said distractedly, playing a couple cords on his guitar.

“Yeah…but we’re fine now, as you read in my Mum’s letter. I actually knew Zayn before I knew Liam so we weren’t about to let anything come between that.”

“Did he even call you? …Liam? To see how you were holding up since the funeral?”

Harry sounded off. Cold.

_He’s seriously jealous._ After Liam pointed it out, Louis was beginning to see it. As disconcerting and concerning as it was, he was actually glad. He wanted Harry to be jealous. He wanted Harry to care. He was so tired of watching every step, wondering if he said or did the right thing with Harry. The only thing he was sure of was his feelings. He was completely smitten with the horse whispering, purity ring wearing, sweet…sweet boy. And wanted so badly to tell him. He wanted to finally let out the breath he had been holding since he touched his face the night before.

“Look, forget I said that. Of course he did. He’s your friend. I rather focus on the song.” Harry said, then handing him his book, “You can help me figure out some lyrics.”

Louis studied Harry as he nodded silently. He took the book from him and started writing, as Harry strummed.

“I know what’s missing here.” he said as he examined the words. Harry nodded curiously.

“It’ll be perfect if- do you mind if I write about my Mum?” Louis said, already scribbling.

Harry shook his head violently. “Of course not. I think that’s a really good idea!”

Louis’ eyes then narrowed, thinking. “And how about we make it to your Dad as well?”
Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh! I wasn’t expecting that! Okay, I guess?”

Louis smiled as he nodded, seeing the boy’s dimples appear, then added with a smirk. “Okay. But we’re swimming when it’s done.”

Two hours later, they had a full song written and a melody to go with it. Harry recorded it on his phone as he and Louis sang the whole thing together for the first time.

“That was amazing! I’m so glad you helped with this. You’re pretty great with song writing.” Harry declared, getting up from his seat and pulling off his shirt.

Louis followed and a few minutes later they were running towards the lake again. They had fun. Loud, searing, consuming fun. Louis threw Harry in the lake. Louis held Harry’s hand while they both jumped off the branch.

Touching. There was a lot of touching. They talked, and ate sandwiches, and sang songs together until the sun went down.

Then, as if a dementor had come and suck the joy right out of him, Harry went silent on the way back home.

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The next two days were rather uneventful if you took out of consideration the fact that Harry had been rather reserved lately. Louis did his usual routine, helping Harry around the ranch, pretending to be the Toad in ‘The Wind in the Willows’ so the twins could recite their lines to him. But harry was so quiet, Louis started to feel like it was his fault, although he had no idea why it could be. Even at Niall’s when they went to practice the new song with him, he was excited at the song the two boys wrote together, and glad to add the strains of his electric guitar to the mix, but Louis observed that Harry wasn’t laughing like he usually did to their jokes.

On Thursday afternoon, Louis decided he wanted to go back to the lake. They had been the song for hours on the ranch and Louis started to get bored. They hadn’t been to the lake in two days and he thoroughly missed it. But Harry still insisted on bringing his guitar to continue practising.

When they got there, Harry immediately sat down on the log and started playing his guitar. Louis was getting annoyed because he seemed distracted and irritated every time Louis interrupted him.

“The song is perfect, Harry.” he sighed as he stripped down to his boxers. “We’ll be fine performing it on Saturday. Let’s take a swim before it gets dark.”

Louis ran toward to the lake, stopping at the edge and looking back at Harry who was still sitting there, fully clothed, looking at him awkwardly. “Come on Harry, water’s great.” Louis called, dipping his toes in.

“Mum said I shouldn’t this hour. I’ll get sick!” Harry answered timidly, looking into the trees.

“Nonsense!” Louis countered. “We’ve done it before, Harry. Come on! It’s summer time!” He hopped back to Harry and did a backward sort of dance/jog to the lake, egging him on.

“Na ha! I can’t.” Harry’s mind seemed to have been made up. Louis stopped dancing and tilted his head to the side wondering what Harry’s problem was. It’s not the first time they went swimming after six and Harry was okay those times, not coming down with anything at all. There was no reason for him to hesitate unless. . .Louis eyes widened with realization. He looked Harry up and down and tried to pretend his heart rate hadn’t sky rocketed times ten that very second.
He’s got to be wearing those panties right now! he told himself as his brain immediately started projecting images of Harry stripping down to nothing but pink cotton panties and running into the lake, and just as fast as he thought them they were downloading straight to his groin area, something Louis would rather not be happening right now while he was in his boxers in front of Harry. Now that he knew for sure Harry was gay he couldn’t stop thinking up possibilities of them together. Realizing that he wasn’t breathing at the moment, Louis let out a sigh and inhaled again until he got his breathing steady then began talking to Harry.

“Look Harry, it’s okay. It’s just you and me here. You don’t have to be scared.”

Harry gave him a confused look, arms jerking with the movement of his guitar playing. “What do you mean? I’m not scared.”

Louis hated how Harry had to lie because he felt like he couldn’t trust Louis. He hated that he had to hide himself from everyone. . . From Louis. He wanted Harry to feel comfortable around him. If Harry had to hide from the world, then Louis didn’t want to be part of that world. He’d make his own world with just him and Harry, and Harry would never have to feel ashamed of wearing panties in front of Louis again.

Louis had been there in that dark corner where no one saw him running in the shadows, hiding himself, hiding his true self. He could see Harry was struggling. He had Gemma and Niall but Louis knew he hadn’t told his best friend yet, and he got from the past weeks of getting to know Niall that he would be most likely supportive if only Harry would tell him. Louis at least wanted to be one of Harry’s ‘safe people’ who he confided in.

Shaking his head in attempt to rid his mind of sexual ‘Harry’ thoughts, he decided he was going to confront Harry about his obvious fears. He slowly walked over to Harry, sighed and let it out, “Harry, it doesn’t matter to me what you wear under your jeans. I’m would never judge you, you have to know-”

“Excuse me?!” Harry cut across looking more confused than ever as he abruptly stopped playing. If Louis didn’t know better, he would think Harry really had no clue what he was talking about.

“What does it have to do with my boxers?” Harry pretended.

“Louis said in the softest most supportive tone possible. He felt sick thinking he should’ve said this at the beginning, Harry wouldn’t have had to spend all that time hiding.

“I know you’re gay.” And there it was. Plain and clear, sharp in the quiet lakeside with only the evening birds around to hear it.

“You’re crazy! You got that from me not wanting to go swimming?? Delusional!” Harry shouted angrily, clearly taken aback by Louis’ insight.

“Harry, I’m gay too. I know what gay looks like!”

“You really are mad!” Harry’s face turned red with anger. Harry’s unwillingness to hear him out was getting on Louis’ nerves and he fought to keep himself calm.

“Harry, you wear nail polish, and lip-gloss! Harry, look at me…” Louis pointed out, as Harry picked up his guitar in a rage and stormed back to the truck. “Harry! Come back here! It’s okay to be who you are!”

“I’m not gay!” He shouted over his shoulder. Louis looked on disgruntled as Harry reached the van
and stormed on past it.

“So, what now? Are you going to walk!?” he yelled as he grabbed his pants, jumped into them and ran to the truck.

“Harry, you can’t walk all the way home!” he shouted to the boy who was already a good distance away marching on stubbornly. Louis had to admit he was impressed how fast he was.

He started the engine and pulling away from the lakeside and setting off after Harry, who had almost reached the big oak tree that landmarked the lake.

As the truck caught up to an angry Harry, Louis called for him to put his guitar in the tray and get inside but he ignored him and kept walking steadfastly, eyes ahead not wanting to look at Louis. Louis figured he had an advantage since Harry couldn’t outrun the truck so he tried again. . .

“Harry it’s important that you know you can trust me.” he said peering through the passenger side window at the red faced boy. Louis hated that he upset him and hoped Harry would hear him now that he couldn’t get away from the truck.

“Harry, please get inside.” He could hear his own voice crack as he lowered it hoping Harry would oblige. Louis took his foot off the gas and let the truck glide side by side with the stubborn boy in silence for a bit, nothing but the light clanking of the engine, and crushing rubber wheels being heard in the silent countryside as darkness approached.

“I’m not gay.” Harry said breaking the silence after what felt to Louis like a lifetime. He watched as Harry finally threw his guitar in the tray and stopped to take a breath, the red in his face turning a lighter pink as Louis guessed he was calmer now. He didn’t answer just yet, waiting to see if Harry had to add to that statement any further. He looked on as the boy drew a breath and tilted his head backwards, probably frustrated, coming to some kind of decision, Louis thought. He got lost momentarily in the curls cascading over the boy’s forehead as he brought his head back up, delicately tossing them to the side.

Yeah, ‘totally not gay’, Louis thought sarcastically.

“If you want to be gay, fine but I’m not.” He shot Louis a warning look. Louis gave him a little side nod of agreement, raising eight fingers off the steering wheel like ‘whatever’, completely angry with himself and with Harry for this whole argument. Louis didn’t want to tell Harry about himself like that. He didn’t want to use it to prove a point. He wanted it to be a mutual thing between them. Since he figured out Harry was gay he thought about the possibility of them sharing each other’s stories and connecting over the similarities and maybe make a new happier story…This whole thing just made Louis so angry thinking he screwed that up. No way Harry would talk to him about it, he barely knows him. Louis started to regret bringing it up.

Reluctantly, Harry opened the door and Louis had to stop for him to get in and put on his seat-belt. Then the truck sped ahead with Louis looking at the road, not wanting to make eye contact with Harry again. But something else was bothering him so he decided to make it clear, “I don’t want to be gay… I just am.”

Harry looked at him, eyebrows raised, and Louis realizing how he sounded, rearranged his words, “I mean it’s not that I don’t want to be. I do. I like being gay. I mean not the parts where people look at you like you’re a skunk and talk behind your back but-” he glanced over and saw Harry internally freaking out by his words and continued- “It’s not all about that. It can be quite fun…”

He let his voice trail off and took Harry’s subsequent silence as another chance to make his case.
“You know, Harry-”

“-Can we not talk about this?” Harry abruptly cut him off, stern tinge in his voice, obviously preferring to go the rest of the way in silence; and Louis agreed. He needed to stop embarrassing himself in front of someone who clearly didn’t need his help let alone wanted to hear his sad story. If he reacts this way now, what would happen if he told Harry how he felt about him? Louis pushed the thought out of his head. With all of these thoughts and the feelings mixed together… Louis didn’t want to deal with anymore rejection.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave kudos if this was okay. Will u recommend this to a friend? Comments are welcomed with open arms.
**The Lake Kiss**

Chapter Notes

A/N: Yep. I wasn't gonna leave you guys hanging for long. Lol. I hope this is okay because I tried to get it to you early.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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As soon as Louis parked, Harry unbuckled and jumped from the truck grabbing his guitar out the back, and started storming up to the house before Louis could even open his door. Louis sighed and shook his head before climbing out and making his own way up the pathway to the house, thinking about the whole lake thing.

Inside, he greeted Anne, Fizzie, and Gemma, who were busy cutting fabric for the play costumes. The twins, who were still rehearsing lines, jumped up when they saw Louis, wrapping arms around him.

“Louis, I can’t wait to rehearse my lines with the other kids tonight!” Phoebe grabbing his hand. Oh, Louis had almost forgotten they had rehearsals that night. He and Harry are supposed to meet up with Niall at the community center.

Daisy was excited. “Yeah, Louis, we have one hour before rehearsal starts. We’ll go over them with you before we get to the center and forget them!” Louis agreed, distractedly tussling their hair. He peered over to the kitchen and saw Harry pulling stuff out the fridge to cook.

“It’s my fault we’re home late.” Louis said, looking at Anne. He caught her smile to herself as she thread a needle.

"No need to apologize. You are supposed to be enjoying your holidays." she said.

"I better help Harry speed up dinner.” Louis mumbled as he made a move for the kitchen.

“No arguments here.” Gemma chimed, gaining a condescending look from her mother. “What? I’m hungry!”

Louis eased into the kitchen and offered to wash the vegetables, making sure to speak in a chirpy casual tone to try smooth the tension between them. Harry didn’t answer, so he proceeded to help quietly.

He looked over as Harry lit the stove. “What are you making tonight?”

“Food!” came the boy’s harsh reply.

Louis heard the chair creak as Anne shot her head in the kitchen from over the open counter. “Harry, watch your tongue! That’s no way to speak to your guest! What in the world has gotten into you!?”

Both boys jumped, startled that she had heard them speaking, and so they continued in silence as
Harry prepared some sort of chicken stir fry.

Dinner was the usual chatter with Harry scooping extra portions for the eager girls and Louis stealing it away with his fingers resulting in screaming and laughter around the table. He kept looking at Harry who was sitting opposite him hoping for eye contact to tell if they were okay but he kept diverting his gaze to anything but Louis. He was disappointed though not disheartened as he still had hope to reconcile on the way to the rehearsals at the primary school.

“Phoebe, how bout you and Daisy ride with us to the community center? You guys haven’t been in the truck yet!” Harry stated hopefully. *Desperately*, if Louis was correct.

Louis head shot up, as the Phoebe answered excitedly. "Yes! I wanna go with Louis!!"

*Determined not to be alone with me. Just great!* he thought, feeling a bit discouraged now.

He sighed, accepting that tonight Harry should probably be left to cool down. Fresh approach in the morning is best.

Louis was the first in the truck. He waited patiently for Harry and the girls to finish whatever dolling up they were doing, imagining Harry putting on his lip-gloss... He shifted the thought away as it started rushing to his other body parts.

He heard the front door shut and saw Harry coming in the side view mirror. Sitting up straighter his eyes widened and his jaw fell open as he watched Harry walking briskly with his guitar case in his hand, hips swaying in his perfectly fitted black jeans as his phone played a song from his pocket making the whole thing look like a scene from a teen movie. He tried not to look at him through the mirror as he packed the guitar in the tray. Tried not to notice his firm backside moving rhythmically as he secured the guitar case in a harness. But even in the dim porch light, he noticed. He held on to his chest as he felt the pang again. *God, this gorgeous creature…*

Instinctively, he leaned over and opened the passenger door for Harry to sit, and as he entered the truck Louis had no choice but to let out a pleasured moan as he breathed in Harry’s scent.

Harry snapped around as he closed the door, eyes curious on Louis. Louis observed a quick decipher being made by his expression before he mumbled, “Gemma hugged me.”

The broadest smile came over Louis’ face as he heard the preposterous excuse for smelling like a walking rose bush in morning dew.

“So, you two are talking now?” he smirked, tapping the steering wheel to Harry’s playlist.

Harry muttered. “No. I shrugged her off. She still didn’t apologize.”

“Of course…” Louis said, knowing Harry was lying. He bet that perfume was Harry’s. It was the same one he wore at his house that day of the funeral. One of the first things that had made Louis’ list of 'things to love about Harry'.

Harry shook his head and started looking around the inside of the truck. “Have you seen my guitar pick? Surely I brought it back…” “Check in the back!” Louis advised.

Harry, visibly irritated, jumped out and checked his guitar case in the tray. “It’s not here!”

Just as Louis put on the light to help look, Anne and the twins emerged from the house.
“Mom, I left my guitar pick by the lake! I need it for rehearsals!” Harry explained.

“It’s okay- I’ll go back for it for you, Harry.” Louis said emerging from his seat. “I’ll just go get it quickly and come back for you guys.”

Anne protested at this. “Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t be expected to go back there in the dark alone!” she shifted her gaze to Harry. “Go with him quickly, I’ll get Gemma to take the girls so they won’t be late. You ought to try not to be so careless.”

The girls whined as they walked back inside. Harry and Louis jumped back in the truck and Louis started the engine feeling a new burst of hope.

They rode in silence, Louis occasionally glancing over at Harry out of habit as they made their way back to the lake. Harry was usually always talking and grabbing Louis attention from the road. During those times Louis would drive slower to be careful as much as to make the ride longer because he loved to listen to Harry yapping all the way to and from their destination.

Harry’s eyes were focused outside the window every time Louis looked so he didn’t think he noticed him.

The truck slowly came to a stop, grazing the familiar dirt track in the now completely dark countryside. Louis looked over again as Harry unbuckled and jumped from the truck, fumbling through the dark to find the spot where he might’ve left the pick and jumped out as well trying hard to ignore the difference between them now.

Both boys put their phone flashlights on and searched around. As Louis scanned the log where Harry usually sat and played his guitar, thoughts of the earlier argument tunneled back into his mind and he felt like he was still in that moment pleading with Harry, trying to reason with him. He shook himself off hoping it would throw the thoughts away but he just kept hearing Harry in his head yelling at him. What was he going to say to make small talk? That if Harry hadn’t run off heatedly he wouldn’t have left it in the first place? He knew if he opened his mouth to say anything it could all replay again and that’s the last thing he wanted. It bothered him tremendously the fact that one minute they were laughing and singing and the next Harry didn’t want anything to do with Louis. He felt a sharp jab beating through his chest and knew it was because of the silent tension that had replaced their ease with each other, making him feel sick.

He had lost so much but gained a lot from spending time with Harry on the farm that he wasn’t ready to lose him. He knew he loved Harry. Ever since he saw that soft, pretty face in the bleachers at his game he loved him. A thumping in his chest started when he got a thought that maybe telling him that part might’ve changed the outcome. telling Harry was a fear Louis wasn’t ready to face but figured he had to for Harry’s sake and his own.

“Got it!” Harry called out from somewhere behind Louis, relief in his tone as he wielded the guitar pick.

“Great! Alright then.” Louis croaked knowing how stupid they both sounded only speaking two worded sentences to each other. He had to do something to end the silent treatment.

“Harry...Wait!” he began as Harry’s footsteps were heard walking back to the truck. Harry stopped and sighed heavily but didn’t answer. Louis remained stuck as he hadn’t figured out what to say yet so he let it hang uneasily for a moment in the night air; crickets chirping, owl hooting, the only sounds they heard.
Louis, what will you say that won’t end up in either another argument or confession with ‘I love you’ stamped on it? This is stupid, just get to rehearsals and forget it, his brain racked.

He heard a twig break as Harry made a step to walk again, and suddenly felt his own inhibition snap, shutting down his better judgement. With new lack of hesitation, Louis grabbed Harry’s arm, turning him around; and gripping both arms, he leaned in and kissed him, suddenly and vigorously.

All of Louis’ thoughts tuned out and all he could feel was Harry’s lips, which somewhere in the moment had opened and was now moving together with his, kissing him back! Soft and wet, clinging together like they belonged there, he felt Harry’s tension ease into the lingering sweet tingling that Louis wanted to last as long as possible.

Then, just as quickly as it started, as Louis lifted his hand, cupping his cheek, Harry pulled away breathless, breaking the kiss.

Hands now propped on Louis' chest from pushing him away, Harry spoke, “Why did you do that?” He wasn’t exactly freaking out but Louis could tell by his tone that he was shocked as he was of what just happened.

“I-um,” Louis didn’t know what the hell to say. “I didn’t mean to kiss you...”

Harry’s eyes furrowed. “So what, it just kinda happened?” he said, backing away angrily, his sneakers almost tripping over the log. Louis made a move to grab him, but Harry held up his hands to stop him from coming closer.

“Yeah, it just kinda happened!” Louis repeated him, shrugging. "It wasn’t what I was going to say-do!” he scrambled, his breath caught in his tongue. He just stood completely shocked at himself, rubbing his hands on his jeans.

“Wow!” Harry shook his head. “What is wrong with you? I told you I wasn’t gay!”

Louis felt adrenaline and anger burn through his veins at that statement. “Oh yeah, that’s right! That’s why you wear ladies' perfume, and nail polish, and panties- pink panties- which I think is so goddamn sexy, by the way!” he belted out angrily.

Harry raised both hands, his fists crunched in frustration at these words, but Louis went on, “And yeah- wait for it - You kissed me back!” Louis was loud enough to be heard a mile away but he was so angry he didn’t care. His own frustration took over and he was consumed.

“Stop it! Stop!” Harry cried out, voice breaking as he started sobbing. He spun around, with his back facing Louis. His sobs quickly turned into loud crooked crying noises and his silhouette soon fell to the ground, overwhelmed with emotion.

His chest bursting in remorse, Louis rushed over to a distraught Harry and put one hand on his back, rubbing it and the other on his forehead hoping he’d lean back into his chest but Harry wasn’t having it. He tugged away from Louis and kept crying loudly into the lonely countryside, with only a concerned Louis and other creatures as witness.

Louis knew this was Harry finally cracking under the weight he’d carried all this time. He knew the tears were more than just the fact that he knew Louis was right. Louis felt a bit guilty for forcing Harry to come clean. For sending him into a sobbing mess before he was ready to deal with it, but Louis was there. He was at Harry’s point once, and looking back he wished someone was there who understood exactly what he was going through. Sure, he had support eventually when he got the nerve to tell someone, but this moment when you come to the realization that you’re not as
okay as you pretend to be, this moment when you’re in pieces on the ground, having a shoulder to
lean on makes a huge difference, and he was glad he was there with Harry to offer comfort even if
Harry didn’t want him to be.

He knew he couldn’t profess his love now, but he thought if he was going to be brave enough to
kiss Harry, he could at least tell him what he meant to him.

“You’re beautiful, Harry.” he said softly over Harry’s sobs. “I wouldn’t change you for anything.”

He smoothed his hair and tilted his own head slightly to look at his face. "Harry, I was a mess
when I came here, you know that, but it’s not so bad when I’m with you. You’re teaching me how
to take care of pregnant sheep! Never in my wildest dreams...” he let out a giggle, and Harry did
too, looking up at Louis through the light of the phone that fell on the ground. Louis saw the
crystal tears sparkling in Harry’s eyes, saying what he could not, that he was torn up inside fighting
an inner beast all alone for years, so he reached out and wiped them away, determined to make
Harry laugh again...

Harry closed his eyes and let Louis touch him, smoothing hair and rubbing circles on his back. He
brushed his lips and nose in Harry’s hair. He loved how it smelled. He wanted to tell him that.
There was so much Louis wanted to tell him, and felt it wasn’t the right time to say it all, but he
wanted-needed to make one thing clear; Harry wasn’t alone anymore. Louis would be there for
Harry as long as he needed him.

Cradling the boy, he told him this as softly and slowly as possible, careful not to upset him again,
and was suddenly startled by Harry’s reaction, which was: immediately throwing his arms around
Louis, gripping him tightly and burying his face in his neck, full on sobbing again.

They stayed like that for a good ten minutes, Louis rocking Harry gently while caressing his curls,
whispering that everything was going to be fine.

Then unexpectedly, the rain started drizzling, pulling them out of the moment. The younger boy
pried himself away from Louis, and they both hurried back to the truck in an effort to beat the
heavier downpour that was nearing through the meadows.

His door shut, starting the engine, Louis looked over at the boy covered in tears and rain, and
shoved his arm in the back seat to recover his denim jacket. Retrieving it, he held it out to him.

Harry, shaking his head full of wet curls in refusal as his red lips murmured along, crossed his
already shivering arms and cradled his biceps, looking down.

“Harry, take it...”

Harry leaned forward, then sideways, peaking at the backseat. “I didn’t bring mine? It should be
here...”

“It’s not. I checked.” Louis answered, knowing he was the reason Harry kept forgetting things
since the argument. He shook the jacket lightly to emphasize the need for him to take it. He looked
at Harry. Harry looked at him.

“It’s not a marriage proposal, Harry. Just a gesture of ‘I care for you’, ‘I don’t want you to
freeze...’” Louis deadpanned, tilting his head towards the younger boy.

Rolling his eyes, Harry grabbed it, leaving his hand empty in mid-air, and dropped it on his lap.
“Great. There! Can we go now!?”
The rain blew on the windshield, sending only flashes of light into view which they used to guide them through the weather. The ride was taking longer than it would on a sunny day, and if Louis wasn’t focused on getting them to the community center safely he would surely use the time to smooth things out with Harry.

He knew he had a breakthrough, Harry let him comfort him. Harry didn’t push him away. They were in each other’s arms and would still be if the rain had not interrupted. But the rain was no longer wetting them. Sure they were already late and the girls might be anxious but…

The truck eased to the side of the road as they arrived at the community center. Louis sighed as he pulled the gears into park.

Moist skin glowing in the light coming from the nearby buildings, anxiety and timidity resonating from the green of his iris, Harry twitched his eyebrows closer together, as he stared at the older boy. Louis stared back, and swallowed a stifled breath as the younger boy’s glassy gaze dropped to his lips then fluttered back up to his eyes.

Scared and anxious at the same time, a breathless Louis reached out to take his hand. “Har-”

With a sudden warm urgent breath fogging the window, Harry flipped his back to Louis and hustled to unlock the door, jumping out and sprinting into the road in front of them.

"Harry!" Louis shouted at the boy as he ran across the front of the truck through the rain. At a loss for words, heart drumming in his chest, Louis sat there and watched as he bent the corner to the entrance of the community center building and disappeared inside.

**

Chapter End Notes

Kudos? Comments? Tell me what bugs you about Harry. Does Louis need to chill?

The song chapter inspiration is Everything by Lifehouse, yep.

Love you guys!
This chapter was extremely difficult to write because I struggle with fleshing out emotion and detailed description. I tried nonetheless. I hope this is okay because at this point I'm thinking of you guys and trying to please your reading buds. Please leave comments. I answer all. Leave kudos if you enjoyed it please. Kudos will make me so happy.

**

Louis grabbed his jacket from where Harry left it on the seat and ran round the truck, retrieving the guitar from the tray. He didn't mind getting soaked for Harry at all. He didn't want him to get sick (thus the offered jacket) but even though he made a point of running away and not wanting anything to do with Louis (right after falling apart in his arms) Louis was relieved he didn't stay back to take his guitar because he really strapped it down good. Nobody anticipated the rain this evening as people were scurrying into the community centre without umbrellas or even coats.

He slung the strap of the guitar case over his shoulder and ran to the building, pushing open the reflex doors.

He quickly spotted Fizzie and Lottie having a chipper conversation with Trey Cowell. He noted how happy Lottie looked as she blushed around the soft-tempered boy, wondering if his own feelings for Harry were as evident to others. He saw Niall laughing with Shawna to his left, and Anne and the twins to his farther left, but looking around, he had no luck spotting Harry. He made his way over to Fizzie to let her know they arrived, still looking around for the curly haired boy.

Fizzie finished up measuring a couple of kids head sizes for hats and turned to Louis with a frown. She took out her handkerchief and started rubbing him down from his face to his arms. He did not protest as he was thoroughly drenched.

"Can you believe the concert is Saturday, and we're leaving on Monday? Feels like we just got here!" she conversed as she handed him the wet cloth.

"I know. I miss Ernie and Dorie but a part of me doesn't want to leave." ...Harry. A part of me doesn't want to leave Harry.

"Have you talked to Dad yet?" Fizzie asked for the ninth hundred and ninety-ninth time since their father left them in Champton Valley. She had just shoved her phone in her back pocket and Louis knew she had just finished a conversation with him.

He sighed up in the air. "I've kinda been avoiding his calls. I just texted him and said he needed to give me time. I seriously had to mute him."

"Yeah, well he just called a while ago. He's fuming. He said he no longer knows if he's waiting to talk to his son or if he's on a waiting list for a heart transplant. You need to call him." she urged,
before sauntering off.

Louis rolled his eyes. The last thing he needed now was his Dad screaming at him the million reasons why he needs to leave England with the girls. He still wasn't ready to hear that. Being with Harry changed the whole game for him and he was beginning to think he didn't even want to leave Champton anymore. Not when he needed him.

Just as he was about to go find Harry, Lottie, flanked by a beaming Trey, poked him in the side. Louis plastered on a smile as the two of them giggled awkwardly, looking at him nervously.

"You have something to say, Lottie?" he asked, taking in her ponytail and bold yellow cashmere sweater. *She sure likes a lot of yellow.*

"Uh," she laughed, looking at Trey. "Trey invited me to a party on Saturday. Dad said I can't go anywhere without Fizzie, and she said she'd only go if you said yes."

Trey added, "You're welcome to come as well, by the way. It's right after the fundraising concert, back at our house?"

A confused crease lined Louis' forehead. "Excuse me, why does this feel like you're asking permission?"

"Because we are -I-am-asking..." Lottie answered, a begging puppy face on. *Must be the one she uses on Dad...* A huge grin spread on Louis' face as he shook his head in amusement. *Great. I'm ignoring Dad on one hand and becoming him on the other. What is my life.*

Louis still hadn't properly gotten over the rodeo show though, and found it difficult being in the crowded auditorium full of laughter, much less a party. And from all he heard about the Cowell ranch, not to mention what went down with Aiden and Cord, he was more than happy to pass.

"Uh, I'm don't think I'll be up for it, but sure Lottie. It's fine by me. Just stay close to Fizzie, and don't consume any alcohol please." The only reason he wasn't worried about his sisters going was because Gemma would be there.

The words had barely left his tongue before Lottie was ten feet in the air with excitement. She wrapped her arms around him and smacked a kiss on his cheek. "Thanks, Lou."

"Yeah, thanks, Lou," Trey added.

"Yeah, just call me if anything happens, I'll come get you." He hoped Anne wouldn't freak out when he tells her he gave them the okay to party with the enemy. It's been rough on all of them. They deserve a break, he thought as he watched both of them skip away. Something about them reminded him of Cher and Josh from Clueless, one of his favourite movies. Lottie has always been told she bore a striking resemblance to Alicia Silverstone, and he marveled at how she found a guy who looked like a budding Paul Rudd. Fate, in a weird sense.

Shifting his thoughts back to his own fate, he set out for Harry again. Just as he passed some teen-aged girls chattering, he spotted Harry leaning in the side of the stage talking to...Nick Grimshaw. Harry had his hands propped on the stage in a position that made it easy if he wanted to climb up to sit, and Nick was hovering too close for Louis' comfort.

He shuffled to get close enough to hear what they were talking about.

"So, how's the fish?" he heard Nick ask.
"She died." He heard Harry reply coldly as he looked away from Nick.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I hope the little girl is okay. You can always get her another fish. They're all the same-"

"What do you want, Nick?" Harry blurted out irritated.

Nick threw back his upper body. "Whoa! Hold up there. Was just trying to make small talk, although you know we're way past that now. I feel like we can talk about basically anything now. Important things. Our conversations were never small. Do you agree?"

Harry rolled his eyes and folded his arms. ...Protectively, Louis figured as he was clearly uncomfortable around the boy.

"I reckon you must miss classes. I do too, particularly you. You're the only one in that school reaching my par excellence in grades." Nick continued in a smarmy voice. Louis noticed Harry's shoulders ease and his glaring green eyes settle to a warmer tone.

Is he...flirting? With my Harry?

Louis lurched out from behind the girls and stopped at Harry's side. "There you are. I looked everywhere for you. You left it in the truck," he gestured to the guitar case over his shoulder. "Niall is waiting for us if you don't mind," he asserted, reaching out for Harry's hand. He gained a sharp look from Harry as he didn't budge, and saw in the corner of his eye that Nick had noticed it too.

"Oh for God's sake, he's not glued to you lot, is he? A guy can't have a decent conversation with a friend, now?" the boy sputtered, gesturing with his pointed palm.

Louis' face went red hot, as he squinted his eyes, mouth agape. He couldn't believe this mono-toned weasel.

"Now, look here," he started as he raised his own palm to gesture, but Harry, seeing an unnecessary fight, sprung off the edge of the stage and came to stand between them.

"Let's just go, okay?" he murmured, lightly touching Louis' shoulder with the back of his hand.

Nick touched Harry's hand to stop him. "Um, we're actually having an after party at the ranch on Saturday. Your sister might have told you. How about you come? You can bring your..." he glanced Louis' face for a nano-second, then down at the guitar case with Harry's initials on it, "guitar!" he stated, eyelashes fluttering back at Harry, smug smile setting on. Louis let out a dry laugh but it was not heard with all the chatter of the auditorium.

Harry looked shocked that Nick would actually invite him to a party...At the Cowell ranch. Louis, eyes hot with searing dislike for Nick's forwardness, lifted his arm and placed it on Harry's back, gently grabbing a handful of the polyester fabric, pulling his T-shirt tighter, hoping to communicate his objection in clandestine to Nick. He glared daggers at the greasy haired boy as both waited to hear Harry's answer.

He felt Harry tense in his grip. He looked like he struggling to find an answer that didn't involve hurting someone's feelings. It had to be Nick's feelings, Louis thought, because no way Harry would even consider saying 'yes' and knowing what a kind person he is, he admired that Harry took no pleasure in hurting even his nemesis.

Nick apparently sensed the inner conflict, and waved his hand nonchalantly. "It's okay, Harry. You have until Saturday to decide. I'll call you."

-How the heck did you get his number!? Louis thought,
fuming. Aiden must have it because of Gemma and gave it to him because no way Gemma would give Nick Harry's number knowing their history.

"Sure, see you around." Harry said to Nick, who turned from his and Louis' mutual glaring to give Harry a soft smile, walking away.

"'Sure'? Seriously, Harry!?!" Louis blabbered, as they made their way over to Niall. His blood was hot and his veins pumped the heat all round his face.

"You need to get a hold of yourself." Harry whispered harshly, as he grabbed the guitar case and slung it over his own shoulder.

"What? So you're angry with me, and suddenly you and Nick are friends?" Louis fretted. They stopped walking and looked at each other. Harry thought for a moment, looking off into the crowded auditorium.

"If you're insinuating what I think you are, stop. Not everything revolves around you!" he grumbled before walking off.

What in the bloody hell?

*****

Saturday had arrived too soon, and although Louis looked forward to the concert he wasn't happy about leaving the farm on Monday. He wanted more time with Harry, to smooth things over. To get a sign that Harry somehow loved him back. He knew the boy was attracted to him and the kiss they shared sealed the deal for Louis. He was officially gone for Harry. But based on the way Harry was acting lately, he wasn't sure how long it was going to take for him to be open up Louis. Harry had been avoiding Louis since that night despite his breakthrough. Because Louis kept following Harry around the farm and even finding him in the stock building where he obviously was trying to hide from him, all along just trying to make small talk with the boy to get him comfortable with him again. But Louis had to admit the damage was done. Harry kept narrowing his eyes at him and only cared to talk about the Betsie and the concert though not eager to make his side of those conversations more than one sentence long. Harry even stopped reading the letters with Louis.

Harry rode with him silently to the concert, and when they got there they met up with Niall who greeted them with hugs, Shawna on his heels, but as soon as he opened his mouth and spoke they were aghast at his voice. He croaked out a 'Guys, I won't be able to sing my lines,' to which Louis' mouth fell open and he pulled him into a hug, patting him on the back comfortingly.

"I got drenched in the rain the other night trying to get in here."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, me too. I feel a bit sore throat but It's not as bad as yours."

Well, maybe if you had put my jacket over your head as you ran out like a bat out of hell, or better yet, waited with me till the rain stopped and we'd had a chance to talk things over, you'd be okay. Louis thought, rolling his eyes.

"I don't know. I feel like everything to do with my part in this performance wasn't meant to be. I'm so glad Louis came when he did. Man I don't know what we'd do without you. You guys." He said hoarsely, engaging them, "I think you two should sing together and I'll just play the guitar in the background."
Harry and Louis glanced at each other as they shuffled backstage to wait their turn to perform.

As the announcer called their names, they went out on the stage, and as Harry started playing his guitar, the crowd went wild. Niall stood to the left of them as he played his electric guitar, mouthing along to the words of the slow song.

Louis bopped his head as he played the keyboard and sang his solo. And when the time came to sing with Harry he skipped away from the keyboard as he took the microphone and made his way slowly to stand next to Harry. Harry got teary-eyed and ended up closing them, as they sang an emotional lyric, causing Louis' eyes to also well up just as they finished the song.

"GIVE IT UP FOR NIALL, HARRY, AND LOUIS. AN ORIGINAL SONG THAT HAS TOUCHED ALL OF US HERE THIS EVENING, FOLKS!"

The audience clapped, and Niall started jumping around to gain the crowds extra cheers. He stood between the two boys and placed his arms around their shoulders, pulling them both down in a bow before hugging them and leading them off the stage as the exuberant crowd clapped wildly.

Louis quickly took a seat next between Anne and Fizzie who were gesturing for him to come over, as Harry sauntered off with Niall. Anne hugged him tightly before wiping her eyes and Louis couldn't help but shed a tear as well. He looked a few rows behind him for Harry, to see the boy's red eyes already on him. He tried to communicate his best 'I really care about you' look he could come up with while feeling every ounce of it. He just wanted to run to him and hold him while they cried and kissed and cried again. Harry did nothing except stare back wide-eyed like Louis was doing something to embarrass him.

As the announcer came back on and called the next performance, Louis turned to face front and realized how pathetic he was being, falling for Harry. But how could Harry not at least feel the connection they shared. They both lost a parent and there's the fact that their mothers practically grew up together, and their granddads were friends and worked together.

Louis rest his head on Anne's shoulder, unable to stop his tears from falling. She responded by throwing her arms around him and rubbing his arms as a group of girls came on the stage to sing a song.

A few performances later, a bunch of kids came on to do The Wind in the Willows play, and Louis shouted along with Fizzie and Lottie as the twins did their parts. Anne clapped along with them as they all laughed at the antics in the play.

As soon as the concert was over and people started moving for the exit, Louis looked around for Harry again.

"Oh, how nice to bump into you again, mam!" Robin Cartwright appeared in front of Anne, taking off his Stetson. Louis flashed the man a quick smile, and dived out of his seat, making his way over to Harry and Niall and Shawna.

"Louis, I can't even begin to start on how that song was a blessing tonight. You made me tear up!" Niall hugged Louis, squeezing him in. "You and Harry were a force up there!"

Louis smiled. "Couldn't have done it without you, mate! That guitar was sick!"

"Your sisters were really good too. You're all very talented. I'm glad you all decided to spend the summer here." Shawna piped, braces and all.

"Thanks darling." Louis grinned hugging her warmly. He felt a tiny pang in his chest as he knew he
only had a few days left in Champton.

They all turned around as Liam came up to them beaming. "Guys, that was awesome! You guys stole our keyboardist and made him into a singer! Zayn did say you had a great voice and should use it more often. I took a video and sent it to him and the guys already!" he chirped as his arms slung around Niall's and Louis' necks. "Lovely song too. Made the whole room tear up. You guys ready to party now?"

Niall's grin sunk into an almost smile as he clutched his throat. "I'm gonna go home and try some honey lemon tea. Besides, I'm not allowed to go to Cowell ranch parties. They have alcohol etcetera."

Liam nodded understandingly and proceeded to quizzically point his chin at the others.

Shawna frowned. "I went there once and I had nightmares after. Count me out."

Louis put on a 'yikes' face, and answered Liam, "I'm not really up for partying, Liam. I'd rather go home, relax, and have a cup of tea." He leaned into Harry suggestively for only Harry to notice.

Liam chewed on his lips. "I wish you guys came but I understand. I'll be by the farm on Monday with Murrey again, okay?" He slapped Louis back before disappearing.

"You ready to go, Harry?" Louis asked, as Niall walked away to find his Dad. Harry replied with a half-tilted nod. As they shuffled, they heard someone call. "Harry!" They both turned around to see Nick making his way through the crowd towards them.

"Harry! That was fantastic. I always liked your voice." Nick said, smiling awkwardly. "So, have you thought about the party?" he asked, full of a hope Louis recognized in himself when it came to Harry. Louis brought a defensive hand to lightly brush Harry's elbow, immediately receiving a shrug from him as he shifted away from the touch, not looking at Louis at all. His eyes were on Nick's face but he looked much more confident than he had been when the boy first asked. Louis could predict an imminent 'No'.

"I can't." Harry said, flashing impassive eyes on Louis. "It turns out I have unexpected... stuff... to do. Thanks anyway." Nick frowned and looked down at the floor as he shoved his hands in his trouser pockets. Louis sported a satisfying smirk as he waited for the boy to mosey away.

"That's a shame. Call me if you change your mind. I'll send someone to pick you up." Nick said, eyeing a scoffing Louis and walking off. How would he call you? He doesn't have your- Great, he must've texted him it before, Louis thought, feeling his temper escalating. He'd have to watch this Grimshaw.

"Unbelievable!" Harry spewed at Louis flapping his arms on his sides. He drew an exasperated breath, then took off toward the exit. Louis hurried behind him until they reached outside.

"Harry, wait, please." Louis said, knowing how desperate he sounded. He processed that Harry was mad at him but he was still pleased that Harry didn't accept that haughty idiot's invitation. Panting, he stood waiting for the boy, who had stopped to turn around. He honestly felt like fainting. He was breathing too much oxygen or too little oxygen, he didn't know which, but he felt like he was about to fall, or float. He squeezed his eyes shut for a second before opening them again.

Harry turned around and shoved his hands in his jeans pocket. "You keep invading my space. Why do you do that? You won't even give me space to breathe!"

Contemplating for a moment, Louis could only come up with one explanation.
"I'm in love with you." he breathed out, swallowing hard.

Watchful of the community center entrance as people came piling out, Harry combed his fingers through his hair in a mixture of frustration and exhaustion.

"Harry, I know you're not ready to hear this, and I know I'm confusing things because I'm your friend first and foremost- and I want you to remember that- but I can't help it. I want to be near you all the time. I feel so connected to you, and somehow I know you feel the same thing." He let the words sink in as he looked to the stone ground then back up at the boy. Harry shot him a pained look but didn't say anything. Louis could see his Adams' apple bobbing as he swallowed, and wished to stride over and kiss the spot a million times, or just until the boy fell into a load of giggles in his arms.

"Harry you invigorate me... The way you see things. The way you are with Scotch, and all the animals." he went on, voice soft yet clear, arms folded, nervously fidgeting with his sleeves, "You wear nail polish, and a purity ring, and you go full diva mode over a guitar pick," he tried for a laugh and Harry did not, yet he continued,"I can't even stop myself from looking at you. You just- You drive me crazy!"

The words came out sharply and stopped mid-air between them, frozen by Harry's discomfited demeanor. While Louis was pouring his heart out, Harry looked at the floor, the ceiling, behind Louis, behind himself, and at the door. Louis saw him desperately flashing his eyes at the entrance in case someone heard them- heard Louis...talking. But he didn't care. He stopped caring what people thought a long time ago.

He stared Harry down, hopeful, adoring. "Harry, please say something? Anything?" He knew he sounded to Harry just as annoying as Nick Grimshaw was, but again he didn't care. He's the one who got the kiss, not Nick, and he didn't care how petty he was being.

Just then, Louis heard familiar voices coming from the entrance and adjusted his gaze to see Anne and the girls emerging. They gathered around the two boys, and they all started chatting about the night's performances; laughing and congratulating each other. Louis kept trying to catch Harry's eyes, but Harry worked just as hard to avoid it.

As Anne yawned and gestured for the girls to head toward the car, Louis pulled out his keys and started walking to the truck, full of hope to finish the conversation with Harry on the ride back home. He looked over his shoulder and saw him muttering something to Gemma. Then, just like that, he saw Harry stalk over to his sister's car, and get inside. His heart crunched and he felt the blood seeping like larvae through a sponge.

Gemma glanced at Louis with a curious look on her face, and informed him and Anne that she, Fizzie, Lottie, and apparently now Harry, were going to the party at the Cowell ranch for a bit. Anne sported a seething look as she mumbled a plea to Gemma who shook her head objectively.

"We were invited, Mum. It's fine. You should be glad they even want us around after what Cord did. I'm trying to talk to Aiden about dropping the charges. We go to that party they will see that we're all cool and we're not looking for a fight."

"Gemma, you know it's Aiden's fault what happened to him!" Anne rasped. "Why are we trying to make peace?"

Yeah, exactly. Why are we acting like the guilty ones? Louis thought, listening to the conversation, still shocked that Harry was actually going to the party. Louis was fond of Cord and considered him a brother now. He totally agreed that he would have done the same thing if someone had
objectified his sisters or anyone he cared about. He respected Cord for standing up for Gemma. He didn't understand why she was even still seeing Aiden after that. Or why Harry wanted to be a part of this damage-control mess. Louis wished he was there to see what had happened so he could stand in front of the judge and vouch for Cord since his hearing was next week. But knew he'd probably have thrown in a punch himself and been charged as well.

"Mum, I want these charges dropped as much as you do! That's why I think it's best if we invite him over tomorrow-"

"A cold day in hell!" the woman grunted before stomping over to the truck.

The twins were happy to go home in the truck with Louis, and quickly skipped over to him.

"Didn't you get invited, Lou?" Phoebe asked. He pulled her to his side as the three of them walked to the truck.

"No, Phoebes, I wasn't. But I wouldn't have gone anyway. I rather go home and watch TV with you guys."

Louis started the engine, looking over at Gemma's car. The windows were down but Fizzie's hair blocked the others from view. He wouldn't have seen Harry anyhow because it was dark, but he couldn't pull his eyes away as the car turned and drove away.

He looked around the truck to make sure the girls were buckled in the back seat, and pulled out of the community centre driveway, feeling betrayed. He was hopeful Harry would go home and have that cup of tea with him.

"You two were amazin tonight. I'm so proud of you." Louis said, glancing in the rear mirror at his sisters.

Anne grinned. "Yes, they were. You all were. I loved that song you and Harry sang. Got me downright crying. Everyone loved it. You boys have talent, that's for sure."

"Yeah, Harry has a great voice." Louis said softly, heading down the road. Checked that on his list ages ago, right under 'his red lips'.

"Yes! You and Harry were da bomb!" Daisy said from the back seat. "You guys have to do an encore for us when they get back!"

"Ha- not tonight Daise, another day. That's enough out of me for one night." he said, not referring to the song at all, feeling sad rather than tired.

**
"I'm sorry, Harry."

"I'm sorry too, Gem."

"But you know I'm right. Mum could've kept the horse ranch open. She wasn't even that sick then."

"Yes, she was. She was, Gem. You forget a lot." Harry leaned back in the seat as they drove to the Cowell ranch for the Grimshaw cousins' after party. Harry wondered how arrogant one had to be to hold an after party for a charity concert.

"Trey said their parents are out of town for the weekend so tonight was perfect. They swam through rehearsals inviting everyone and telling them to keep it on the down-low." Lottie piped up from the back seat as she pulled out her headphones.

Gemma nodded. "Yeah, they'll be in big trouble if their Dad finds out."

Harry was peeved. "What kind of person leaves town at a time where everyone is supposed to come together for charity?" He rolled his eyes at the Cowell's inconsideration. Aiden and Nick also had to tie in their party to the concert schedule and call it an after party otherwise their parents were bound to find out why half the kids were not at the concert, which made them horrible. But Harry really needed to get away from Louis right now. He had been struggling so much, trying so hard not to tell him how he felt about him then Boom! Louis had to tell him he loved him. Harry wanted so bad to just kiss him then and there but he couldn't. He knew no matter how bad he wanted to, no matter how much Louis' friendship and love meant to him, Louis wasn't there for him. He was there for his mother.

Harry wasn’t blind to the fact that his mother had been happier since Louis and the girls arrived. He even noticed her helping around the farm more. She even tried cooking with him and Fizzie the other day. And not to mention her and Louis reading his mother's letters together and chatting about her the whole time. When Louis first came to Champton, he told Harry how confused he was that neither woman really talked about each other before, but Harry was ashamed to say that he wasn't confused by that at all. He knew why his mother never mentioned her. He knew why she never mentioned his dad and how he died either. Because she was depressed. She had severe depression after he died and it was hard for her to talk about anything, let alone people from her past. Harry would know...because he's the one who had to take care of her during these times. Sure granddad used to come visit regularly in the old cottage but on the daily Harry and Gemma were basically the parents. Gemma did the laundry and cleaning etc. and Harry would cook and make sure his mother ate at least five spoons of food for the day. Anne only lightly summarized it for Louis when he asked her, but this is the full ugly story. So yeah, Gemma forgot a lot. But he wasn't
in the mood to remind her.

It was years since she had been that bad but Harry couldn't help but notice a complete turnaround since she had Louis and his sisters on the farm. She's energetic, the lines on her forehead were gone, and since that day they went out in the meadows, Harry can now finally say he's seen his former jump trail champion mother in an equestrian suit. From what he gathered so far, his mother and Louis' mother basically grew up together and were like sisters so it made sense that she was happier with Louis' company. And Harry was happy. He wanted her to be happy. There is no way he was gonna jeopardize this progress she made. And he was glad Louis had her too. He wanted Louis to like Champton. He knew it would hurt Louis if he was to somehow fall out of his mother's good graces if she found out they had feelings for each other. If he were to acknowledge his advances it would be detrimental. Louis needed to stop kissing him and telling him he loved him.

"Yeah but Harry, you have to admit we could have brought back the ranch to its former glory if she had cared. It wasn't all about cutting back. Granddad and uncle Emmet pulled in serious paper in their days. We were the best! You think I like Simon throwing it in my face every time I go to train at his stupid ranch. I get so angry! I just wish-

Gemma had a point. Harry wouldn't mind being in a better financial position either. "Wish what?"

"I wish there was a way we could open it back. You know that's what I've always wanted."

"Yeah, me too. I just have a different vision of what it's going to be like next time around."

"Oh boy, not this animal rights thing again. You know how far you'd have to go to actually have that. Most horses have to be pushed out of their comfort zone to perform at all."

"Mine doesn't. You know I taught Winnipeg and Salsa those tricks without hurting them at all. It just takes patience and Kindness, Gem. It's not hard."

"Harry, that's kinda unfair. You're a very rare thing in this world. Not much people can do what you do. Look, if we open back the ranch, we'll have you as an advantage over other ranches. You can put your 'kumbaya animal love' thing to good use."

"Yeah, maybe one day, Gem." Harry said, fading off his words.

"Sounds like a plan to me!" Fizzie jumped in, "I'd love to see Granddad Emmet's ranch in operation again. Since I found out about it from Grandma I've been doing some reading. I think Harry has a good point. I myself am thinking I wanna go into veterinary field. A vet who specializes in horses!"

"Thank you, Fizzie!" Harry said, smiling back at her, just as she got a call.

"Oh, it's my friend from Australia- Hey Marie!" Fizzie went off chatting.

Gemma turned to her brother. "So what's this about you going to the party. I thought you hated Nick?"

"I didn't say that. He's annoying but he's not that bad."

Gemma put on a terrified look. She shot her head in the backseat to make sure Fizzie and Lottie didn't hear them. Fizzie was still on the phone and Lottie was still humming obliviously, headphones intact, so Gemma turned and whispered to Harry. "You're not saying you like him?"

"Ew! NO! Why is everyone analyzing everything I say and do?!"
"Whoah! Sorry. Don't bite my head off, just wondering why you chose to jump in my car instead of riding home with Louis. He looked sad. Did you two fall out? Harry glanced at back seat. "I don't wanna talk about it."

"Oh, come on. They can't hear us."- Harry shot her deadly glare. "Okay, Okay. On a different note...I'm inviting Aiden for dinner tomorrow night."

"On the farm?"

"No, on the hood of my car. Yes, on the farm!"

"Are you mental? Cord has dinner with us! He can't be within fifty yards of that scumbag-oh I'm sorry- boyfriend of yours! Why do you keep doing things to make Mum mad!?"

And Harry was angry again.

* * *

**Thirteen years ago- William's POV**

The car door shut and he smoothed his shirt. Adjusting his cowboy hat, he looked up at the little cottage. The scene wasn’t far off from what he expected. His daughter was never tidy, per say, and given the circumstances, he didn’t expect her to be now. The once white paint was flaking off the wooden walls, and pigeons had been doing a good job of ‘redecorating’ the front window as they lived in a beam just over it.

As he made his way through the cobble-stoned path to the front door, he looked around and saw the dried up flowers in the yard, and tall weeds covering up God knows what creatures beneath. The razor bushes brushed blocking half the pathway against his trousers and grasshoppers jumped out at him. He batted them away with his hand and stopped on the door mat. He clicked his tongue at the sight of it, wanting to pick up the old useless thing and throw it in a garbage bag.

He knocked on the blue door, which to his bewilderment looked a whole lot more kempt than its environs. As he waited for answer, he took a quick look behind him; the cottage was far out in the countryside and the nearest neighbor was a mile down the road. He sighed as his eyes fell on the pick-up truck peeking out from the side of the house.

*Gavin, boy, I’m so sorry about this. I hope you know it was out of my control.*

William knocked on the door again, louder this time, heart beating like a carburetor, not knowing what to expect.

Then he heard mumbling coming from inside, and feet running to the door. It opened and through the crack below, he saw a little boy barely four feet tall peeping shyly at him. Kneeling down, his heart never felt so much in all his years.

“Well, hello there. Do you know who I am?” he asked as he took of his hat.

The little boy looked scared as he said “I can’t talk to strangers.”

William heard someone mutter weakly, “That’s your Granddad,” from inside the house and pursed his lips. He stood up as the boy opened the door wider for him to come in, eyeing him curiously, fascinatedly.
He took tentative steps inside as he ruffled the boy’s hair. It was ten a.m. and he was still in his pyjamas. Pyjamas that looked too small for him as his belly and shins were on display.

He peered into the livingroom and saw Anne sitting under a blanket, eyes on the TV. He sighed.

He stuck his neck in the kitchen and was horrified at the sight of dirty dishes and ants everywhere. There was a rat nibbling something under the little breakfast table in the middle.

“There’s mac and cheese if you want, Granddad.”

The man blinked rapidly as he looked down into the little boy’s large eyes fixated on him. “Mac and cheese?” He stalked over to the cupboard and opened them. Inside were boxes and boxes of mac and cheese and endless packets of ramen noodles. He almost jumped back as a cockroach as big as his nose ran across the line of packets. Closing it back, he shook his head.

“You can’t have the ramen because– it’s the only one I know how to make for Mum. Gemma makes the mac and cheese because I can’t cook that.”

William nodded, realizing the child was implying him to make his own mac and cheese. He rest endeared hand on the child’s back, rubbing it. Anger suddenly overtaking his sadness, he marched into the livingroom and came to stand in front the couch.

“Damn it Anne, why isn’t he in school?” he shouted over the TV. He looked at her and she wasn’t looking at him but he knew she heard him. She smelled like she need a bath asap and her eyes had dark egg shapes underneath. Her hair was up in a very matted messy bun, and although the sun was roasting outside, socked feet peeked out from under a huge warm blanket.

“Anne, get up! Get your ass out of that couch now, young lady!”

“Don’t yell at my mum!” William swatted around to see an angry little Harry with clenched fist and eyebrows that reminded him off a little tiger cub, and it suddenly occurred to him that Harry probably hadn’t even been to a zoo yet. Making a mental note to take him and Gemma soon, he knelt down in front the boy and held his arms. Harry kept up his ‘deadly’ frown as he looked up at him.

“Listen, there, do you wanna see a horse?”

—the little boy’s eyes changed into excitement, and he gasped, nodding- “Well how bout you go pack some clothes in your knapsack and I’ll take you to my ranch. I’ve got lots of horses. Harry disappeared in a flash, and William turned to his daughter. “Why isn’t he in school!?”

Anne huffed. “I don’t know! He always has excuses why he can’t go! ‘I’m not feeling well,’ ‘The teacher yells at me,’ I’m just fed up with him!”

“Lord, you gotta pull yourself together or one day I’ll come in here and meet you all dead!”

“I came to see and my Grandkids! Gosh, Anne, he’s only three years old! You have him on the stove?” he gestured to the kitchen, “What the hell are you thinking?”

His daughter did not answer. He thought he saw a flash of shame in her sunken eyes. “Come on, go shower and come to the ranch with me. We’ll figure something out. I promise everything will be okay.”
“Just take the kid to see the damn horses, Dad.” she said irritated as she leaned back and closed her eyes. Harry ran back in the room with his bag full of clothes, and when William saw it he reckoned he should have gone in there and packed it himself because the kid just randomly stuffed them in there.

“Oh, let’s go.” He said taking the child’s hand. He pulled away and looked back at his mother. Her eyes were open and she was looking straight at him, through him.

“Mum, aren’t you coming?” Harry asked.

William grabbed the bag from him and scooped him up in his arms. “She’s not coming with us, Harry. She needs rest. Come on, son.” He was half expecting her to change her mind and wanted to get out before she did.

Harry started crying as he watched his mother stare back at him blankly. “Mum? MUM!”

William fought back his own tears as he carried the boy to his car and buckled him up. When they got to the ranch, they walked into the house and Harry gasped as a brown fluffy dog came speeding towards him.

“Hey!” the boy shouted as the dogs dashed to a stop wagging its tail and licking him, then dashed away again playfully. Harry pelted after the dog giggling, and William had to sprint after him for fear him and the dog both rolled away down the steep hill. He scooped his grandson up in his arms and carried him in the house.

“Okay. Now I ain’t got mac and cheese, but I do have beef stew,” he said walking in the kitchen. Harry tagged behind him and climbed up on the table, sitting himself on top. William made him a plate and beckoned for him to get down on the chair. The child obeyed and started eating. William only had time to open the refrigerator and pour out some orange juice when he turned around and saw the plate empty as Harry licked the remaining sauce from it. He froze on spot, eyebrows wide, and only caught himself when Harry eyed the cup longingly. Handing him it, William cursed in his mind. *Why is she doing this to these poor kids…*

After a second plate of stew and another glass of juice, William ran Harry a bath and pulled the clothes out of the bag. He was stunned to see that the child was very good at picking out clothes for three years old.

He put out some undies, a pair of kiddie trousers, a shirt, and the little pair of sneakers he stuffed in there.

“Mr Twist! I heard your car get back!”

“Yeah, Calum, I brought my grandson back with me. He’s washin up. I’ll bring him out back when he’s done.” William said heartily, walked down the stairs.

“Oh, glad to hear it! Can’t wait to meet him!” the young man answered before heading back to work.

William sat on the back porch taking in the view of the vast empire below. A huge building where the ranch staff were accommodated; a round pen; stables filled with wild stallions, geldings, and mares; trail courses for horse training of all kinds; and endless pastures beyond. He was excited. He couldn’t wait to show his grandson what would be his one day. He heard pitter patter of little feet coming up behind him and pretended not to hear, then it stopped. Smiling he spun around making a roaring noise and Harry, who was perched, about to do the same, screamed out in playful
fear, as he tickled him. He grabbed him up in his arms and listened to the series of gasps the child let out as his eyes caught the scenery.

“Come on, I did promise to show you the horses, didn’t I?”

William watched as his staff tried to stop a horse from running so they could put him back in his stall. Dust flew beneath its feet, chasing every turn and skip as he galloped around the round pen.

They stopped in front of the pen and Harry looked up curiously at the horse as a young man saddled it.

“Oh ma lorsh! He looks just like his dad!” a young girl, about twenty, gasped, as she ran out from the staff quarters.

“He sure does, Perrie,” A proud William answered.

The girl beamed down at the boy. “How would you like some ice-cream, Sweetie?”

Harry nearly jumped ten feet in the air nodding wildly. “Yes, please!”

She at least taught them good manners…

William thought, observing as the girl marched back in the house. Calum picked Harry up and introduced him to one of the horses that came strutting up to the fence. The boy grabbed onto the fence and braced his feet on the railing, as the orangey-brown horse came up to them. Just then a guy with mouse colored hair shouted from the stables.

“Calum, come on we gotta clean this mess in here, I ain’t doin your work for you!”

“Go on and help Luke, I got him.” William said as he braced Harry from falling off the fence. Calum nodded and stalked off.

“Harry, meet Scotch. He’s sad all the time but- look at that. He’s happy to see you!” William exclaimed as the horse nuzzled up to the boy. Harry stuck out both hands shoved it away but the horse kept smelling him and chewing on his ears as he giggled “Stop it!” and rubbed its nose and the white line that on its face.

Soon, Perrie came back out with an ice-cream cone and handed it to the boy. William pulled him down from the fence and patted Scotch.

“Here you go! Mint chocolate chip!” she grinned, handing him the cone.

“Thank you,” he said as he ate. Scotch dipped his head through the gaps in the fence and took a lick of ice-cream causing Harry to make a face that had William and Perrie bracing themselves for him to start crying, but to their surprise he burst out in boisterous laughter and proceeded to share his cone with the horse who took a few more licks, laughing as the ice-cream ended up in its nose. William and Perrie laughed out loud as they watched the boy bond with the horse.

"He cried all the way here," he said, worry lacing his mind.

"Well he ain't cryin now!" Perrie noted as she patted the man's shoulder, before getting back to work.

After a few hours of showing Harry around the ranch and teaching him a few things about horses, he noticed the child grow tense. “Sup with you?” he asked, curious eyebrows stretching up on his
“I want to go home. My sister is coming home soon.” Harry said, scared watery eyes peering up at him.

William sighed and checked his watch. “Well, look at that. It is three o’clock. You’re very smart, kid.” He marveled at how articulate his grandson was, as he put on his hat and grabbed his keys. “Come on, let’s get you back to your Mum.”

A while later, he had barely cut off the engine when Anne game flying out of the cottage. William and Harry got out, and the boy was grinning about to tell her about his day when she started shouting.

“Get out of here! Give me my son! How dare you take my son from me!?" Harry yelped as her finger nails dug into his skin. She grabbed him up and ran inside.

William barely had time to grasp what just took place when a little girl came pelting out of the house. She dashed to the car and jumped up in his arms, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Granddad, don’t go. I wanna go on the ranch. You took Harry, I wanna go too!” she cried, not letting go. He wrapped his callused hands around her, trying to fight back tears. He hadn’t seen Gemma in almost three years since she four years old, yet the girl still remembered him.

Anne ran back out a minute later and tugged at Gemma, pulling off the screaming girl from her grandfather. Gemma started swinging her arms around hitting her mother and she had no choice but to smack her on the bum to stop. “What is wrong with you!? Behave!”

She then dragged the child to the door, and looking back at her father, she shouted, “Get off my property!” before shutting the door.

William sat in the car for hours, waiting. He didn’t want just leave them, and he couldn’t go up to the door again for fear she’d pull a shotgun on him. He wouldn’t put it past her in this current mood swing. After the bawling died down and the house was quiet, he decided to do the one thing he could do. He started the engine and drove to the grocery store, making a mental note to get Harry a bucket of mint chocolate-chip ice-cream.

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"Get outta the way, Grimmy! Aiden said, clutching Gemma's hand as they passed Nick and Harry on their way down the stairs. The latter were sitting together with a few inches of space between them, and were now smashed together so Nick wasn't mashed by his cousin's boots on his way up.

"Why does he call you that? Aren't both of you Grimshaws?" Harry muttered face flushed trying to ignore Nick's thighs pressing into him.

"Yeah, he considers himself a Cowell. Uncle Simon promised him he'd take over the ranch one day. Trey wants to be a doctor, so..."

"And what about you? Aren't you going to run this place as well? Or are you going to make it your life's mission to debunk all animal rights campaigns? –which is probably the same as running this place." Harry knew Grimmy was looking at his dimples as he smirked them onto display.

"That's not a bad idea- if I wanted to waste my time on a dead topic. I'd be out there arguing against
animal rights when people who own and operate meat processing factories, abattoirs, farms,"- he gestured Harry-"already vindicate that animals are here to serve us not the other way around." he answered returning a playful smirk.

But the ethical treatment of horses mean something, Harry grumbled in his mind. You wouldn't eat horses. He pursed his lips. He wasn't in the mood to get into it with Nick. Not when there was a fun party going on where he could get a beer and get his mind off Louis. Great, now he's thinking about him again.

"We should get something to drink," he said, changing the subject.

Grimmy's mouth quivered, as his eyebrows shot up. "You mean, like...soda." He asked slowly.

Harry squinted his eyes, a mocking smile setting in. "You think I came all the way here for soda?"

This seemed to ignite something in Grimmy because he was now on his feet dashing down the stairs. "When he reached the bottom, he stopped and quickly turned back. "Wait! I didn't ask what you wanted!"

Harry found him funny. "Surprise me." he smiled, hand propping his chin, lap propping his elbow. Through the railing he saw the side door exit that lead to the pool. The light out there was brighter than inside the house and he saw loads of people splashing around with cute coloured floating devices. The mass of water was a bright clear blue that sparkled in the light...Just like Louis eyes. He frowned thinking about it, trying not to think about it. He spotted Murrey relaxing with a girl under his arm as he held up a red cup. His eyes blinked like mad when thought he saw the guy pull his trunks out of the water, holding them up like he had just won a medal...For stupidity, Harry thought. He shook his head as he turned away, looking through the other side of the stairs. A group of teens were doing a chug challenge that involved removing pieces of clothing one by one if they didn't drink enough all their cup's contents. Harry gasped at the madness. He had no one to blame for him being here and feeling out of place, and having to hang out with Nick, who soon returned with two red cups in his hand.

He took his seat again next to him, this time sitting not as close as he was after Aiden shoved him but not as far as he was before that. Harry painted on a smile as he looked down at the contents. It was red. He took a sip, keeping eye contact with Grimmy as the latter ogled at him.

Harry's eyebrows went wide as he drank the contents. "What is it?"

"Vodka and cranberry juice. Is it any good?"

Harry raised an index finger in front of Grimmy and took another sip. "It's not bad. Taste much different from beer."he said out loud at the same time as he thought, The beer Louis bought me...

Grimmy looked at Harry, stupefied. "You've had beer?"

Harry swallowed another gulp. "Don't look so surprised! I'm sixteen same as you."

Grimmy's face went pale and he hid in his cup.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Nothing."

"What are you drinking?" Harry said, trying to keep the conversation flowing.
"Coke...and something."

Harry tried looking in the cup. "And what?"

Grimmy smiled, pulling the cup out of Harry's view, flapping his knees like a butterfly.

Harry laughed, grabbing Grimmy's hand, pulling the cup to his nose. His mouth opened as he eyeballed him. "That's just plain coke!"

Grimmy blushed now and shrugged and said, "You caught me," at the same time that Harry said, "You cheater!"

They giggled, and Harry noticed Grimmy looking down at his hand over Grimmy's bony hand over the cup, and jerked it away back onto his own lap, taking a sip of the vodka again.

A couple of tipsy girls giggling nonsensically passed them on the stairs and almost tripped in front of Harry. When they passed he realized that Grimmy had shifted himself to give them room and was now shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip with him again. The Cowell house was actually a mansion and the stairs were one of those really wide swirly ones that Harry only saw on Celebrity Lifestyles, and the only reason Aiden shoved Grimmy into Harry before was because at that time a flood of people were on the stairs. It was cleared now and the girls had enough room, so it was totally unnecessary for him to be that close now. Nonetheless, Harry tried to ignore the feel of his cold pasty skin that smelled like carbolic soap.

"You're not in the mood for partying tonight? Was looking forward to taking drunk pictures of you to show the whole class next term."

Grimmy laughed and sputtered his coke back into his cup. "That's why I'm not drinking, and you are. But seriously. Don't tell anyone, but, I've never had a drink."

Harry shifted his head to focus on the boy's face. "Seriously?"

Grimmy nodded. Harry bit his lip.

"Well I can't judge because this is the second time I've had alcohol." And a pain shot through his chest as he said it, remembering the first time...with Louis.

And Grimmy wasted no time in driving the pain in further. "When was the first time? What did you drink?"

_Ah, with Louis. He looked at me with some kind of expression that read like a mixture of worry, and concern, and fond as I drank. He was fondering over me and, uh, he caressed my cheek hoping to God I didn't choke on my beer. He bought me a beer. And he wasn't mad when he found out what a liar I was. He said he loves me... And suddenly Harry felt sick. "I need to go. I have to go."

He jumped up, leaving the cup on the step and ran down the stairs.

"Harry!" he heard Grimmy call but he was already lost in the sea of people, determined to find Gemma and Louis' sisters and get the hell out of there. To the left of the stairs a big hoopla of noise sounded as the chuggers had a clear winner. They lifted the skinny girl up and Harry's mouth fell open. It was Gemma. In her bra and thankfully a swim shorts. He shoved past the sweaty giggly cackling bodies and stretched his arms up to grab his sister.

"Hey!" an irritated voice shouted from the other side of her, where her feet were floating in the air. Harry yanked again and soon a hand was gripping his jacket and Aiden's face appeared from under
Gemma. The boy seemed not to recognize him for a minute then his face softened into a Cheshire grin when he realized who he was collaring.

"Harry! Didn't know you wanted to play. Gemma'd have my head if I let you drink what we're drinking." he bopped his eyebrows suggestively, "If you know what I mean."

Harry pulled his head back to avoid the horrendous smell coming from his mouth as he talked, still holding his sisters' elbows as the group of guys tossed her in the air. Her head bopped backward so that her mouth was on top making her grin look like a frown and her closed eyes look weird at the bottom of her hanging face, and Harry would have laughed at that if he wasn't scared to death right now of her state.

"Tell them to put her down!"

Aiden looked back at the girl. "Relax-

Harry clapped in his ear and he jumped. "Tell them to put her down!!"

Aiden staggered drunkenly for a bit and was soon pulling Gemma off of the crowd. He picked her up and dragged her to the stairs where Harry followed them to make sure he didn't drop her. They went up to Aiden's room and he rest her gently on the bed best he could in his state. Harry sat on the edge of the bed. She was passed out. Harry knew he was in trouble now as she was too drunk to drive him, Fizzie, and Lottie home. His heart raced as he heard his mother's voice yelling in his head.

"Relax, you can all spend the night. There's plenty of room." Aiden said as he slid himself next to Gemma, smoothing her hair. Harry scanned her bare flesh. "Does she even have any clothes here?"

Aiden burst out in a scandalous laugh. It took him a few minutes to recover himself before he muttered, eyes wide, "Would you like one of her nighties to sleep in!? What am saying, of course you do!" Then he was cackling loudly again, so loud Gemma flinched in her sleep.

Harry sat there in total shock. He didn't know if to punch him or scream or cry. Why was he being so mean? Why would he assume such a thing? Asshole. "I meant for her, you idiot!" he spat.

Aiden's laughter died down and he settled on a serious tone. "Look, Harry. It's okay. I know you like guys. I have lots of gay friends. Grimmy's gay."

Harry opened his eyes wider, aghast. He didn't know why he was since kind of already figured that but something about hearing it out loud. Harry didn't know any other guy at school who liked guys and thought maybe they were all hiding like him, and apparently like Nick. Aiden made it seem so normal. Of course Grimmy would tell his cousin about it, just like Harry told Gemma. Gemma... Harry looked at his sister with narrowed eyes. She must have told Aiden about him. He thought he could trust her. He was going to kill her. As soon as she got a good rest and was sober the next day, he was gonna get her before his mother does.

Aiden sighed, caressing Gemma's forehead with his thumb as he leaned back into the head rest. "Don't tell him I said anything, but I'm glad you're his friend. He doesn't have much friends..."

He doesn't have any friends, Harry thought. Because he's always been mean to everyone. Mean to Harry, only until recently... when Louis had showed up. Louis. A feeling he never felt before sprung up in him as he watched his sister sleep. He missed Louis. He wanted Louis. Louis who told him he loved him. Louis who was changing his life with every second he spent in his house and in his Dad's truck.
Harry jumped up and marched for the door, he needed to find Fizzie and Lottie and get the hell out of there. The traitor can stay. "Wait!" Aiden shouted making him stop at the door. "Where are you going?" "I'm going home!" he harshly replied, slamming the door behind him. He quickly texted Louis' sisters to meet him on the stairs, and as he sat down there, he then texted Louis.

***

Like a bruised and burning heart, skewered and cut up, and left to bleed its remainders into his chest cavity. That's how Louis felt lying on bed blankly staring at the wall with his head turned to the side so his resting hand partially blocking his view. He whimpered, breath so short he feared he'd need to be taken to hospital soon, but Louis wasn't crying. He was in way too much pain to cry. Here he was having poured his broken heart to someone, an hour prior, only to be rejected. Okay, so Harry didn't want to come out yet. Fine. Louis can deal with that but how can he even start to when Harry remained in Gemma's car and went with her to the Grimshaw party. How could he just go to that stupid party and leave Louis hanging. Harry hated the Cowell's. Was he so desperate to get away from Louis that he's enduring the likes of Nick Grimshaw. Louis saw the way Nick looks at him. Harry doesn't like him? Harry wouldn't choose him over Louis. Would he? Did Louis literally just screw up his friendship with Harry. A friendship he had grown to cherish in such a short space of time. A friendship he had hoped to last more than just two weeks- two weeks which was over because Louis leaves on Monday. Louis heart would break all over again if he left Champton Valley like this.

*I can't let it end like this. I won't. I love Harry. I can't walk away from him when he needs me. Even if he doesn't think he does.*

He felt hopeless. His self-encouraging pep-talk was true, he wanted to help Harry as a friend, but also wanting to be with him made it easier said than done. How? How was he to separate his friendship with Harry from his feelings of wanting to hold him and kiss him again.

He leaped out of bed, holding his head. His hands were covered with his hair and he realized how long it was getting since the last time he cut it, the day just before the football game. He looked in the mirror, twirling a strand around his finger, suddenly feeling self- conscious, wondering if Harry liked his hair this way. He loved Harry's hair, he thought as he ran his hands through his own, pretending it was Harry's curls he was massaging, pulling a handful on his nose and savoring the scent. Closing his eyes as he pictured Harry close enough for him to breathe him in, he began to feel a tingling in his lower abdomen. His eyes popped open.

*I have to stop this. I have to stop. I have to,* he whispered frantically to his reflection in the mirror, butting his forehead on it lightly, as he closed his eyes again only to see a picture of the boy's dimples poking at him teasingly. The feeling in his abdomen grew stronger, causing him to grip his hair tighter as he spun around to the bed and let himself fall on his belly, face down in the sheets.

"Ugghhh!!" he groaned, as he now heard Harry's voice telling him to pull himself together. *How can I. How can I, when I lose it around you every time. You're not even here and I'm losing it.*

He gripped the sheets, feeling a sweet sensation on the tip of his groin, and started sweating. The feeling had him moaning into the mattress, as he gyrated into it. Soon, Louis was crying as the sweetness became too intense to hold. His muffled cries stuffed into the sheets along with his tears and saliva as he bawled. As he released his come in his jeans, he slowly rolled over and lay on his back, sobbing loudly. The last time Louis remembered feeling so hopeless was before he came out. But this was worse. Louis never felt weaker and more vulnerable than he did now.
"I can't believe Harry went to that party! I know the girls are curious but," Anne said, walking out the kitchen with two cups of tea and pulling Louis' eyes from the letter he was reading, as he heard Harry's name. He had taken a bath and was now sat comfortably on the plush rug. Anne set them down on the coffee table and sat next to him on the rug.

"You know; you could have gone with them. Make sure Harry doesn't find trouble. Gemma's middle name is trouble so don't even say 'but they're with Gemma,' she used to get Harry in so much trouble when they were younger."

Louis laughed. "It's okay. I told them to call me if anything happens. Besides, I rather stay and read these," he said, wishing he really was with Harry now. He handed her the letter. "Speaking of trouble, read this."

My dearest most living friend,

I know you never loved being in the city and don't get me wrong, I'm quite accustomed but lately I'm a bit nostalgic for the fresh country air and green hills we used to run through. I'm pregnant with my second set of twins as I've told you in an earlier email and I'm no doubt doing fine but I can't seem to get any sleep with the busy traffic outside. This is one time I sure would like to be back at home. I miss the farm. I miss Phoebe so much. Is she still around? that horse was a maniac. Speaking of Phoebe and Daisy, the twins are becoming a lot like their namesakes! Most of the time they would be riding their bikes down the road or hanging out in Louis' room whether he's there or not. He's always complaining and calling them pests. You know they hide his things in the strangest places. The other morning, I found his knee pad wrapped around the dining table leg! I bet your children aren't so obnoxious...

How are Gemma and Harry?

"Hahahahahaa!"

"Ha aha!!"

Louis grinned widely. "Ha! I remember that. They were like... five? They were really something else."

Anne giggled to herself so hard her head fell backwards and her bangs flew back off her forehead, and Louis saw Harry for a flash second before he threw her head back down and the bangs curtained her face again. Louis jiggled along with her as she struggled to talk, and waited for her to catch herself.

"Your Mum and I used to do the same things and we were older than that! HAHA!" she managed to say before exploding in boisterous laughter.

"You won't believe what happened at the concert," Anne said grinning like a teenager. Louis couldn't help but tilt his head as he grinned back at her. "You know Robin, he asked me out on a date! I don't even. I don't even know what to do!"

Louis built up a laugh as he stared blankly at her, then he let it out, making her laugh as she picked up the couch cushion and hit him with it.

"What do you mean? You should totally go! He seems like a nice guy." Louis giggled after
shielding himself from the blows. Anne stopped, eyes narrow on him. "You think so?"

"I like him but you should probably check in with Harry. I'm not sure if he likes him."

"Yes, he does," Anne said defensively, "In general, I think. He used to love watching him ride at shows he went with his Granddad. He said he was the best, next to his dad..." she trailed off sadly.

Louis reached out and took her hand, gently squeezing it. "Well in that case, yeah, he'd probably be elated! Harry loves you. I think if he knows you're happy, he would be happy for you no matter what. Just like you'd be for him."

Anne agreed, patting his hand. "I haven't been on a date in ages! I wouldn't know what to wear! Gemma will put me in flowered sundresses! Yuck!"

"I can help you pick something out if you want. I used to go shopping with my Mum. I have a good eye. If your taste is anything like hers you're in good hands."

Anne laughed. "Oh, Louis, she had the worst taste in clothes ever!"

Louis' head and shoulders protested. "You're talking about before I was born. Trust me, she's improved since me." He said proudly, pointing to his chest. "Here, I'll show you." He took out his phone and scanned through his photos, trying not to break down as he saw his mother's face come up.

As Anne praised the beautiful pictures in Louis' phone, it buzzed once and Anne jumped. "Oh!"

He pulled it close to his chest and read the screen. It was a text. From Harry.

I need you to come pick us up. Gemma's drunk. Please don't tell Mum.

"Um. I gotta call Dad. I'm gonna go to my room." He lied. "Okay, I'll go check on Betsie. She's really close to delivery." Anne said.

Louis went into his room and left the door open a crack peeping to see when she passed through the kitchen on her way to the backdoor.

A little while after he saw her flash past, he waited for the door to close then sped out of his room grabbing the truck keys as he headed out the front door, making sure to close it softly. He turned the key in the ignition and pulled out of the yard and straight down the road, letting out a long breath he was holding the entire time.

The things we do for love...

***

Louis knew the town like the back of his hand by now and had no trouble finding the Cowell ranch. He parked the truck just outside the open gate and made his way up the driveway on foot, passing girls with red plastic cups and short shirts as they chatted up wayward looking boys in slinky jeans and oily hair.

He walked through the opened giant oak doors of the...mansion? Stopping and taking a look around. The foyer was huge, bigger than his living room, and there were large potted plants in corners that made the scenery look even more posh, not to mention the wide staircase that opened up in front of the entrance. The lights were party mode, flashing all around but he still saw faces, lots and lots of faces. There were so many people there, pushing him on their way in and out, and
the smell of alcohol and some kind of exotic fruit.

As he navigated his way forward he quickly sent a text to Harry and the girls to make them aware he was there. He didn't quite like the feeling of drunk bodies mindlessly bumping into him so he tracked back to the door to wait for them outside. On his way there he noticed a brown head full of wavy hair slouched forward over in the maroon shirt he saw Liam in at the fundraising concert. He went over him and sank down next to the boy. There was a puddle of clear strong smelling liquid in front of him on the floor and a line dripping from his mouth that let Louis know he had just thrown up.

He draped a hand on his back, and the other pulling his hair off his face.

"Liam? What is going on?" he knew his friend too long to not know something drove him to over drinking. Someone must've coaxed him into it. He looked around for potential culprits but no one was paying them any mind so rubbed his back, frowning. He heard Liam let out a sob just as his phone buzzed. It was Fizzie with a text stating that she and Lottie were by the truck waiting. He was relieved about that but where is Harry? He quickly sent a text letting Fizzie know he was inside looking for him. Then he texted Harry.

'Where are you??'

"He didn't tell them. He said he was gonna tell them but he didn't. I need more vodka. Refill, please." Liam sounded croaky and whiny. He was definitely out of it.

"Don't worry. He must have a bit of cold feet. He'll tell them. Just give him time." Louis said realizing how stupid he sounded because what time did he give Harry to consider anything before declaring love eternal.

Zayn was supposed to tell his parents he was gay and that Liam is his boyfriend, and was super scared because his parents are super religious Muslims, and in sympathizing with Zayn's situation, Louis couldn't help but feel sick of himself for pushing Harry the way he did.

"He said he was going to make up some story to come visit me here! I'm nothing but a secret booty-call who can't mean important to anyone."

"No, you're not." Louis said soothingly as he raked Liam's hair back. Just then, his phone buzzed. It was Harry. 'I'm right behind you.' He almost cracked his neck spinning around so fast to spot the elusive boy. He marched over to them through the sea of people and his gaze met Louis hands on Liam. "What happened to him?" he asked.

"He's had too much to drink. You see Murrey anywhere?"

"I did. He's skinny dipping in the pool. Also drunk."

"Ski-" Louis sighed, scratching his head frustratingly, as Liam fell back on the couch eyes shut, clenching his stomach. He knew exactly the kind of madness that took place at house parties.

"How are we gonna explain this to his Mum?"

Harry thought for a while then shrugged. "He can stay in the cabin with Cord. I don't want Mum to see him and freak out. We can sneak him home in the morning."

Boy, well you think of everything, don't you? Louis thought sarcastically as Liam sobbed some more.
"Zayny, I want my Zayny. Tell him I'm sorry, Louis. I didn't mean to give away the watch he gave me."

Louis' eyes widened. "The silver one!?"

"Yeeeeaaaahhhhhhh!" Liam cried.

Okay, Louis had enough. "Who did you give it to?" Louis demanded, pulling on Liam's shoulders. The boy just dozed off on him and he had to slap him several times to wake him up. "LIAM! Who did you give it to!?" Louis said angrily again.

Liam was sobbing again. "Hit me, Louis. I deserve it!

"I'm not joking! Who. Did. You. Give. The. Watch. To!?" Louis shook him on the beat of every word and Liam seemed to get it this time.

"A guy, he had on an orange jumper and a huge diamond earring in his ear."

"One ear?" Louis asked, not quite sure if that was important.

"One eeeeeaaaarrrrr!!!!" Liam wailed before dozing off again.

"Stay with him." Louis said to Harry, as he marched off.

He looked around the pool area then made his way to the dining room, where he saw a flash of orange in the kitchen. "Hey! Did a guy give you a watch?" I don't know what you're talkin about man_" the guy lied.

Louis clearly saw the shiny object peeking out from under his long sleeve. "I'm gonna need that back, mate."

The guy tried to run and Louis lunged forward, grabbing him by the collar. "You're gonna give me that watch or I'm going to drag your arm away with me!" he said, shoving him up on the counter. If he wasn't so angry he could rip the guy apart, Louis would be aware of how close his pelvis jammed onto the boy's crotch as he was pinned between him and the counter or how kind of cute the guy was. Waiting for an answer, he felt an urgent hand rest on his back, and he eased his grip off the guy a bit. He didn't bother turning around as he already knew who it was.

"Look, he gave it to me, after..." The guy started. Louis scrunched his face in disgust as he grabbed his collar tighter, shoving his back hard on the counter edge. The guy was sweating now.

"You're gonna let him take that watch off your wrist or I'll punch you until we can change the colour of that pool," he said.

He turned his head slightly, eyes not leaving the guy. "Harry?" he gestured for him to take the watch, and felt the hand release his back. The boy timidly stretched his hand to remove the watch from the cowering boy. Harry pocketed it and Louis shoved the guy as he finally backed off, stretching a protective arm in front of Harry as they walked backwards to the exit, in case orange-jumper-guy felt brave.

Back to Liam's side, Louis slung his arm over his shoulder and pulled him up. "Come on, Liam. We're getting out of here." Harry took his other arm and they carried the limp boy to the truck and placed him inside next to Fizzie. He held his head covering his face and sobbing. Boy does he look like how Louis felt. Frustrated.
"What about Gemma?" Louis inquired, not wanting to leave anyone behind.

"She's too drunk to drive. She's spending the night." Harry said as he got in the passenger side. Louis raised an judging eyebrow. He really didn't get Gemma's decision to stay with that rascal. As they drove to the farm, Louis got a call. It was Cord. He gave it to Harry.

"Where the hell are you!?"- Harry pulled the phone from his ear, startled. Louis looked over concerned. Even he heard the shouting on the other end of the phone. Harry put it back in his ear and spoke. "We're all coming home now. What's your deal!?" he said irritated.

"What the hell is going on, Harry? Put Louis on, now!"

"Hello?"

"Louis...?" he heard Fizzie from the backseat. He recognized her tone warning him about talking on the phone while driving. "Betsie just gave birth and you weren't in your room! Explain!"

"Oh, shit! Harry and the girls needed a ride-"


"Is Mum mad?" Harry asked quietly.

Cord heard him and answered. "Anne is going to flip! She called Gemma and she's not answering! Harry, what the fuck is going on with your phone!? How many times is she gonna tell you-" Louis moved the phone from his ear and rest it on his lap to drive. He could not deal with people yelling at him while he was in a moving vehicle.

He looked at Harry, who was looking back at him with a expression laced in guilt.

Louis rolled his eyes at him. Why did he have to go to that stupid party? He really didn't want Anne yelling at Harry again but he knew this time she'll have to yell at Louis too for sure...At least he knows the trouble he's caused.

Then he started hearing moaning coming from Liam. "Louis, pull over, I think I wanna throw up!"

**

Chapter End Notes

I wanted William's pov a long time ago and Im happy to introduce him. I want you guys to fall in love with him and I hope I brought him across to u guys clearly. He's important to Harry and Louis' story.
Tell me what you think about Grimmy. I wanted him to be the kind of villain u have a soft spot for despite his flaws.
Did Aiden surprise u?
Anne and Louis friendship-how do u feel?
Talk to me!
It gets steamy from here on out so pull out your wine and sit back.
"Where's Mum?" Harry asked, voice shaky, as he closed the truck door. They had just pulled into the yard where Cord was irately waiting for them on the steps. He got up and marched over to the truck, arms flying.

"She went to bed!" he answered, not believing it himself. It wasn't like Anne to skip the 'yell fest', and this one was big as the boys missed out on a birth on the farm.

Harry covered his arms and looked at Louis like he wanted to die. The older boy sighed and reached out to touch his back but he pulled away as Fizzie and Lottie emerged from the back seat.

"I hope she isn't too mad, because Louis was only trying to help." Lottie said.

Fizzie shrugged. "That's no excuse! You should have told her you were going. It's not like she would've stopped you!" Louis looked as Harry and he looked down at his shoes.

"I know it was stupid." Louis said. He hugged the girls and watched as they went inside.

Then Liam started howling in the backseat. Harry flinched and Louis let out an audible sigh. Cord gave them a 'look'.

"I'm not even gonna ask."

"He has to stay in the cabin tonight! His Mum can't know he's drunk."

"To hell with that!" Cord grumbled.

"Louis already called her and said he's sleeping over!" Harry begged.

Cord laughed dryly. "Well, let him sleep in his room!"

Louis rolled his eyes. Harry looked like he wanted to throw up. Or hit someone. Cord. He wanted to hit Cord. At least that's how Louis interpreted it.

"Fine. I'll get him in my room and sleep on the couch."

Harry wasn't happy with the idea of Liam in Louis' room, whether he was in there or not. "What if Mum sees him! Please, Cord, just do this one thing!"

Cord's face went into a sea of contemplation before coming to a decision. "Fine! Help me get him down the hill."

"Louis. You're the bestest best friend ever. Thanks for coming to get me!" Liam mumbled, eyes
closed as he curled up on Cord's couch a few minutes later. Harry rolled his eyes. Louis didn't bother to let him know that he saw him drunk purely by accident and it was really Harry he that he had come for. Instead he covered him with the blanket and made for the door with Harry on his heels.

"Night, Liam."

"Thanks Cord."

"You and I shouldn't have broken up..."

– Louis stopped dead as he reached the door. Harry panicked behind him. What? No! Ignore him! He's drunk! Don't turn back! Don't turn back!

"You were out. You wouldn't have me in all this shit I'm in now!"

While saying his silent prayers for the boy to keep walking, he heard a dry laugh escape his throat. He then bolted passed Harry and jumped in front of the couch.

"Look here, don't ever- drunk or sober- ever, EVER say that again!" he screamed, at the top of his lungs causing everyone to flinch. "And don't you ever talk that way about way about Zayn! I'm ashamed to call you my friend right now and you're goddamn lucky I didn't leave your ass in that hell hole! Now get some fucking rest!"

And with that he stormed out the cabin, slamming the beaten oak door behind him.

Cord gave Harry the 'startled' eyebrows. The only time Harry had heard Louis yell before was at Daisy when they picked them up. He too was mad at Liam for saying that, but he knew he was drunk. Surely Louis knows it's just the alcohol talking? Right?

In that moment, Harry felt scared. Why would Louis let Liam get to him so much? He remembered when Louis told him their story about how Liam hopped from him to Zayn in a heartbeat and wondered if Louis still had some kind of grudge about the situation.

He bolted out the door making the track uphill, trying to catch up with Louis but the older, angrier boy was too fast for him. By the time he got inside, Louis was already in his room.

Walking up to his own room and slumping down on the bed, Harry closed his eyes and sighed. He still had a hard time believing the older boy had called him out, kissed him (twice), and professed his love for him all in one week. He wanted so badly to talk to Louis and tell him how he felt. He didn't want Louis dwelling on what Liam said at all. He didn't want him regretting breaking up with him. Because if he did that, he would forget all about Harry...and the love he expressed for him.

Harry slapped his palm over his face. He hated this feeling. This feeling of having someone he wanted want him back when he couldn't have them, and dreading them losing interest in him because he can't deliver. What's to stop Louis? What's to stop him from calling Liam or dragging him up the hill and into his room for the night. Zayn was their friend, yes, but Louis had Liam first so what's to stop him from taking him back, and forgetting all about under-aged Harry who kept dodging him every turn.

He sat up in the bed, arms around his knees, still in the shirt he wore for the concert. He remembered the day before when Fizzie went with them to buy shirts to perform in. Louis had gotten a red short-sleeved one that looked brought out his jawline, and Harry chose a violet colored one with longer sleeves. He remembered Louis telling him how beautiful it looked against his
complexion even though Harry wasn't speaking to him at the time because of the kiss at the lake the prior evening. Louis can't really be that bothered by Liam's stupid, careless words?

Feeling torn, his eyes fell on the little stack of papers Louis had given him the week before. The letters... Maybe there's something in them that can let me know just how much he cared about Liam. If he loved him enough to take him back any time now since the drunk bloke expressed regret of the breakup.

Harry picked up the pile and started scanning through, looking for something to help him know just how deep his feelings ran for Liam. His mother was pretty candid in some of the letters and he hoped he'd find something.

He read some with no luck, then his eyes fell on one in particular. Judging by the date, it was written when Louis was fifteen years old.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

My dear best friend Anne, I think my son is gay.

No- I know he is. He has to be. His face goes red when the girls mention his friend Zayn. And he's so quiet and reserved. I can tell he's struggling with something, and he says he's fine when I ask but as his mother I can sense it's not. He buries himself in his football practice and his school work which isn't bad but he's so withdrawn and when Dan comes around he only wants to talk about footie with him. He doesn't know Dan hates football and would very much like to have a talk with him about what's been bothering him. Dan has this theory that Louis chose a boyish, normal as possible thing like football as a hobby to mask himself hoping it will make him look straight. He's talking rubbish because Mark is the one who taught Louis the game when he three years old and he thoroughly loves it.

Dan thinks we should intervene before he tries to commit suicide like a large percentage of other gay teens in the world. Oh Anne, please tell me Louis won't do such a thing. He knows we love him and I try extra hard to make him know how special he is to me. How he changed my life the day he was born. This is hard for me, as you would suspect, but I would never change him for anything.

I will update you as soon as I can.

Ps- How are Gemma and Harry?

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

This letter made Harry even fonder of Louis than he was a minute ago. His mother had written a touching letter that brushed on Louis' life obviously before he came out. Harry related to the feeling of being reserved and struggling so hard with feelings that make you so scared to tell anyone. The letter made Harry connect to Louis more, but it had done nothing to answer his original questions, only serving to add more confusion in his mind. He had a crush on Zayn before? Great, one more guy for Harry to compete with. But that's just it, he wasn't competing at all. He already took himself out of the equation.

Sighing in despair, he clasped his hands behind his aching neck, and tried to ignore the pain he now cradled in his chest. He didn't want to be out of the running. He wanted to own the running. As he edged closer to the headboard, in a bid to look out the window, he heard something knock against it, and suddenly realized he still had Liam's watch in his pocket. He pulled it out and examined it, an idea forming in his head.
Wondering what the fuck Liam's deal was but mostly glad him, Harry, and his sisters were safely home (and in the cabin), Louis pulled the covers over himself, shut his eyes and tried to sleep.

*Tap! Tap! Tap!!*

Louis scrambled around in the sheets trying not to curse. If that was Liam at the door, he swore he'd drive his drunk ass straight home to his mother. He stumbled out of bed and pulled the door open, not looking up as he rubbed his eyes.

"What time is it?" he rasped.

"Pretty late, or pretty early depending on which way you look at it."

Louis opened his eyes to see a restless Harry standing there, still in his concert outfit. The livingroom lights were off and Louis' lamp was the only source of light peeping through the door.

"Are you mad at me?", the boy asked. Now that Louis was adjusted to the dim light, he began to see the worry in his face as he folded his arms sheepishly.

Louis scanned his upper body. His hair was frizzy, he still had on the clothes from the concert, and Louis could not be any less mad. He tried to relay this but the words were not keen on coming out, so he settled for shaking his head as he pulled the door wider for Harry to come in if he wanted. He blew a low sigh as he turned back inside.

Harry followed and shut the door, walking into the Study half of the room. Louis made a move to put the light on but Harry murmured for him not to. "It'll hurt your eyes."

Louis obeyed. He let his eyes rest on the boy.

"Are you okay, Harry? I'm sorry about...everything."

Harry looked down dejectedly at the floor. "I know she's going to yell at Gemma tomorrow. She's saving it all for her. I'm sorry, Louis. I shouldn't have made you lie."

Louis tilted his head to make eye contact. "It's a good thing you texted me. I'm glad I was able to come get you, thanks to your dad's truck."

Harry looked up at him and Louis saw the tinge of a small epiphany settling in his gaze. *Maybe he finally sees we're connected.*

"Why were you so angry about a watch tonight?"

Louis lips pursed. "It was Zayn's granddad's. He'd have killed Liam if I didn't get it back."

"So you'd basically risk your life for your friends?"

Louis folded his arms, shrugging as he leaned into the wall. "I'd hardly call that risking my life."

"What if that guy had a gun?" Harry asked, observing Louis' bent knee as he braced his right foot on the wall.

Louis snorted, raising an amused eyebrow. "Worried about me, are you?"
Harry's face lit up in an open-mouthed smile, and Louis swallowed at the sight of his front teeth, wanting badly to suck them and their environs. Harry shoved both his hands in his pants pockets, and tilted his head, eyeing him with a look that made his heart start beating as though he had come to life that second. He watched as the boy shifted his gaze to the wall, somewhere to his right, and caught the unmistakable flare of a sensual nature in his eyes.

"Well, I have the watch now," he said walking backwards slowly to the desk. *The fuck is happening?*

"What are you going to do to me to get it back?" he droned in a whisper, as he slowly set himself up on the desk backwards, eyes dreamily on Louis.

Feet playfully swinging, he patted his hip twice, alerting Louis of the watch in his pocket. Observing such an assertive gesture, Louis' breath caught up in the space between his throat and his tongue.

"Uh? Um," was all Louis got out as he felt his toes curl up and his palms go slippery. A million stars flooded his mind as he watched the younger boy lick his lips, looking at him. *He wants me. He wants me to kiss him!*

*Fuck!*

The next thing he knew, he was moving towards the boy, not sure how fast or slow or awkward he was moving. It was like his brain had shut everything else out and all he saw was the person in front of him.

Certain he might collapse from shock soon, he pressed his right index finger on the desk, between Harry's hand and his left hip, pretending to keep his cool. He looked up to meet him smiling and still looking at his lips. His heart hurt badly now.

"Well, we can do this the easy way or the hard way." He whispered, moving closer, ever so slow now.

Harry held back a grin as he whispered. "What's the hard way?"

"You don't want to know..." Louis breathed, closing up the last inches of space between them and pressing his lips into Harry's slightly open ones as they eyed each other. As he moved his tongue around carefully, he tasted alcohol in the boy's warm mouth, and furrowed his eyebrows hoping he wasn't in his room solely because he was drunk from that stupid party. He recognized it as the essence of vodka and tried not to let the seductiveness of it push him over the edge. The boy's heart beat times a thousand, just as Louis', and he seemed to be holding his breath as they lightly smashed mouths. Louis didn't want him stifling himself so he tilted his head to the side to allow him space to let the air out his nose, and when he didn't, Louis thought to kiss his neck instead. He wanted to kiss him there so bad he felt the anxiety in his boxers, but he decided against it, as he didn't want to scare him off by moving too fast.

He pulled away from the boy to look at him breathe. Harry let out the longest breath known to man and inhaled again, and again, panting as he locked eyes with Louis.

He put his hand in his hair to calm him down and slowly moved it to his cheeks, gawking at his features as his fingertips smoothed over the hot plump skin, his other hand lightly gripping Harry's propped up wrist. He tried pulling it off the desk as it gripped so tightly from nervousness that his bones might break, but Harry did not budge. It was almost like he was restraining himself from...*reaching out to touch Louis?*
Letting his fingers slide to his lips, satisfied that he was breathing evenly enough, Louis leaned in again, reconnecting their lips. He inhaled him in a moan, pressing into his face.

Then, suddenly Harry was swerving his head at an angle that disconnected them once again.

Pulling back, heart beating so fast, Louis looked at him, watery-eyed.

"Um, can we stop? We shouldn't," Harry mumbled as he jumped down, shoving his hands in his pockets. He walked to the door and turned to Louis, thinking.

"Don't leave yet." Louis said, shaking his head slowly, pleadingly. "We can just talk. It's what we should've been doing in the first place." It's true, they needed to talk about everything that happened and sort things out, but Louis wondered how the heck he was going to do that with his boxers tight now. He folded his arms to keep himself from reaching out and grabbing him.

"I better go. Thanks again for picking us up." Harry forced out, as he mindfully threw the watch to Louis, who caught it without taking his eyes of the boy. Harry looked in serious pain, and Louis wanted to take it away—kiss it away. He moved forward to do just that, and Harry darted backwards, shaking his head objectively, on the brim of tears, as he felt behind him for the doorknob. With one last look at Louis, he disappeared out the door.

What the Fuck just happened!?

Exhaling like the life was being 'Heimlicied' out of him, Louis dragged his shaking hand down his face and neck, and threw himself on the bed, face down.

***

Louis started fading into sleep, but was startled awake by a buzz from his phone, which was under the pillow next to his head. He opened it and saw it was a message from Zayn in his WhatsApp group chat.

Zayn: I got 20 mins before shut-eye so who's online?

Louis typed two messages in response, hoping they all come online that second-

Louis: Harry and I kissed again.

Louis: And he started it this time!

Calvin: OMG!

Zayn: What happened?

Calvin: I told you he'd come around. There are certain moves that get them hooked even if they don't know it yet!

Louis rolled his eyes at that and started typing while the others were chatting.

Liam: Zaun? I love you [kiss emoji]

Zayn: [eye roll emoji]

Calvin: sup with u 2?

Zayn: He called me drunk and broke up with me via text. Louis, continue the story of the kiss
please.

Liam: *Im sorry bave*

Zayn: *{goes offline}* 

Stan: *he called u a drunk? Ahahahaha!!!*

Liam: *{even though he knows Zayn is offline} Zayny? I LOVE U* [ten hearts]

Zayn: *{suddenly appearing online again} To Liam- are u blind or did u not see the* [eye roll emoji] *I sent? Fuck off. To Stan- no he was drunk when he called me.*

Calvin: *Seems like hz tryin to un-breakup with u...*

Louis: *After the concert I told him how I felt and then a while ago I was sleeping n he knocks on the door comes in and sits on the desk and practically begs me to kiss him! I freaked!*

Niall: *what?*

Zayn: *hey Niall! Wow, Louis that's great news*

Stan: *hey Niall nice to meet u* [handshake emoji]

Louis saw one name and freaked. He flew up in the bed and threw the covers off.

Louis: *SHIT!*

Niall: *What's this about Harry?*

Calvin: *[terrified emoji] Liam [arrow emoji] [axe emoji]*

Liam: *SHIT! [surprised emoji] LOUIS IM SO SORRY. I WAS A MESS AT THE PATTY AND I MISTVE DON IT THEN.*

Zayn: *done wat Liam? Wat did you do? Why does Calvin want to murder u wit an axe? Louis' friends were constantly group-chatting so sometimes he could barely catch up whenever he joined them online. There were so many messages that he didn't notice Niall had joined the group-chat.*

Louis: *SHHHHHHIIIIITTTTTTTTTTT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

Stan: *Louis are u having some kind of a meltdown? Because if u are I'm coming to get u. U can stay at our house.*

Louis' head started pounding and he got out of bed, pacing frantically around the room. How the heck did Niall end up in this chat? He sat on the bed contemplating whether to go down to the cabin and snatch Liam's phone. He settled for with a direct message to Liam.

Louis to Liam via direct message: *Why da fuck did u add Niall? He doesnt know about me and Harry! I AM GOING TO KILL YOU AND THERES NOTHIN U CAN DO ABOUT IT U LITTLE SHIT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! [approximately ten middle finger emojis]*

Liam to Louis via group chat because his drunk ass doesn't comprehend that he's in a direct message with him: *Im soeey! Im soeey! IL remobe him noq!*

Calvin: *u drunk Liam?*
No, that's Chinese for 'I fucked up' [cheeky emoji]

Frustrated out of his mind, hoping Harry wouldn't find out that his best friend found out about the two of them from a freakin group chat, Louis decided to text a direct message to Niall to do some damage control-

Louis to Niall direct message: Niall I can explain!

Niall: Harry snogged u 2nite?

Louis was so scared to answer that again although Niall already saw it in the group chat. Taking a deep breath, he typed. Yes. But please dnt tell him I told u!

Niall: relax. I won't. But-Is he ok?

That was far from the reaction Louis was expecting from him. He wondered what to type.

Louis to Niall via direct message: You mean like physically, or...?

Niall: No I mean like did he get drunk at the party?

Louis: No- {He then remembered the vodka taste of the kiss. Blushing, he typed.} Maybe- but not much.

Niall: I don't want to do this over the phone, but let me just say that this has been a very interesting night for me so far. I'm sick in bed and I just found out that two of my best friends have been keeping things from me, so, yeah, we'll talk in person when my voice comes back. Louis, back in group chat, read the new messages.

Calvin: Niall u can't tell any1 abt this! Esp not Harry!

Louis smiled knowing he can always count on Calvin to have his back.

Zayn: u guys knw Harry is in here r8? Me and Stan chatted wit him a couple hrs ago. He told us abt your performance at the concert. So proud of u Louis!

Niall: I added Harry as soon as Liam added me. He's in this chat, yes. Louis is a genius.

Harry: {online}

Niall: {goes offline}

Louis dies.

Harry: hello.

Louis dies twice.

Stan: [devil emoji] [laughing face emoji]

Louis: stop that!

Harry: oops. sorry

Louis dies third time

Louis: Hi
Harry: *Hi Louis. Ur downstairs. Lol*

Louis: [finger pointing up emoji]

Calvin: *Louis u are so lame*

Zayn: u are so comically...

Liam: *I love u Zatn. Zayny?*

Zayn: *catch up later! Love u guys. {goes offline}*

Liam: {even though he knows Zayn wont come back online for the next eight hours because of his time zone in the middle east}: *Ds that include me?*

Harry {after reading only as far as Calvin's last message}: *What's the secret u can't tell me? I'm good at keeping secrets.*

Louis: *really? [smile emoji]*

Stan: [eye roll emoji]

Liam: {removes Harry from chat. Removes Niall from chat. Even though he's drunk and should be sleeping.} *

Liam: ~*relieved~*

Calvin: *thank god! We were almost toast!*

Louis: **LIAM U R A DEDD MAN!**

Stan: [voice message- 'u guys really need to get your shit together'] {goes offline}

Harry to Louis via direct message: *Did u guys just kick me out? I didn't ask to be in there anyway.* [raised eyebrow emoji]

Louis: *Im sry. I will add u bck. [heart emoji]*

Harry: *no thks. If u guys killed sum1 and hid the bdy, I don't wanna knw* [palm emoji]

Louis: [laughter emoji]

Harry: *m srs*

Louis: *U r so cute*

Harry: [voice message- 'I'm goin to bed.']

Louis listened to the message and his blood grew hot as he let out a drawn out gasp.

Louis: [heart eyes emoji] *u cudda jst txttd that, Luv! U jst md me rly hot.*

Harry: *what?*

Louis: *Hearin the word 'bed' comin from ur mouth at 3 in the mornin isn't fair.*

Louis: *Gdnite Love.* [heart growing emoji]

Calvin to Louis via direct message: *U need more time with him.*

Louis: *I do.*

Calvin: *Don't go to wales yet.*

Louis: *I don't know what to do. I'll figure it out.*

Calvin: *Love u man. Get some sleep.*

Louis: *love u 2 gdnite.*

***

**LOUIS POV**

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry!"

Louis' brown boots knocked on the wooden floor of the little cabin as he strode over to the porch bench, taking a seat. It was after eleven and Louis was surprised at how well he slept last night. Since his mother died he hadn't had a full eight hours before.

"Save it."

He had listened to Harry's voice recording twenty times before falling pulling his pillow over his head and sighing to sleep, and it made him forget all about how Liam almost ruined everything by drunkenly adding Niall to the group chat. He shoved his hand in his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He shifted to reach his other pocket, brandishing the watch. Tossing it over to Liam, who fumbled before catching it, he offered him a cigarette, lit them up, and took a puff.

"How did you end up with-" Liam stared at the watch, horror rising up in his eyes as the night before came flooding back to him.

"Lou-"

"Okay, first of all, your welcome. Second, you are disgusting and I can't believe I'm friends with you, you cheater. Third, you have to come clean to Zayn." Liam opened his mouth to protest and Louis raised his hand - "Don't ask me to keep that secret for you. I've known Zayn longer than you and we both know he doesn't deserve that. He'll be more hurt if he finds out I kept it from him too."

Liam slapped his thighs. "And who the fuck is going to tell him, Louis?"

"You are! You've done your shit on your own and you're not dragging me down with you."

"I broke up with him before that-" Liam whined, holding the watch like he didn't know what to do with it.

"You were drunk. How does that count as a valid breakup? You're sober now, so fix it!" Louis yelled, cigarette hooked between his fingers as he flared his hands, gesturing.

Liam made a woeful grunt from behind his palms as it sank in just how deep he buried himself.

Just then, Louis' gaze fell on Harry as the boy made his way around the house. He spotted them and lifted his hands to his mouth, shouting. "Mum left breakfast! Better come and help yourself
before she gets back."

Liam raised a thumbs-up sign for the boy, and Louis just sat there ogling him. As Harry's feet went on the move again, Liam started clicking his fingers to get Louis' attention, but he didn't respond until Harry was out of sight.

"You see the way he looked at me? I swear if looks could kill..." Liam said when Louis was all ears again.

Head shaking, Louis took a puff and exhaled it. "Quit being so over dramatic." He paused to take another puff. "I still can't believe he kissed me. The first time was mostly me, but this time felt like it was the two of us, together..."

Eyes narrowing, Liam quickly assessed something in his brain. Eyes opening, he covered his face. "Oh!" He peeked at Louis through his fingers.

"What?"

"When did he kiss you? Was it after you guys left me in the cabin?" Liam asked.

"Yeah, I went to bed and then he knocked on my door."

"Louis..." Liam said. "He must've done it because of what I said last night!"

Louis tucked his hands under his armpits. "I don't think-"

"Think about it, I said that stupid thing about us not breaking up and he heard all of that and got scared and totally snogged you!"

Liam was staring at Louis' frowning face, wide-eyed now. "It's not a bad thing, though. For one, it means he really likes you." Louis tossed a semi-agreeing nod. "Well, I'm not gonna thank you for that. You were way out of line..."

Liam pursed his lips guiltily. "Yeah, about last night-"

"Don't." Louis ordered in a flat tone, exhaling smoke as he stood up. "Come on, let's get breakfast-slash-lunch and wait for Anne to get back with the truck."

Accepting that he shouldn't push the topic further, Liam silently but skeptically obliged.

"I don't just like him."-Liam's eyes fluttered at the shift in subject and tone,- "It's more than that. I think I'm in love with him."

Liam let out a long whistle as they strolled up to the house.

Seated in the kitchen as they spread butter on their buns, they dug into the meal in silence. Louis wondered why Anne didn't cook more often because he quite liked her cooking. It reminded him of his mother's.

After they ate, they relocated to the back porch to have another smoke. Flicking the lighter, Louis leaned his back against the railing, and Liam had to brush up close to stop the wind from outing his cigarette.

"I told him how I felt right after the concert, but then he went to that party and I thought I made a huge mistake, but then he kissed me..." Louis planted his face in his palms and sighed, the cigarette in his pinky finger.
"Yeah but you're leaving for Wales tomorrow. What are you going to do?" Liam questioned as he took a seat on the patio set.

Louis shook his head, looking out at the bright sunlight hitting the view of the back yard. "I can't leave yet. I don't want to leave."

Liam clapped decisively. "Then don't. I see how gone you are for him. Besides, you have another two weeks before you go to Australia. You'll figure things out by then."

As they spoke, they heard the truck pull into the yard, and soon the sounds of Anne and the girls murmuring inside the house made the boys stop taking. Louis stood up, shoulders drooped as he outed his cigarette.

"Oh, hey, Liam." Fizzie said, popping her head out the back door.

Lottie's head popped as well. "Sleep well in the cabin?"

And just as Louis was about to shush her, Anne's head shot forward, and both girls disappeared. Eyes scanning Liam, she frowned at the boy still in last night's clothes. Turning up her nose at the repugnant smell of alcohol mixed with stale vomit, she said, "Louis, surely you have clothes that will fit Liam. I don't want his mother to think he spent the night on the pavement somewhere. Go on, Liam. Take a bath!"

Louis' chest fell when she disappeared without even glancing at him. He pulled on Liam's arm. "Come on."

While Liam took a shower, Louis dug in his drawers to find something for the boy. He only remembered sharing clothes with Liam one time before when he had crept in his window and spent the night a long time ago, and was beginning to feel uncomfortable since Liam brought up the forbidden topic last night right after he broke up and cheated on Zayn. How was Louis supposed to deal with that and everything going on between him and Harry? He hoped Liam got his shit in order soon because this is awkward and he even had trouble finding a new pair of underwear for him.

As he rested a T-shirt and a pair of track pants on the bed, Liam walked in, soaking wet in a towel and smelling like Louis' Gillette shower gel. Louis darted to the door.

"Hey!" Liam said, making him turn around. "I know this..."

"What are you talking about?" Louis asked, trying to pretend this was normal.

"This," Liam said picking up the T-shirt, "is Zayn's!" He smelled it and held it up to his chest.

"No it's not!" Louis defended.

Liam pointed to the painted samurai print on the front and Louis remembered. He remembered two summers ago when Zayn had taken art classes to enhance his natural skill, and did the perfect painting of the warrior they used to watch on TV when they were kids. Louis admired the heck out of Zayn's talent and would stare at the T-shirt the few times Zayn wore it, begging him to borrow it but Zayn kept shutting him down because he never made another one like it and he didn't want it getting stained with pizza or soda like most of Louis' clothes back then. As Louis recalls, it was one of Zayn's piece offerings after Louis saw him with Liam. It was one of the reasons Louis knew how much his friendship meant to Zayn. How dare he give it away to the cheater now.

"Oh, yeah, he gave it to me," he said, grabbing it away. "You can't have that one."
He opened his drawer and tossed him a red one, carefully folding the samurai one.

"You have to tell him," he said in a whisper, pressing it onto the other clothes before shutting the drawer.

Liam sighed. "I know..."

Nod-frowning, Louis crossed the room and closed the door as he exited.

**HARRY'S POV (Same time frame)**

Harry couldn't believe he had slept in so late. He was certain the drink Grimmy gave him must've crept in and done it. It was after eleven in the morning, and as he hit the kitchen he noticed a basket full of buns on the table and a couple servings of sausage and eggs on the stove. *Mum cooked?*

There was a note on the fridge stating that she and the girls went to church and that she didn't want to wake 'you guys'. *You guys? Louis slept in too? Louis. Louis! OMG! I KISSED LOUIS!*

He checked his phone. *A text from Nick?*

Nick: *I hope I didn't frighten u off. Rain check? Call me*

Mind flooded with the events of the night before, he felt his cheeks flush. He remembered running from Nick, and kissing Louis then running upstairs to Gemma's room only to remember she was still at the Cowell ranch, panicking, diving into his bed and panicking himself to sleep.

After breakfast he filled a bowl with water and went out on the front porch. Resting it for a thirsty Cliff, he decided to go check on Betsie and the new lamb. As he bent the corner he heard muttering and looked over to the cabin to see Louis and Liam on the porch in deep conversation. Louis made eye-contact with him first and he felt like he didn't have on any clothes again. He glared at Liam. He wanted him to go home. Now. He quickly yelled at them to come have breakfast, hoping they would immediately break up whatever it was they were discussing, or reminiscing, eat and get Liam the hell off his property. And when Liam just gave him a thumbs up and Louis didn't even flinch, he could have just screamed at them, as his anger curdled inside him.

*Why can't I just be like normal people and stop freaking out about everything!?* he thought, going back to the night before when he had only kissed Louis for a short time before bolting back to his room. No wonder he ran to the cabin and decided to spend all his time with Liam who's older and more experienced. Fighting back hot tears and a biting in his throat, he walked away towards the stables and opted to just go about his day like the night before never happened.

A little while later, as he let Betsie and her lamb out in the pastures he looked back and saw that Louis and Liam had come up for breakfast after all. They were now shamelessly cozy on the back porch, smoking, and Harry wanted to...cry. He just wanted to go to his room and hug his teddy bear and fall apart.

A few minutes later he walked into the kitchen to meet Fizzie and Lottie putting up a pot of noodles.

"Oh! You guys are making Chinese! I wanna-"

"Oh no, Harry, you need a break. We're leaving tomorrow, so let us do this for you today." Lottie insisted as she pushed him out of the kitchen and into the living room just in time to see Liam's back drenched in water as he disappeared into Louis' room in a towel. Thunderstruck, he heard Louis' voice mumbling inside, and felt like he needed to collapse. Everything went muddled in his
mind and he wanted to fall, crumble like sand castle.

Running down the stairs, out of her Sunday dress and back in a pair of trousers and boots, Daisy waved a hand in front of Harry, bringing him back into his senses.

"Come on, you and Cord have to get the horses for us to ride."

Phoebe showed up and tugged at his hand to go as well and Harry heard his mother muttering to Fizzie. He walked over to the couch and braced himself for her yelling but when her eyes fell on him she looked away.

_Silent treatment? She's definitely saving it for when Gemma gets home._

***

After dropping Liam off, Louis' mind was still telling him the same thing- He wanted to stay. He put the keys on the nail looked over to Anne. She sat at her corner table pulling her newspaper out from its rubber band. He had to ask her before he got cold feet. Walking through the living room, hands shaking as he wondered what she'd say, he pulled a chair and looked at her quietly, gaining her attention. She looked up at him for a split second before reading the headlines.

"You slept in late. That's good. You haven't been getting enough sleep since you started helping Harry around." Her tone was impartial, as though she was talking because he was standing in front of her and not because she wanted to talk.

"Where is everyone?" Louis asked, nervously bopping his knee as he fumbled with the rubber band under the table.

"They're in the round pen with Cord." She answered, pointing and looking back over her shoulder for a moment, before burying her head in the newspaper again.

"Are you mad at me?" Louis asked, sounding like a hurt puppy. Anne peered over her spectacles, her gaze reading him. She suddenly went back to her papers.

"You didn't have to skip out on me. I'm used to those two's antics. According to your mother's letters, aiding and abetting isn't usually your style."

"I'm sorry..." Louis pleaded, looking at the rubber band wrapping around his fingers. He wanted to tell her that the reason for this change in his behavior was because he was in love with her son and it clouded his judgement. And that he wanted to stay because of him. Because he wanted to see where their kiss-kisses, would take them. Tethering on the lines of changing his mind, he pulled the rubber band for some form of support.

"It's alright, Louis. I understand why Harry panicked and made you lie. It's Gemma I don't get. This is all her fault."

Louis felt equally responsible, being the next legal adult from Gemma. He remembered when he turned eighteen and his mother put the cake in front of him and told him how proud she was that he turned out so articulate and responsible. Responsible... That was the last thing he described himself as in this moment. He should have told Anne he was going to pick up Harry instead of sneaking out.

She eyed Louis. "Okay, maybe you and Harry each hold fifteen percent of the blame."

They both laughed. "I can accept that." Louis didn't understand why Harry was always so edgy
with her. She's a pretty cool lady. His heart skipped as he wondered if he should just ask her now.

_The rubber band snapped._

"Can I stay?" he blurted out in one beat.

Anne looked at him like she'd just seen a flying elephant.

"For maybe a week longer?" Louis' eyes bore into hers, hoping his heart doesn't pummel if she says no.

Her hand hit her chest in a thud. "Of course! You can stay as long as you want!" she bubbled, her eyes still looking at him like she didn't believe he was serious.

Louis breathed out. "The girls can go to Wales without me. I need more time to think about the whole Australia thing. Dad will be upset but I'll have to talk to him, and Dan."

"Okay...? I'm glad you're staying!" Anne stretched her hand across the table, her schoolgirl smile telling Louis she wasn't mad anymore. He grinned back at her as he took her hand.

***

Skipping up to Harry as he brushed Scotch's coat, Louis, eyes bright, tried to hold back his bursting excitement. As Harry squinted at him, curious as to why he was hopping on the spot, he grinned back at the curly haired boy.

Harry gave him a raised eyebrow look like, 'What?'

"I'm staying-" Louis sing-songed, hands up in the air, "An extra week!"

A touch of befuddlement clouded over Harry's demeanor as he placed his focus back on the horse, but his eyes told a different story. Louis definitely glimpsed an undeniable flicker of...relief? Gladness?

Still basically on a high from the kiss that Harry initiated the night before, Louis started, "About last night-"

Face going red, Harry raised a hand to stop him. "About last night- That won't happen again. I'm not gonna disturb you like that again. Okay?"

"What? Wait a minute- But you didn't distur-" Louis started to affirm, but Harry cut him off, snarling.

"Look, we can never do that again! So please drop it."

Louis blinked repeatedly as his eyes circled Harry's face. His cheeks were still as plump as ever and his lips a red kissable hue but his jaw was set in a countenance that made it clear to Louis that he was resolute in his decision to never kiss him again. He took a staggered step backwards and frowned into his shoes. His frown evolved into brimming tears as he glanced at Harry's face again. It was now a cross between 'please accept this' and 'what-the-Heck-Did-I-just-do'. Feeling a clenching on his throat, he slid his hand in his pocket, trying not to crush the pack of cigarettes he very much needed now.

Insides tailspinning, he let out a choking breath and swallowed, as his eyes fell weakly on the younger boy's shirt collar.
"It's only for one more week. I sort of need time to think. I want Phoebe and Daisy to spend some time without me. See if they can go to Australia without me after all." he had tried for the words to come out even and calm, but they just came out sounding brittle and bruised.

***

At promptly two o'clock, Gemma pulled into the driveway, and marched into the house where Anne was waiting. She got up from the couch and summoned her, Harry, and Louis to the back porch.

"I'm sick of this! You act like a child! I send you to school, I put a roof over your heads,"- Harry and Gemma snorted in unison- "What the hell was that?!"

Gemma, in her clothes from last night but neatly brushed hair, wasted no time in elaborating. "Granddad put this roof over our heads. If it was up to you, we'd all be in orphanages and a mental home!"

"You're quite right. Granddad. My father!! You know, I am completely disappointed in you, Gemma. Louis' sisters depended on you. Harry depended on you. You just left them stranded in a house full of strangers because you can't hold your alcohol!?" She had screamed the word 'alcohol'.

"And now you have the audacity to stand there and talk about your grandfather? Your grandfather who is not here, and I am!? When are you going to realize that!?" Anne's tone grew angrier with every word.

"And Harry. Not only did you ignore my calls and encouraged Louis to be dishonest, but you made him hide Liam in the cabin? The both of you are unbelievable!"

Harry met Louis' eyes. As his eyes told 'How did she find out?', the older boy's read, 'I don't know, she just...did!' and Harry pursed his lips.

Anne head fell, and she took a deep breath before stomping off, leaving the three of them standing there forlorn.

"Louis!" they heard Phoebe bellow from in the yard. Louis gave Harry a quick look to communicate that he was going down to meet his sisters, which Harry mindlessly shrugged to, as he watched him hop down the stairs.

"Ughh. Can you believe her?" Gemma complained, scraping her fingers through her hair. Harry didn't answer. They stood in silence for a minute until Gemma moved to go inside.

"Why did you tell Aiden?"

Gemma stopped moving, and her eyes crawled to her brother, they were laced of pure hurt and regret. Harry nodded as she didn't answer but he was glad, he didn't want to hear it anyway.

"Something happened- last night. It's been happening for the past week. I wanted to talk to you about it but we were fighting. Ever since you came back -You know, I thought when you came for the summer I'd get my sister back and it would be like before but it's like you're a different person. Like you don't give a damn anymore." he said, tears falling.

Gemma moved to console him but he shuffled away.

"Look, Harry, Aiden's not going to tell anyone." she said, not sounding convinced herself.
Harry narrowed deadly eyes at her. "I don't trust him. I trusted you. You asked me to keep you and Aiden a secret from Mum and kept it! Why did you tell him about me?"

"Because he related. You know Nick's gay, right? Aiden gets it."

"Get's what?" Harry said, out of normal range. Gemma sighed, closing her eyes- "Say it, Gemma. Say he gets what's it like to be related to the sad pathetic gay kid."

"That's not what I meant! What I meant was that he knows not to say anything!"

"The point is, you told someone that I never would have trusted with my secret!"

Gemma's voice broke. "Why are you attacking me? He's not gonna say anything. He wants to get along with you and Mum. He's dropping the charges if you cook something fancy and just be nice to him tomorrow at dinner."

A scoff sounded over her words, as Harry opened his mouth. "If you can get Mum to be okay with Aiden coming here, then fine, I'll cook something...fancy." he said glaring at her, and as he walked away he added sarcastically, "But, good luck with that."

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William POV

Cutting off the engine, William was about to unbuckle his seat belt when he saw Harry duck out the front door and ran to the side of the cottage. It had been two days since he brought the groceries and packed them neatly in the kitchen cupboard with a happy little Harry's help. He had decided to come back and help clean up the yard and hopefully talk some sense into his daughter to get some help for her obvious depression.

William's jaw dropped as he saw what his grandson was doing. The groceries were thrown in boxes on the side of the house and Harry was shoving juice boxes into his and Gemma's lunch bags.

"Harry?" he called as he came up to the cottage. The child jumped when he saw him. Eyes brightening, he dropped the bags and sprinted towards him. Kneeling down to embrace him, William planted a kiss on the top of his head.

"How's school, kid?" he chirped.

"It's okay. There's this boy who's always pinching me. And I have to sit next to him in class. He annoys me!"

William laughed. "Well I guess I'll have to take a trip down to the school, now! Nobody pinches William Twist's grandson!"

"Can I skip school and go to the ranch today?" the boy begged.

William sighed. "Not today, kid. I promise I'm working on that. I need to talk to your mother. She in a good mood today?"

Harry gave a hesitant nod. *The poor kid doesn't even know what her good mood looks like.*

Gemma soon came out dressed neatly for school and her face lit up when she saw her grandfather. "Granddad! You owe me a trip to the ranch! Harry said he got ice-cream! And I want to ride a horse!"
William couldn't contain his excitement. "Of course sweetie. I'll make sure of it!" then his eyes furrowed. He looked to the box of groceries. "I bought you guys a bucket of ice-cream..."

Harry's face went sad. Gemma answered. "Mum put the groceries you brought outside. We sneaked out later and took them out of the trash, but the ice-cream had already melted by then."

William wanted to curse.

"Thanks for the snacks and juice, granddad." Gemma said as she examined her newly filled lunch bag. She zipped it up, then her brother's, and grabbed his hand just as the bus arrived. "Come on, we have to get to school, Harry. See you later, Granddad!"

He waved as he watched their little feet climb into the bus, then, sighing, he turned around to face the house. *This shit has to stop once and for all!*

"How long are you gonna blame me for her leaving!" He boomed as he stormed towards the couch where he found his daughter in the same spot as last time. "I wanted to tell her but we thought it was best if she didn't know. I was wrong. Emmet begged me to tell her. I regret it now because I can't even see my grandson. I don't know what he looks like. But I still got you, Gem, and Harry. Don't punish them for my mistake. Come home, Anne."

"I told you I'm never stepping foot back there."

William sighed, knowing it was going to take more to help her. "Then I'm taking the kids. They deserve better. Take a look around. Any judge is going to let me take them."

Anne gasped loudly. "NO! You can't do that!"

Putting his hands on his hips, he swerved his head. "I will! If you don't get up and go to some kind of therapy, I will!"

Anne started crying. "Don't take them from me! They are all I have!"

"Well, they ain't dolls you can pick up and play with and then stuff them back on the shelf, Anne. They're little *people!* He said, hand gesturing for emphasis. "They need nurturing. They need food!"

***

"What the hell happened between you and Harry? And don't give me any bullshit!"

Louis opened his eyes to see a Menacing Gemma standing over his bed having just hit him with a pillow. What in the...? He sat up groggily and rubbed his eyes, yawning as he peered up at her.

"What in the world are you..."

"I told you! No bullshit! What did you do to my brother!? I just talked to him and He said stuff happened between you two! He's acting weird."

Louis lowered his head. "Uh... What do you mean, weird?"

"Oh, don't tell me you haven't noticed! Did you two fight? What did you say to him?"

Louis wasn't sure if he should tell Gemma about...

"I know about you two! I know you've been sneaking around the whole time since you got here!"
"Now, wait-"

"What? He's not good enough for you? You city people think you're so superior don't you?" she spat, picking up the pillow again in a rage.

What in the f...? Louis thought, as he crawled out of the bed.

"Okay, first of all, I care about Harry. A lot. Second, we never sneaked around, and third, I would never think of myself as superior to anyone!" he said holding his palms out defensively from the imminent pillow attack. Gemma's face softened a bit as she lowered the pillow, but she still held it, waiting. "I may have said-and did- something to upset him, but I swear I wasn't thinking before-"

"What did you do?" she gripped the pillow tighter, and Louis cowered, eyes wide at how strikingly similar she was to Harry. It was like Harry with slimmer cheek bones and longer, straighter hair.

"I kissed him...on Thursday." Louis said, shoulders dropping. "And I told him I was in love with him after the concert. And then we kissed after that."

"You came on to my brother?"

"NO! I swear. Look, Gemma, I really do have feelings for him but I don't think he's ready for something like that. It's overwhelming for him." he whispered.

"He's afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of Mum." She said, voice laced with contempt. She dropped the pillow and put her hand to her mouth and folded the other one. "Harry likes you. A lot. I just thought- You two spend a lot of time together and I figured you guys already passed all this."

Louis shook his head. If he didn't feel so pathetic about it he would actually laugh. "Don't you think he would've told you if it had."

"Yeah, me and Harry aren't exactly seeing eye to eye lately." she said sadly, then her eyes widened like an idea popped into her head. "Listen, there's something I wanted to ask you."

"What?" Louis said, sitting back down on the bed. Gemma followed suit.

"Look, I know you and Mum are close. She won't listen to me after last night but, Harry agreed to make a nice dinner if I can convince Mum to be okay with Aiden coming over tomorrow night. I tried to explain to her that if Aiden and Cord have a civilized meal in the same room, then I can get Aiden to drop the restraint order but she laughed in my face. Asked me if I wanted Cord back in jail without bail this time. I think you're the only one she'll listen to,"

"Gemma, you do recall that Aiden was the one at fault for in the first place? Those things he said about you-"

"Look none of us were there! He swears Cord took it out of context. He didn't mean that I was a possession, he just meant that I was in better hands. Cord hit him and we can't blame him for trying to make sure it didn't happen again!" Gemma stressed but Louis didn't buy it at all.

She continued. "Listen, Aiden and I made deal. He feels he wasn't treated fairly at the rodeo show,
by Mum or by Cord, and he wants to make a good first impression," - Louis let out a short satirical laugh- "If we invite him to meet Mum and just have a chance to show that he's a good person- a good boyfriend- he promised to drop the charges. Mum is set on stereotyping anyone associated with Simon Cowell, but you of all people should know not to judge people without getting to know them first. That's why I'm counting on you to convince her. It's just dinner, Louis. She'll do it if you ask her!"

Louis made a disgusted hum. "Why didn't you tell her about your deal with Aiden. I bet she'd say yes if it means getting the charges dropped."

"He wants Mum to genuinely take a liking to him. He doesn't want her to think he's blackmailing us!" Gemma ranted. "This all has to go naturally. Please, Louis. I know you don't like what went down at the rodeo show but you don't have to do this for Aiden. Do it for Cord.

He opened his mouth to protest. He didn't want Aiden on his ranch anymore than Anne did, and he was dead sure Cord would object to this too, charges or no charges, but then Gemma grabbed his shoulders in desperation, "If you do this for me," she said a low voice as her determined eyes bore into his, "I'll help you get a chance with Harry."

Chapter End Notes

**

Okay... I hope you guys understood the Groupchat bit. WhatsApp may not work exactly like that so just go with the flow please.

So Harry...I dont know what to say about Harry and his jealousy. lol. Don't worry, they get together soon...which is when the real drama begins!

Guys, was Louis right or should Liam just not tell Zayn what he did?

Who makes you the angriest in this fic?

I revealed a key component of the fic backstory(William pov) so please tell me what you think of that. It's why I had to make Anne adopted. But trust me on this you guys will like it(I hope). Do you think Louis is going to take Gemma up on her deal?

So who do you think that kid is in little Harry's class?

ps- The backstory will not be prioritized in this book but will be tiny pieces throughout. The full backstory mystery will be revealed in book 2 of this fic. Okay im talkin too much. Stay tuned. kudos pretty please.
I am in no way supporting or endorsing the calling out of LGBT people before they are ready to come out themselves if THEY so wish. You need to be in a place of trust and confidence to come out to someone and it takes loads of courage and time. It could go south pretty quick if you play the hero like my Louis here. This is a work of fiction so please do not call out or expose anyone you suspect or know to be part of the LGBT community. If it’s a friend or family member just be there for them whenever they need to talk and be super supportive and encouraging. I barely proofread this before so if i made mistakes please tell me. I rushed to get to you because im so late with updating!! I love u all and am so sorry i took so long! Please bare with me as I am currently writing another larry story that has been floating around in my head a while. I told some of u abt it so u may know what im talkin abt! It's out of the box and may give mixed signals but I believe in it. I will give info on it soon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**

Louis POV

The next morning, Louis cheerfully dragged his sisters’ luggage outside sisters’ luggage out to Gemma’s car. He wasn’t happy that they were leaving, per say, just happy that he was staying. The guilt of not going to Wales to see Ernie and Dory had not quite sunk in yet. Nothing in Louis’ brain was telling him that cutting time with his siblings was a bad idea. He had given Anne, his sisters, and his father all these ‘excuses’ as to why he was staying but the truth, he kept to himself; Harry.

“I’m going to miss you so much!” Anne mumbled, hugging the life out of Fizzie. She moved to Lottie and planted a large kiss on her blonde head. “I don’t know when I’ll get to see you again.”

“We’ll surely come back. I love it here.” Lottie added as he piled her bag in the car.

Phoebe and Daisy were busy saying goodbye to Cliff as the dog licked their faces and made whiny noises at them. Phoebe had taken the news of him staying an extra week pretty well, considering. The past two weeks had been good for her and she had been getting better with each passing day they had been on the farm. Louis hoped that Phoebe and Daisy seeing Ernie and Dory again and Fizzie and Lottie’s presence would make up for him not being there for a while.

“He’s going to miss you two.” Harry piped, looking at them play with the dog. He reached out and stole his last hugs from them, with Louis daydreaming of getting one too.

A steadfast Gemma walked over and quietly nudged Louis, as he put the luggage in the trunk.

“You have time while I drop the girls off to convince Mum!” she whispered. “Call me as soon as she caves so I can tell Aiden!”

Louis rolled his eyes. “You have to give me a few days! She isn’t going to say yes just like that.”
Gemma almost caught a fit. “It has to be today. He’s leaving tomorrow for a trip to California; Something for his uncle. Look, just hit her that million dollar smile you got and reel her in.” She gave him a wink and settled herself in the car.

Million-dollar smile…If it was so convincing then why is Harry not reeled in.

“This week is gonna fly in no time and I’ll be in Wales with you guys before you know it!” Louis said, hugging each of his sisters before they descended into Gemma’s car. She was to drive them back to Doncaster where they were going to prepare for their flight to Wales the following day. He, Anne, Harry, and Cord waved to them as they drove off and turned to Harry just as Fizzie was waving to the boy.

Harry looked at him like he had just realized he was staying. He shot him a ‘yikes-its-just-me-and-him-now’ look that caused a little giggle to escape Louis. Anne swung her head around, her loose hair hitting Harry’s face, making his eyes flutter, and Louis laugh harder.

“Someone’s ecstatic!” she observed. Louis put his hand to his mouth in an effort to contain himself. “I’m glad you decided to stay longer. But I fear when you leave my heart will shatter because it’s close to breaking right now.”

Louis hugged her and caught Harry rolling his eyes from over her shoulder.

An hour after the girls left, Liam and Murrey showed up to resume work on the gazebo. Louis wanted to stay and help but he had plans for that morning. He pulled Liam aside as Cliff ran up to them barking at Liam.

“I’m going to see Niall. I need to clear the air with him. He’s Harry’s best friend and I don’t want to be the one to cause a rift between them.”

Liam shut his eyes repentantly. “Louis, I’m so, so -”

“I know. How many times are you going to apologize? It was an accident. To tell you the truth I’m glad Niall knows, I just wish he heard it from Harry first.”

***

Louis rang the doorbell of the Niall’s parent’s flat. He had been there once to practise for the fundraising concert but Harry had been there that time so he hadn’t really taken his eyes away to view the little yard with blue, pink, and yellow flowers growing in neat hedges surrounding, or the butterflies that fluttered about in the sun completing the aesthetic of the yellow house. Niall lived on the other side of town, and it looked pretty much the same except that the neighbors were closer together than on the other side where the farm was. It only took about five minutes to get there, not counting the stop he made to buy a pack of lozenges because he didn’t want to show up empty handed, and Louis had already texted Niall beforehand.

Niall opened the door and let Louis in. He led him straight to the TV room and they sat down. Niall wasn’t smiling, wasn’t even looking at Louis. He looked so down. Louis threw him the pack of lozenges and clasped his hands together, waiting for him to start the conversation.

“Thanks, man,” Niall mumbled. He sounded better than he did at the concert but not quite there yet. But something about Niall was different today. Louis prayed he wasn’t too mad at him and Harry.

“Louis, you know that everyone knows you’re gay. I’ve known since rehearsals when we sang that song, and you haven’t really kept it a secret,” Niall started. Louis nodded.
“I don’t know how to. I hid for a long time and it almost destroyed me. People sneering at me and whispering behind my back is nothing compared to what I went through before I came out.” he answered, referring to the townswomen scorn at rehearsals.

“I get that.” Niall sympathized. “And I just want to get it out of the way that I’d never judge you based on something like that. Getting to know you over the past two weeks, I respect you as a person and I consider you one of my best friends.”

“Thank you, Niall!” Louis said, easing into the couch as Niall sat on the arm of the single chair. “You’re one of the most exciting people I know. I’ve grown quite fond of you.”

“Yeah, but you still threw me out of your group chat, so-“ Niall deadpanned, fake ‘sad face’ and all.

“And that will be rectified! That was a crazy night!” Louis offered. “But to tell you the truth, Niall, I was scared of you knowing about…”

“Yeah, I was gonna get to that. Uh…okay, do know what this is?” Niall pulled out a chain that was lying around his neck from under his shirt, revealing a ring hanging from it. Louis drew closer to examine it. “Yeah, Harry has one just like it. Is this his?”

“No. This one’s mine. It’s a purity ring.” Niall said sullenly, like it was a ring of doom. Louis stared on, waiting for him to continue.

“Well, there’s a reason Harry and I have the same one.” Niall said, deepening his voice. “But hold that thought for a second. I’ve known Harry since seventh grade. We moved here when my dad became the reverend so that’s like three years now. I never knew he was…until I saw you two outside the community centre after the concert. I heard what you told him. He texted me when he was at the Cowell ranch party. Said things were getting pretty crazy there and you were coming to pick him up so when you messaged in the group chat that you two snogged, I put two and two together. I’m not gonna lie to you, at first I thought you probably took advantage of him but Shawna said it didn’t sound like that, so…”

Louis’ eyes went wide as he stared at the vase on the coffee table. It was a ceramic cat and it stared back at him. If he wasn’t already freaking out about another person knowing about him and Harry before Harry had a chance to tell anyone then he’d be pretty freaked out by it’s pretty lashed eyes that were almost the same green as Harry’s. Louis started twiddling his thumbs as he tried to ignore the item.

“Don’t worry, she won’t say anything, but anyway, I was mad at the both of you for not telling me, more so, Harry because he’s my best friend and best friends tell each other everything. I was hurt and confused and I didn’t know what to think so I went to my Dad and asked him for some advice on what to do. I didn’t tell him the exact situation and I didn’t name Harry or you. I basically asked him how to approach someone you just found out had been lying to you for a long time,” Niall’s eyebrows furrowed and his voice became more quiet and even. “He knew exactly what I was talking about, and that’s just the beginning; you wouldn’t believe what he told me, Louis…”

Louis perked his ear in curiosity. Niall sounded serious, like something bothered him to the core, and Louis’ heart started beating faster with the suspense.

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Driving down the country road, Louis still found it hard to process what Niall had just told him. When he had just come out and was learning about himself and what his life would be like, he had done some reading so he knew it was general consensus that you should never call out a friend or
family member for being gay before they come out themselves- and Louis knew he was probably wrong to do it at the lake with Harry that day- but before he read about it, it was not the way it happened with him, his mother had basically pulled him out (and he was glad she did) and he understood that not everyone had the relationship he and his mother had. Not everyone will have a positive reaction to being called out and so it’s advised that its best to let people come out on their own. But for one to jump to conclusions and try to control things from the background? That’s just- Louis didn’t know how to process Niall’s dilemma with his parents at all. He felt sorry for Niall at the end of it and wished him well with his parents, but he didn’t leave before stressing to him the importance of telling Harry everything. If Niall did not, then it could damage their friendship. He promised to tell him before the end of the week so Harry could have Louis to lean on for extra support. They had spent two hours talking in which Louis explained everything that happened and how he felt about Harry, and Niall had made it clear that he thought Louis was good for Harry and if he was still friends with him by the end of what he had to tell him then he’d definitely push Harry to give Louis a chance. But they both agreed that Harry needed to be honest with himself before anything else could take shape.

Pulling up to the house again, Louis had another assignment to attend to. Getting Anne to agree to dinner with Simon Cowell’s nephew. He had already gotten five texts from an importunate Gemma since she left with the girls that morning.

Marching straight into the kitchen where Anne was going over her mail, he wasted no time in getting to the point.

“I think it’s a good idea for Aiden to come over for dinner. He and Gemma are pretty serious and I think that it will be best if we can all get along.” Louis hoped he sounded confident, because he was far from. As he said them, he wanted to throw up. Even though Gemma and Aiden had some kind of deal that if he got the chance to make a good impression on Anne, then he’d get the restraint order and charges lifted from Cord, he didn’t trust Aiden one bit to drop those stupid charges at all. But he and Gemma had their own deal. Get Anne to reconsider welcoming Aiden into the family and she’d help get Harry to break down some of those walls he had up that were too high for Louis to climb.

Anne cracked a smile, not looking up. “It’s nice you and Gemma are getting along. She and Harry are two of a kind when it comes to wrapping people around their finger.” Her tone was a mix of condescending and weary.

Louis looked at the clock on the wall; two o’clock. If she kept this up there was no way he’d get her to reconsider before dinner time, and then he’d might as well get back to the mining tunnel that was Harry’s heart. But Louis wasn’t ready to give up yet. Feeling extremely hypocritical for urging Niall to come clean to Harry and then turning and lying to Anne’s face, Louis decided to take a different strategy.

“All Anne,” he said, grabbing her attention. “I don’t trust Aiden. Like you, I think Simon is using him, probably to get close enough to see our weaknesses where the ranch is concerned. He did say he wants to buy it, right? Well,” he took a deep breath and hoped Gemma for will forgive him. “Aiden promised Gemma that if he can have a chance to impress you, then for certain he’ll drop the charges and everything. If Simon is the one who put him up to pressing charges in the first place, then he must be behind this dinner thing too. Gemma told me not to say anything because Aiden didn’t want you thinking this is blackmail, but you see how it is, right? I think we can have an advantage. Entertain him for the evening, we’ll be the perfect hosts, get Cord’s charges dropped.”

“You’re helping Gemma scheme now?”
Anne, and Louis looked at the kitchen entrance to see Cord leaning into the wall, arms folded with an eyebrow raised at them.

Anne nodded slowly. “He has a point. A very good point. We can keep a close eye on this Aiden and see if we can figure out what Simon is up to.

“He’s only up to one thing; to buy the ranch! I only have one question,” Cord said bouncing off of the wall. “What’s in it for you?”

“Can’t a guy just want to keep his friend from behind bars?” Louis said, smiling to himself.

Anne snorted. “Ease off, Cord. You don’t have to have an ulterior motive to do something nice for somebody.” She nodded to Louis who took the opportunity to test out Gemma’s theory and flash her a big ear-to-ear smile. In response she draped on her proud parent-y grin and nudged his chin.

“You can drive Harry to the grocery store, see what he needs for our big dinner.

And just like that, Anne’s overall attitude towards inviting Gemma’s boyfriend to dinner had generally changed, and Louis was a boiling pot of relief.

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Jogging through the front door to get upstairs, Harry glimpsed his mother and Louis laughing in the kitchen as they looked at something on Louis’ phone (obviously pictures). They didn’t see him come in, and were chatting away. Harry gripped the banister in his hands, craning his neck as he watched them, feeling a strange sense of vindication. She’s happy. She’s genuinely happy and that’s all Harry could ask for at this point after all they had been through. After all the years of grief, crying into her blankets, unable to be a proper parent, Harry felt like the parent, proud that their child was finally seeing clear skies.

Shifting his gaze to Louis, he suddenly welcomed a different feeling; hurt. He felt sick at the way he treated Louis the previous day, and he wished he had known how to let him down without causing the misery that flashed over the older boy’s face when he rebuffed him. Tears emerging in the white of his eyes, he wished he could have it both. He wished he could be with Louis and have his mother be happy, but he knew those two things can never happen at the same time.

After everything that took place, with kissing Louis, Louis confessing his feelings and deciding to extend his stay, Harry needed some things to change. He didn’t want to make himself a target for the older boy’s misguided affections. He hated walking the other way every time he saw Louis, and he didn’t want to give him a reason to think anything would happen between them in time, so resorting to drastic measures, he gathered every queer and quirky thing he owned (favorite pink & white blanket and all), put them all in a big cardboard box, sealed it with masking tape, and started dragging it down the stairs.

"Need help with that?" Louis said from behind him, as he reached halfway down the stairs.

Harry whirled around and almost whipped him away. Looking at him he realized that had he gone an inch backwards, while he was dragging the box, his ass would've backed straight into him.

"Don't sneak up on me like that!” he snapped, propping up the box. "And no, I don't need any help!"

Louis ignored him, gripping the edge of the box, and shooed him out of the way before pulling it down the rest of the steps with much less effort than Harry had to put in. As he stood watching Louis' strong muscles navigate the box through the front door, he grasped the irony of him...
unknowingly dragging away Harry's identity to be collected by the garbage truck after he told Harry he didn't have to hide anymore. He felt guilty for the way Louis cared but he reasoned with himself that this was for the best. Louis was reconnecting with Liam while causing a change in his mother and Harry dared not get in the way of any of that. If his mother found out that Harry and Louis had feelings for each other, Louis would be out of there for good, she would relapse and Harry would never see Louis again. Harry's feelings didn't matter against the great scheme of things. The box had to go and it wouldn't be going if Louis wasn't there to cause him to get rid of it in the first place, so there, push the box. But why did he have to look so hot doing it? It was like his biceps and thighs were made for bending over and pushing things…Harry slapped his palms over his eyes, forcing the thoughts out as he followed Louis.

Louis pushed the box all the way into the garage and stood up to see Harry’s eyes on him. Harry swung his head in the opposite direction and mumbled a ‘thanks.’ Louis seemed to convey a smug satisfaction at this as he dusted his hands off.

“Anne said we could drive to the grocery since you have to cook dinner and all…I can help you cook too, if you want!”

Harry looked out to cars passing in the road. “Fizzie’s the only Tomlinson I let help me cook, and she left, so no thanks.”

Louis snorted an endeared smile, gesturing his head to the sealed box. “What’s in there anyway?”

Harry, caught off guard, said; “Nothing, just some old stuff. I have to call Niall’s dad to come take it for charity.”

Louis gazed deeply at Harry, and the latter narrowed his eyebrows.

“I can take it there if you want? On our way to the grocery?”

“That’s okay.” Harry said, a little louder than called for, not wanting Louis to do any favors for him anymore.

Unfazed, Louis slowly grew a smile as he gawked at him.

“What?” Harry responded, eyeballing him.

“Can we just talk?” Louis shrugged, as Cliff lay flat on his belly, nibbling at Louis’ sneakers. He wiggled his feet, laughing down at the playful dog.

*What’s up with him all of a sudden?* “Maybe not-”

“You were pretty clear yesterday about certain things and I feel it wasn’t fair that I didn’t get to finish what I wanted to say.” Louis shoved his hands in his pockets.

Harry’s face crumpled up confusedly. He wanted to run.

“I’m staying because of you. It’s like I can’t move- like a magnet just- pulling me.” Louis started pounding his knuckles together. “And I know that you are, but I’m not sorry about what I said at the concert, and I’m not sorry we kissed twice. I have feelings for you and I’m not going to be modest about them anymore.” He let a long-ass pause follow before he added, “I’m going to grab the keys.”

And with that Louis stalked off into the house leaving a disheveled Harry to ponder what he had just said.
“Are you going to say something, Harry?” Louis said with his mouth and eyebrows and fingers halfway off the steering wheel.

“I have nothing to say.” Harry shrugged, earning a look from the other boy that read, “You-are-a-piece-of-work-aren’t-you.”

“Do I have bad breath?” Louis inquired, palming his mouth.

Harry gave him a semi-amused, semi-annoyed look as he propped his arm on the window.

Louis flashed him a glance. “You’re seriously not gonna talk to me? Okay. I’m gonna sing.”

Harry snorted. Louis continued.

“She was more like a beauty queen from a movie scene
I said don’t mind, but what do you mean, I am the one
Who will dance on the floor in the round…”

“Oh for God’s sake! Stop!” Harry complained in a not completely amused giggle. Louis shot him a few glances from the road, beating the steering wheel playfully. He pretended to be done for a sec and as soon as Harry stopped giggling he started again.

“She told me her name was Billie Jean, as she caused a scene,
Then every head turned with eyes that dreamed of being the one,
Who will dance on the floor in the round, yeeeaah!”

“You are unbelievable!” Harry said as Louis sand out the window to a group of elderly people as they passed by the town park.

Louis laughed like a hyena, causing the inevitable high pitched laugh of a bedazzled Harry. As they neared the grocery store and their laughter died down, Harry couldn’t help but keep his gaze on Louis’ profile as he hummed the rest of the song to himself. Parking the truck and unbuckling his seat-belt, Louis locked eyes with him and he didn’t even look away, he couldn’t. He just sat there staring in a daze.

“Harry, are you alright?” Louis said, clicking his fingers. Harry eventually blinked and shifted, clearing his throat as he unbuckled and opened the door.

“Uh, It’s nothing.” Harry assured as he checked his phone. A confused look spread across his face as he read a text from his mother.

“Mum wants to make a cake? What in the world?”

“That’s a good thing, right?” Louis asked as he let Harry go through the door first. He smiled to himself, knowing it was his doing.

“She doesn’t bake! Or cook for that matter!” Harry informed, as he pulled the grocery list out of his jacket. Louis pulled out a trolley, observing the semi-crowded lanes.

“She made breakfast yesterday, didn’t she?”
Harry brushed shoulders with Louis as they headed for the meat section. “Which I’m still trying to wrap my head around!”

Louis smirked. “But the buns were good, she’s not a bad baker.” Harry pursed his lips as he examined the packs of beef.

“Needed a bit more baking powder is you ask me,”

Louis almost tumbled over in his giggles. “I loved it. I can’t cook for shit so I won’t agree with you, you horrible son!”

Laughing, Harry swung his head around to look at Louis so fast his hair whipped over his eyes. Louis made a sudden reach to fix it and a jerk of the shoulder in response made him pull back mid-air. Personally Louis cared not about the other shoppers around, and Harry hoped one day to be that carefree, but this was his world right now. A world where he couldn’t let himself be touched in an obvious way, public or private.

Louis grabbed the list from him, tearing it in half and muttering that he was cutting down time, before diverting to another lane. Harry’s shoulders drooped as he watched him disappear, wondering why Louis even put up with him in the first place. Back in the truck as Louis started the engine again, Harry’s phone buzzed with another message. On reading it, he produced a high pitched distressed groan, taking Louis’ eyes off the road for three one-second intervals.

“What?”

Harry propped his elbow on the window and massaged his forehead. “Grimmy’s coming to dinner with Aiden.”

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“Harry, pass the garlic bread to Aiden, dear.” Anne sputtered to Harry in a honeyed tone. Dinner had commenced and they participants were now sitting at the auspiciously set dining table. Anne sat between Cord and Louis on one side, with Aiden between Gemma and Nick on the other side. Harry, who sat on Nick’s right, obeyed his mother, confused by the buttered tone she was using sporadically as they ate. “Oh, this stew is so good! Miss Styles, you are such a gourmet chef! Is there anything you’re not good at?” Aiden spewed in a saccharine tone. It was disconcerting to Harry the way he fawned over his mother.

He shot Aiden narrow-eyed sneer from his seat, but Aiden didn’t see as he was currently busy wheedling the two women at the table, and he’d have to make a one-eighty to meet Harry’s eyes. Aiden chatted to Anne, who was sitting opposite him, and Gemma, who was directly opposite Cord. Anne beamed gracefully at the young guest, taking the complement without correction, and Harry wondered what the heck was going on. He racked his brains trying to figure out if he used too much of something in the recipe. He had decided to make his Granddad’s recipe for stewed beef with a side dish of roasted potatoes, garlic bread, and tomato herb salad. Aiden had brought a bottle of wine which Anne made Louis open for everyone to taste. It was pretty easy to make and he wasn’t going to go to any lengths to please Aiden of all people, unlike his family which were creeping him out right now. He looked at Louis opposite him and even caught him smiling dumbly at Aiden, who only returned sneaky glares when Anne wasn’t looking, but the bloke kept smiling at him anyway.

Has everyone gone bonkers!?

To make things even more weird, Aiden and Cord, seemed to have an unspoken rapport carried out
in teeth edging choreography; Cord sticking his fork in his meat and looking up at Aiden with a poker-face every time it disappeared in his mouth while brandishing the fork in a feign-casual manner, showing disgust only by the way he chewed and drinking his glass of wine boastfully, and Aiden on beat throwing a seedy arm around Gemma and twirling her pink streak of hair possessively while he chatted with Anne all the while not taking his eyes off Cord.

Nick seemed to catch the tension as well, as he turned and shot Harry a quick eye-roll, not waiting for him to respond to it before his eyes were back on the others. Harry tried to drown everything out as he ate his dinner, but then Louis’ eyes flashed over him, and from underneath his lashes he saw him lean forward.

“This is really good, Harry.” he whispered under all the chitchat. Having no choice now but to look up, he met Louis eyes for a moment before the older boy shifted his gaze to his cheeks and forehead, ogling proudly like he’d won a bet. He looked striking in his buttoned up blue checked shirt with hair not too neat, not too messy. Big drowning blue eyes boring into him, Harry held his breath as he felt completely exposed and examined. He was already feeling visually awkward since all his rings and other accessories were packed away and sealed in the box in the garage, and now here Louis was scraping his eyes over every square inch of him.

Feeling flushed with embarrassment, he looked back to his dinner, and from the corner of his eyes, saw an elbow coming his way. Nick bent his head toward him.

“You? Made this?” he asked, not in a ‘I-wouldn’t-have-guessed’ way, but more in a ‘you’re-a-national-hero’ kind of way. Harry nodded and slowly turned away from the boy’s gawking. He opened his eyes wider at his plate as he felt Nick’s gaze linger, hoping he wouldn’t bother him again.

Why won’t they just shut up and eat and stop looking at me!?

He dared to glance up, and sure enough, Louis was glowering at Nick like ‘seriously? Why are you here?’ making Harry feel even more uncomfortable. In front of his mother of all people was no place to manifest unwarranted jealous-type behavior.

“My Mum used to make this,” Louis said, shoveling stew in his mouth. He chewed intently. “This tastes strangely like hers…” He finished inquisitively, taking another scoop. It was then Harry noticed he was eating with a spoon instead of a knife and fork. He spat out a giggle and quickly held it, covering his mouth with his hands as he observed Louis scooping up the sauce and dumping it in his mouth while eating the bread dry.

He was about to comment on that when he felt a thick breath hit his neck preluding Nick’s accolade, “It’s the best stew I’ve had since my mum’s.”

He looked at Harry with watery eyes and Harry’s heart broke into a such a sympathetic softness that he almost cried then and there. If it wasn’t for the loud clang of Louis’ spoon hitting the plate as he dropped it ‘by accident’, and Louis giving Harry a questioning look that he read clearly as ‘his Mum died too?’, and Harry responding with a puppy-eyed nod that garnered a look from Louis that read something like ‘Great, now I have to be nice to the guy?’ which earned the brightest dimpled smile from Harry in return, Harry might have been swept up by Grimmy’s kowtow.

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“What did you say to Mum? She was acting super weird!” Gemma said rolling up the garage door as she and Louis ducked underneath. They left it halfway up and covered the room looking for the cardboard box.
“You got what you wanted, didn’t you? Besides, you didn’t tell me Nick was coming along, so what’s that about?” Louis said, changing the subject as he rubbed his belly. Given the chance he might’ve eaten the whole pot of stew.

“Was that a problem? I didn’t think that was a problem.” Gemma rambled guiltily.

“Yeah, well, it’s not. Nick doesn’t exactly have anything Harry’d be remotely interested in anyway, so don’t sweat it.” Louis discussed, fumbling around in the dark garage.

Gemma’s hands came to rest on a taped up box tall to her knees. “Is this it?” she questioned, feeling the weight of it.

“Oh! Yeah, that’s it!” he said as his foot hit the large box he dragged in there for Harry earlier. Just before dinner, Gemma had asked him if he saw Harry throwing anything away. She told him she had gone into Harry’s room and noticed stuff missing that he usually had hanging around, some of which he was attached to. He had told her he helped him take a box into the garage but as they were speaking the doorbell had rung signalling the Grimshaw cousins’ arrival for dinner, so after dinner now that they left, Gemma pulled him out to the garage to pinpoint the box.

“What are you two up to?” a suspicious Cord asked from behind them. They whirled around and both looked at Cord like deer in headlights.

“Nothing!” they both answered unanimously. “Eavesdropping should be a crime; You’d be in for life!” Gemma roared as she beckoned him to get inside. She seemed to think for a moment before adding, “Actually… I need your help with something. Help me get this box back upstairs to Harry’s room- without him seeing us!” She tapped the top of the box suggestively.

“What are we even doing? You know how Harry gets when you touch his stuff! I can’t believe I’m letting you talk me into this!” Cord complained even as he grabbed hold of the huge cardboard box. “I’m already a criminal as it is!”

“Well, if Aiden keeps up his end of the deal, after tonight you won’t be!” Louis pointed out. “He’s right. Look, my brother needs this, okay! The stuff in this box are important to him, and for him to just throw them away is going too far!”

“Yeah, but what are you planning to do exactly? He did say he wanted to donate it,” Louis informed.

Louis did not know what the box held but since Harry was acting rather suspicious when he offered to help him carry it, he arrived to the conclusion that it was probably all the quirky stuff that made Harry, Harry. Louis did notice that Harry wasn’t wearing his rings or necklaces at dinner so he deduced that he must be in a stage of denial. Louis worried about him most of the time and wanted him to know what it was like to be free and proud like he was. He wanted that for Harry so much. He wanted to be a part of that, and Gemma promised she’d help him get a break with the curly haired boy. He just wasn’t sure if Gemma had a right to retain the box without Harry knowing.

“Louis, get in there and help Harry with the dishes! We could use the distraction to get the box back inside!”

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On Gemma’s ‘orders’ Louis got in the kitchen like a man on a mission. He was barefoot so Harry didn’t hear him come in. He crept up behind him and blew in his right ear as he held his arm.

"Ahhhhh!" Harry jumped and dropped the spoon he was washing.
"What's wrong with you?" he whispered harshly while Louis giggled loudly. He looked back at the doorway and shushed Louis who was holding out a plate for him now.

"I've got it, thanks." he said grabbing it away and dipping in the water.

Louis stood there thinking for a moment. He always got lost for words every time he was near Harry. He looked at him. Harry wasn't wearing any of the things that he normally did. No bracelets. No rings. Even the dark polish on his nails was gone. "What did you do with them?" he asked.

Harry gave him a confused look so he explained, "Where are your accessories?"

"I'm not gonna wash dishes with my rings on, Louis." Harry retorted.

Louis laughed at his profile because they both knew it wasn't just his rings missing. Eyes travelling down past his jawline, Louis' mouth watered. He couldn't control that. Harry's necklaces were gone too, and his now bare neck glimmered outstandingly with the new exposure. Louis wanted to run his fingertips over the soft surface.

"I like it. I can actually see the cute freckles on your neck now." he said audible enough for just the two of them to hear.

Harry flushed and shot Louis a glare but Louis pressed on. "There'll will be nothing in the way when I kiss it." He whispered teasingly, as if having necklaces on would stop him anyway.

This made Harry's face even redder. "You're insane!" he roared quietly so Anne won't hear.

Enjoying this reaction from Harry, Louis teasingly made a move to kiss Harry's neck.

Taken completely by surprise, Harry jumped back to dodge the impromptu gesture, and the plate he was holding slipped out of his hand and crashed to the floor. Small shards of it landed on Louis' bare foot and cut him.

"What on Earth!" Anne came bursting into the kitchen, and on seeing the blood she ran to the cupboard to get the first aid kit.

Harry froze on the spot trying to force words out of his mouth.

"It's okay!" Louis told him. Louis could care less about his bleeding foot. He just couldn't take his eyes off Harry.

"Harry clean this mess up!" Anne barked as she set the kit down in the table. She motioned Louis to sit but he and Harry both hesitated for second, eyes locked on each other. Then Harry broke off and swiftly got the broom and dustpan.

"I swear I keep telling him not rush things." Anne was saying while seeing to Louis' foot.

Louis watched as Harry shakily swept up the bloody glass.

"It was me. It slipped out my hands. I'm sorry..." Harry peered at him in disbelief.

"Harry's clumsiness finally rubbed off on you, huh?"

Eyes dreamily focused on Harry, Louis saw him shoot a glare at his mother who was focused on his foot.
“Smooth tongue, that one, aye?” Anne said, shooting Louis a wink while tossing her head at the living room where Aiden was engaging Gemma in some old blarney.

“I swore I might get a headache from all the artificial sweeteners being passed around.” Louis whispered to Anne, making her chuckle.

Harry narrowed his eyes at them, wondering if they were talking about the cake Anne made for dessert. His mother was no baker but surely even she had common sense to use real sugar in a cake.

****

A few hours later, exhausted from all the cooking and cleaning up, Harry decided to go to bed. But when he got in his room he almost backed out the door, stumbling- The bed was neatly done and crowded with all his stuffed animals and his My Little Pony pillows on top The blanket he swore he’d packed away in a box hours earlier. He remembered the weekend before when Louis visited his room and how he had to move like flash shoving it all under the bed and in the closet, making a quick eagle-eye check around the room before he had opened the door for him. He was so sure he was done with all that now, that he no longer had to be scared of some emergency where Louis would come barging in and see all his queer belongings. He cringed at himself for hiding from another gay person. It was already hard enough as it is hiding from everyone else. He figured he’d have to be truly the most pathetic creature in the world to hide from the one person he had something so delicate in common with.

His eyes fell on his bookshelf which usually housed all kinds of other paraphernalia until he had thrown them all in the box. He gasped. It was now full again, but not with shoe boxes full of his toiletries like he had it before, everything was out on display like in a cosmetic store. He walked over to it, completely aghast, and started swiping the off the shelf, letting them crash to the carpeted floor.

He then darted over to his chest of drawers, dreading to open it. Pulling the handle, he couldn’t have been more horrified as all sorts of colored underwear peered back at him from their neatly folded positions. He staggered back, wondering if this was a bad dream.

*This had to be Gemma. It can’t be anybo- but Louis’ the only one who saw me with the box. No, no, Gemma is the only one who knows what’s in my room since she bought me all this stuff in the first place. Ugh!!! That-*

Harry darted out the door, not forgetting to slam it shut behind him.

He slowly made his way down the stairs, trying not to explode, trying to hold down his growing rage as he saw he saw Gemma, Louis, and Cord cackling as they played Go Fish around the coffee table. Gemma looked up at him with a mock innocent look he knew too well. It was immediately wiped off when it sank in just how upset Harry was. He was so full of disgust and something else he didn’t even know the word for. He knew she did it, but when his eyes came to settle on Louis it was clear as day that he knew exactly why Harry was upset. He looked like he was ready to jump out from his kneeling position at the table and run to him blurt out a million apologies.

*Well he can save it!*

Harry’s expression sank further when he noticed Cord pointedly and nervously avoiding his gaze.

Then Gemma stood up and started blabbing things Harry wasn’t even listening to. “What were you doing in my room!?” he asked, tone flat, feet landing on the last step or the staircase.
“Harry, you said I wasn’t there for you. Well that’s me being there for you. That’s what I’m good at.” Gemma shouted defensively, pointing at the stairs. She was saying it like she had a right, every right.

Harry forced a bitter laugh, looking up at the ceiling fan. His chest felt like someone had just dumped a car on it.

“Your right,” he said, tone normal considering… “YOU’RE GOOD AT BEING SELF SERVING, EGOISTICAL BITCH WHO REACHED THE BOTTOM OF THE BARREL WITH YOUR ASS WIPE BOYFRIEND CUZ NOBODY WITH A SHRED OF COMMON SENSE WANTS YOU! WHY DON’T YOU GO LIVE WITH YOUR NEW FAMILY AND MESS WITH THEIR STUFF AND STAY OUT OF MY FUCKING ROOM!”

Gemma’s jaw dropped as she backed into Cord. Harry didn’t know where all that came from. He hated her. He hated himself. He hated everyone and everything in sight. He needed to get out of there before he really started offloading because he felt like this was only a warm up. Louis, and Cord, and most definitely his mother didn’t need to be on the receiving end of his wrath right now. He turned on his heels and ran for the back door, darting down the stairs. He let out a piercing growl full of anger and hurt as he hit the grass and kept on running until he reached the stables.

“Did you hear what he said to me!?” Gemma yelled to Cord.

“Gemma, what did you do!?” Louis said in a horrendous tone, hands shaking as he heard the resounding scream.

“Me!?! You’re the one who told me he threw away his stuff!” she shouted, equally terrified. “How is this my fault!?”

A door opened upstairs and a groggy Anne ran out throwing on her robe over her nightgown. “Gemma! What did you do to him!?” she yelled as she ran down the stairs.

Louis’ hands were in his hair now as he looked frantically from Anne to Gemma to Cord, all at a loss for words.

Gemma started hysterically crying at once. “I didn’tt- I didn’tt-” she stammered as her hands raked her hair as well.

“I should go talk to him.” Louis tried.

“NO!” everyone answered at once. Louis looked at them confused.

Cord piped up. “When he’s like this, no one can talk to him. That’s why I knew it was a bad idea-” He added that last part looking sternly at Gemma, who shot him a warning look as her eyes circled to her mother who was already in the kitchen rummaging through the drawers. He stopped talking immediately as he opted to massage Gemma’s shoulders.

“Louis, you go.” Anne said finally. “Just hide outside the stable and keep this with you if anything happens.” She held out an inhaler in her shaking hands. "Oh no! you can’t go. Your foot!” she backtracked, concerned.

“No! I’ll go.” Louis said, hopping over to her. He grabbed the device, shooting Gemma a condescending look before sprinting to the backdoor.

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Louis hopped as fast as his legs could carry him with the wound and came to a stop a few feet from the stables, trying to get his breath even enough for Harry to not notice him, before he got any closer.

He sneaked in the stable, and on seeing the open stall door squatted down in front the little space between Scotch’s and Winniepeg’s stall doors, settling himself on his bum.

“Louis, please leave me alone,” came Harry’s broken voice from the stall. He sounded small and weak, and terribly, terribly hurt. Louis never regretted anything more than having a part to play in the cause of it. When he thought about, it was his fault. From the beginning. He should have never told Harry he knew he was gay. He should have just left it. Harry would be happy right now instead of tasting this bitter tea that Louis fed him.

Why am I so stupid! He berated himself as he examined the inhaler. Harry was already so young and innocent and fragile when they met. He still is, then I had to go play the hero and hurt him more.

Louis did not answer Harry. He just sat there quietly because Harry didn’t need him objecting and Louis wasn’t about to leave for anything. He leaned his head back and breathed, hoping that Harry knew he was there for him. A little while after. Louis heard Harry’s sobs die down, and the hay crunch as he suspected he was shuffling himself to sleep. Louis sat up straight with his arms propped on his knees, still clutching the inhaler. He twisted his torso to look under the stall door and saw Harry asleep with his head fitted in the nook of Scotch’s neck, an arm draped around the horse as the animal itself slept. Louis stayed in that position not moving, trying to steady his own breathing so he could decipher if Harry’s breathing was normal enough let him sleep without the inhaler. When he was satisfied that the boy was alright he sat back up and accepted that he would have to stay with him until he woke up so he stretched his legs out and sank his shoulders into the wall, blowing to ease the throbbing in his foot.

The morning sunrise crept up on Louis too soon, and the sound of a cockerel clucking in his ear as it approached his sleeping silhouette woke him up. The bird jumped and cackled wildly as Louis shuffled out from under the blanket. Blanket? How did he come by a blanket?

Yawning as the cockerel clucked bickeringly at him, Louis stretched and raked his disheveled hair back. “Oh, quit it! You’ll get your grain soon enough!”

Less than a minute later, Harry emerged, puffy eyed with dried tears stained on his cheeks. He stood there looking around the stable, then he closed his eyes and opened his mouth as though trying to say something but nothing came out. Louis just sat there waiting.

He timidly brandished the inhaler for him to take, careful not to get yelled at. “Do you need this?”

Harry grabbed it and pocketed it, then headed straight for the door.

Louis leaped up and followed him, ignoring the pain in his foot. “I don’t know what Gemma did to make you so mad but I know whatever it is she did it because she loves you.”

Harry turned to look at him. “You’re going to pretend you don’t know what I’m mad about? You’re the only one who saw me with the box!”

Louis crossed his hands on his heart. “I have no idea what was in there, Gemma asked me if I saw you throwing anything away and I said yes! I’m sorry—”

Harry sighed in a rush. “It doesn’t matter anymore. Just stay away from me.”
Louis folded his arms. He didn’t in the mood for any more games. “Please talk to me. I want to help. I can’t see you in pain and just ignore it.” The tone came out choppy as he didn’t anticipate the tears that accompanied them.

Shaking his head as his own eyes welled up, Harry remained unrelenting despite. “You can’t force someone to do something they don’t want to do. Stop. You’re being creepy and I just want you to stop.”

And he walked out on Louis yet again.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: I intentionally left out the rest of Nouis conversation because I felt that it would be best to flesh that particular topic of discussion out with Narry instead of Nouis, so the next chapter will reveal what Niall was about to say to Louis.

I know my Harry is hard on you guys, he's an intensely complicated character but don't worry guys, Larry will finally get a break in the chpt 30! The next chapter will be posted within the next 24 hours so look out for it! And I hope u are all okay!

Share Kudos and comments because I need the support. Writing for me is so time consuming and I need to know if you guys are with me!
Talking Things Out

Chapter Notes

A/N: Okay I know I promised to update early with this and I sincerely apologize for being a few days late. So much happening in twitter in the fandom with xfactor, and lilo onogglebox and the four nipples etc, I got distracted! Feel free to follow my Larry Stylinson stan acc. @joydiLana on there, I tweet regularly with proofs and opinions etc. Other links in my bio!

Okay let’s get on with it! Here is my latest chapter. What you’ve been waiting for. I hope u like it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Louis POV

Tuesday continued-

Harry had been ignoring Louis all day, attending to Betsy's new lamb, and helping Cord and his mother with the horses. Whenever they found themselves alone, Harry would pretend he had other things to do than talk to Louis. Harry kept playing this game that should be behind them now that their lips touched twice. Louis wanted to touch Harry like that again, and he hated that whatever insecurities the boy had was blocking him from letting him get close to him.

He tried to talk to him, knocking on his bedroom door, following him around the farm, he even tried nudging him to get his attention, but they were only met by sharp glares in return from a reluctant Harry. Even Gemma tried talking to him, she really did, but she was no more successful than he was, and Louis concurred that he should let Harry stew a bit. He didn't want him thinking he was an obsessed teen who stopped at nothing like in those LMN movies. If Louis were Harry, he would most likely be scared of him too, so he backed off.

He took an opportunity to add Niall back to the group chat and catch up with everyone, telling them about everything that happened with Harry since their last chat. Popping up right after he was added, Niall said hi to everyone and proceeded to chat about his girlfriend and Harry. He also directly messaged Louis that he was going to invite Harry over to spend the entire day tomorrow to catch up and talk, which Louis was relieved, anxious, and concerned about. Harry and Niall had a lot to talk about and he hoped Harry would be alright by the time they finished talking. He texted Niall back telling him about what happened Sunday night and that Harry was in a bad mood, Niall then told him that it was a good thing for Harry to spend the day with him and get away from the farm a bit. Louis agreed and asked Niall's assurance that he'd call him and let him know how their it goes, which Niall promised to comply.

Louis also talked with Liam about what happened as well, while Murrey and his uncle John worked on building the gazebo, and he too deduced that it was best to give the boy some space.

The only time Louis and Harry had exchanged words during the day was when Aiden had invited himself over for lunch and didn't want to leave. Anne had made some tea later that afternoon and was more than 'happy' to allow him to remain, since he had the charges against Cord immediately dropped that morning as promised. Anne made sure to tell Louis out of Aiden's earshot that she still
didn't trust him, a sentiment Louis shared as well. She told him to keep an eye on him while she went to help Cord, who wanted nothing to do with Aiden- charges or no charges- groom the horses out back.

Gemma and Aiden had been sitting on the couch watching Family Feud on television, while Harry sat on the love-seat. As they sat sipping the afternoon tea, Louis, who settled himself on the single chair next to the couch, glanced at Harry, and his foot started throbbing again. The painkillers he took earlier had worn out, plus he was feeling down because of Harry's rejection. Harry had made eye contact with Louis and mouthed 'I'm sorry!' with a genuine sorry face, and Louis, knowing he was referring to his wounded foot, stared back blankly at him, but still ended up mouthing back a heart wrenching 'I love you,' causing Harry's eyes to widen as he turned back to the television.

*Maybe Gemma was wrong. Maybe he doesn't want me,* Louis had told himself.

Getting up, he went to the kitchen to take a painkiller, and heard Gemma muttering in the other room. *'Oh- Harry. This tea needs sugar!'*

Louis had thought the tea was fine...*Oh. I see what she's doing.*

*"Well if hers is bad, mine is too so thanks, Harry, if you will,"* Aiden's voice seeded, gesturing to his cup. Harry glared at Gemma as he picked up both cups and headed for the kitchen.

Louis clenched his jaw, furious that Aiden was ordering Harry around. *Didn't Gemma say he had to go to a business trip with his uncle? Must have been a ploy to get himself invited for dinner as soon as possible...snake.*

Louis sat at the table listening to Harry's footsteps, waiting for him to come in.

As Harry entered with the teacups, his eyes fell on the dispirited Louis sitting there rubbing his shin soothingly.

*I'm so sorry, Louis. If I could take it back, I would..."*

Glancing up at the boy, taking in his baby-soft freckled skin, Louis offered a short, humorless laugh, not making eye-contact. "That's not what I want you to take back, Harry."

Harry's breath gasped to a stop. He pulled the sugar jar open and tapped in a few grains in the teacups, ignoring Louis as he steadily walked out.

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That night after Aiden finally left, Louis resumed reading the letters with Anne, laughing and exchanging stories about his mother. But when it came to bedtime he just didn't want to go to his room. Anne had stacked the letters back up neatly before taking away the empty teacups and headed to bed, but Louis, wide awake with restless unblinking eyes, got up from the living room floor and walked out to the porch. His mind was not at ease at all. Clicking the light on, he sat on the swing, thinking about Harry and wondering how to fix things between them. After all, he was leaving for Wales the next week. He thought he would just let it go but he didn't know how. How can he forget something like that; him kissing Harry, Harry kissing him back with just as much vigor, the way his hair smelt. . .

[Front door opens]

Louis was knocked out of his thoughts when Harry stepped outside in his pajamas. He jumped at the sight of Louis on the swing.
"I thought you went to bed." It was chilly, and Harry immediately folded his arms, making an attempt to go back inside.

"Stay, Harry. I was just about to go to bed anyway. . ." Louis said, moving the swing forward from its stand-still.

Shooting him a glance, Harry walked tentatively to the banister and looked out. Louis sat there staring at him, but he didn't say anything. Didn't even look at Louis.

"Dinner was amazing," Louis said, voice raspy from the late hour. He didn't know what to say. He just wanted some sign that they could get past this, get back to being friends or just anything better than whatever this was.

"Thanks," was all he got. He hated this small talk. He felt the built-up urge to just let Harry know his mind.

"I can't stop thinking about you," he said. Harry abruptly folded his arms on hearing this, but gave no reply.

"Harry, are we really doing this? Are you planning on ignoring what we feel forever?" he asked, getting up and inching towards Harry.

Turning around hastily, Harry fumed, "I knew you would do this again. Why won't you just let it go?"

Louis let out a shaky exhausted breath. "Because you don't just kiss someone more than once and forget about it!" He paused before adding softly, "I want to kiss you again. . ."

Harry, getting frustrated, turned to get back inside, but Louis blocked his chest with his left arm. Harry tried going around him, but he grasped his hand quickly as he darted away, pulling him back into him.

"Louis, let me go!" Harry demanded, but Louis didn't listen. Harry needed to hear him out.

"I know you want it too, Harry. Let's just talk about this. I know you're scared but we'll figure it out. We don't have to know all the answers-" Louis tried to make his voice as steady and calm as possible, afraid that the tiniest wrong move could send the boy running again.

"I have an answer for you- NO!" Harry whispered sharply, as not to wake the others up.

Louis' eyes welled up, as Harry's words hit him. But, nevertheless, with his free hand, he adoringly brushed Harry's angry cheekbones with the back of his fingers.

"Louis, please let it go. I'm not gay." Harry's words came out whispery, in waves of high and low, with a hint of a disgust that Louis got the sense was directed at Harry's own self for saying it, and not at Louis for provoking him.

Yet, Louis laughed dryly in lieu of sympathy. "So we're back to that? You're giving me that same stupid answer? Is that what you tell yourself at night when you dream about kissing me again?"

Louis cupped the sides of Harry's face and focused on his features. Harry squeezed his eyes shut under the feel, his hands propped on his chest to prevent him from getting closer, as Louis kept talking.

"You can't sleep either, can you? I certainly can't after what we did. I keep seeing you... Seeing you
"Sometimes when I *do* sleep, I dream about you...in your panties. You're kissing me, a guy, in your pink goddamn panties..."

"Louis, please stop!" Tears were leaking out of Harry's eyes now, never looking at Louis as the older boy's thumbs moved around on his cheeks; adoring the red bursts of color appearing all over his face.

"I want you to look me in the eyes and tell me that again, Harry. Tell me how you're not gay."

Louis was so close to him. He smelled so good, Louis wanted to kiss him then and there. But he willed himself to let go of the sobbing boy who pushed away from him then.

He watched as he ran inside, up to his room, leaving him alone on the porch.

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Wednesday-

The next morning Louis woke up at around eight o'clock. He staggered into the kitchen to see Gemma and Anne having breakfast.

"Hey, Louis. Don't worry about the farm, Harry got up before everyone, did everything, and then left to go see Niall." Gemma said, pointing a non-committal thumb to a scribbled note stuck to the fridge door with a magnet.

Anne fixed him a plate and he wobbled over to the table. "Gemma, you haven't touched your food!" Anne said, encouraging her.

Gemma turned up her nose. "I can't see eggs right now. The flu is going around. You should make me a soup, Mum."

Rubbing his eyes, Louis read the note. 'Niall invited me for the entire day [smiley face] See you guys later.'

"Could have taken you with him, though. He knows your sisters are gone and he's your main company. If he had waited for you to drive to Niall's...?" Anne said, in a blunt tone, pouring some chow for Cliff as the dog snuggled up to Louis' leg.

Louis ran his hands through the thick fluffy fur, sighing as he thought to himself. Anne didn't know that Niall needed Harry to come alone. *Plus, Harry's gladly avoiding me...*

**Beep! Beep!**

The familiar sound of a truck horn sounded from the front yard. Murrey and Liam had arrived to start the day's work. "Well, I won't be alone. I'll just hang out with Liam!"

Louis spent the entire day helping Liam and Murrey on the Gazebo, which was coming along rather nicely. They got the frame up and hoped to have the whole thing ready by the end of the week. Louis promised the girls he would take lots of pictures to show them how it turned out when he met them again.

In the midday heat, he and Liam sat on the new gazebo platform having sandwiches made by Anne
for lunch as Cliff came up to them, tail wagging.

"So I talked to Zayn..." Liam mumbled into his sandwich. Louis' eyes hit him.

"And?"

Liam licked the ketchup off his lips. "We're on again. Full stop."

Louis shot him a questioning look.

"Well, you don't expect me to tell him what I did over the phone? He's coming next week, so I'll do it then..." Liam said, the words fading as he spoke. Louis knew it was a hard thing for Liam to do in the first place, and that it was best not to press him.

Instead, he patted his back supportively. "It was a stupid drunk mistake. I know you regret whatever happened with that guy."

"Louis, I honestly don't even remember what I did or who it was!! I feel so shitty. Most I can do now is beg for his forgiveness."

"And never ever do that again! Zayn didn't deserve that." Louis shook his head as he planted it in his hand, realization sinking in. "He's going to be devastated. But I know he'll forgive you. He's like that. He loves you and he knows you love him."

"I hope he does, because I can't see myself without him. I just can't."

Louis bit his sandwich, Liam's words from that night in the cabin resurfacing in his head. Liam had remembered saying them the next morning but he totally forgot hooking up with a stranger? Chewing, Louis did wonder how Liam saw himself if Zayn wasn't in the picture. His old feelings for Liam seemed so far away now. If Liam was somehow subconsciously harboring feelings for Louis, then he was alone in that. Louis only ever thought about Harry lately, it was hard not to since he kept his mind in a whirl trying to figure him out and find a way to help him.

Louis sighed as he finished his lunch. Since he came to Champton Valley he had been swept up in Harry, chatting with him, helping him with the animals, laughing, and now Harry wanted space, now when Louis stayed back just to spend more time with him and make sure he was okay.

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Harry and Niall POV

It was after two in the afternoon. Harry had been at Niall's all morning, just the two of them, as Niall's parents were busy with group meetings at the church. Harry sat sprawled out on Niall's bed, as the two played Nintendo. They had cooked a quick lunch (and by 'they' I mean Harry), and were now just chilling as they had hardly got to do since school closed.

Niall sat down beside him observing his friend, wondering if he was ever going to tell him about Louis or that he was even gay in the first place. Niall wondered to himself how it could have slipped him. Harry was his best friend, surely he was supposed at least figure it out. He was glad to know now, but he wished Harry could have at least trusted to tell instead of him accidentally finding out in a group chat.

Harry needed to get away from the farm, and from Louis. Lately he was always dodging Louis, and last night was the last straw. He had fought back sinking into the older boy and kissing him, to the point where he literally felt the pain in his veins and had wanted to scream. He had been close
enough to him to smell the cigarettes on his breath, which for some reason made Harry want to kiss him even more. While he had had his hands propped on Louis' chest, he felt his heartbeat, and it thumped through him like he was gaining supernatural powers from the contact. He wanted so bad to bury his face in his chest and cry. Louis had practically begged him to talk things through and acknowledge that there was something between them, but Harry couldn't. He had to be the pathetic little baby and run away from the one guy he ever really liked. Harry doubted he'd find the strength to tell the boy the whole truth about why he was so elusive and confusing. It was already mid-week and soon Louis would be gone along with Harry's heart, because it no longer belonged to Harry.

Throat still slightly hoarse, Niall chirped in a conversational tone, "So what's Louis doing today?"

Thank you Niall. Very much. For that. Harry thought, sarcastically.

Harry shrugged, not looking up. Niall pursed his lips.

Harry smacked his mouth open and drawled out in a fake-casual tone, "He's busy helping Liam build the gazebo!"

Niall gave a prolonged nod, eyes moving from side to side, wondering how to approach his friend with his thoughts.

"There's something important I wanna tell you, Harry..." Niall said, seriousness diffusing in his tone. He thought he'd just get it all out in the open because he hated keeping secrets from his best friend, especially as big as this one. "Do you remember when my dad talked to us about abstinence and all that stuff and he urged us to get these?" he wrapped his fingers around the purity ring hanging from his necklace.

"Yeah?" Harry answered. He remembered when he had come over to hang out with Niall a couple of years ago and the Reverend had lectured the boys about saving themselves for marriage with Mrs Horan looking on closely.

"Well..." Niall started. He didn't know how to say it without making it sound crazy. It was crazy! "There's a reason he did that. See, when we became friends, we spent a lot of time together, I'd hang out at your house, you'd come to mine? Well, I just found out that my Mum thought that you and I were...together, at one time. She basically thought I was gay and into you...that way."

Harry stopped pressing the buttons on the control. What? "What!?"

"Harry you need to let me finish. This is already hard for me to say, okay?" he peered into Harry's eyes, willing him to listen quietly. The curly haired boy looked frozen on the spot, so he took a deep breath and continued.

"My Mum assumed that because you and I spent all that time together that something was going on with us so she told my dad, "--Harry's eyes squinted in disbelief. On seeing it, Niall added, "Let me finish! She told him and that's why he started with all that abstinence stuff. Instead of just asking me about it they decided to play god with my life. That's what all the lectures were really about whenever you came over. But trust me, Harry, when you weren't around I got the full brunt of sermons, and them telling me what to wear and what to say in public, and basically controlling every area of my life, but I always thought it was because my Dad's a reverend and we needed keep up a certain image as his family. And, yes, that's true but I now know that there was more to it. Harry, you and I clicked because I could always talk to you about how my parents are. You always understood because your mom is pretty overprotective too, so I'm really angry with them right now for twisting our friendship. Now, I don't know if, or when Dad would have lectured us about all that abstinence stuff if Mum hadn't urged him to, but I'm telling you that that is the reason he did it
when he did; because Mum thought we were a thing and she got scared."

The white in Harry's eyes were prominent as he stared at Niall, unblinking. Niall shook his head and kept talking, not wanting to let Harry speak until he was finished.

"I found out about on Sunday. After church in the evening when we got home my dad told me. He said Mum suspected I was gay and made him do all that. I was so angry with him for not asking me, and angry at my Mum for using my dad like that. Now I know why they've always been so hard on me."

"Niall!!??" Harry got out in a stifled gasp, before Niall put up a stopping hand.

"Harry, when I asked my Mum about it and she said she doesn't think that anymore, since Shawna. Then my Dad jumped in and said that Shawna is the only reason I'm not in bible camp right now. That's the other thing; The reason they've sent me there every summer is so I wouldn't have any free time to hang out with you! My Mum wanted to send me there again this year, but then I started dating Shawna just before the summer. But even though they see how much I like her, they had me help them around the neighborhood with all the fundraising and stuff so I wouldn't have time to help you and Louis with the song for the concert. And I'm angry about that because Louis' my friend and they know he's gay so it's like a form of discrimination and I'm so ashamed of them for that. I'm so glad you had Louis to help with it, because my parents are really unbelievable. It sucks that they could just jump to conclusions and dictate my life like that without me knowing it. I have no idea how I'm gonna forgive them for doing that to me. I find it hard to trust them now because they didn't trust me enough to just come to me and ask."

He took a pause as he shuffled closer to Harry, whose brows were threatening to touch his eyelashes as he gripped the control. "Well, I'll be honest with you now, Harry, and you have to promise not to get mad, but the main reason my mom thought I was gay was because she thinks you are. I told them that if I had a kid or friend that was gay I'd never deal with the situation like that. I don't even believe that it's something that needs to be dealt with. I actually got in my dad's face and called him out for having double standards because he tells everyone about tolerance, and here he is treating me like I was some kind of a problem, sending me away to camp... I'm not gay but any friend of mine who is, like Louis for example, deserves mine and my parents' support instead of keeping me away from them without a valid reason. I hate what they did not only for myself, Harry, but for you. I just wanna say that I'm sorry about not being around those times they kept me away. I basically yelled at them and told them I'd hang out with you whenever I want now, so that's that."

Harry took his eyes off Niall and went back to playing the game, teeth clenching and gripping the control tighter than normal.

Niall stared at him, a grim awkwardness settling between the two friends.

"Harry..."

"Let's just play the game, okay." Harry said in a quiet exhausted tone."

Okay."

They played on in silence for a while, Harry sipping his soda, and Niall hitting the control buttons and clearing his sore throat the only sounds coming from him at all.

"I'm sorry your parents did that to you. I feel like it's my fault," Harry's words floated through the room like a paper jet hitting Niall smack in the ear.
"NO! Never! It was never your fault! My parents, my dad took an oath to be an example and a
teacher for everyone who wants to be a good upright citizen, and he failed. That's on him, not you.
Never you, Harry!" Niall's voice was urgent and pleading. He felt sick to his stomach that his best
friend felt like he was responsible for the way his parents treated him all this time. If Niall was
truthful, he blamed himself for not seeing it before. If he had, he would have put a stop to his
parents' bullshit a long time ago. "My parents disappointed me so bad, but you never did. You're
the best friend a person could ask for. I'd never judge you, Harry. I love you, man."

"I love you too, Niall," Harry said, sighing as he looked straight ahead at the television.

"Great. Okay, they're going to be back in a few hours and I want you to stay so they can see I'm
serious. They already apologized to me and promised not pull shit like that again but right now my
trust is broken so, will you stay a bit?" Niall stared at him, eyes eager for an agreement.

Harry wrestled with that for a moment. It would be awkward to stay and face them, knowing what
he knows now, but when he thought about it, Niall had to put up with them for years, so he gave a
decisive nod, determined to do this one thing for his best friend. Harry was lucky to have a friend
like Niall who had been there for him through a lot. He still felt guilty, knowing now that he was
the reason Niall's parents were so strict with him all the time. And after what Niall just said about
standing up for him and supporting him, Harry felt like he owed Niall one more thing.

"I like Louis."

Accepting the statement as somewhat of a coming out, Niall produced the most fervent nod,
smiling like a Santa Claus. "I know."

Harry turned to face him, a worried/scared look on his face. "I really like him. Like, like, like him."

"I know, I got you on the first 'like'," Niall deadpanned. "If you ask me, I'd say he's the sweetest
guy ever and I can actually tell he's more than a little fond of you."

A blushing smile cracked over Harry's face and he became instantly calm and relieved to be able to
tell Niall this and have him be okay with it. But the smile did not last long as he then thought about
why he didn't, or couldn't allow himself to give in to his feelings for Louis.

The boys spent the rest of the evening playing songs on Harry's guitar, and when his parents got
back, Harry took Niall's queue to act as though he had not told him anything. It was hard to do, and
Harry felt uncomfortable at first, but helped a bit that Niall's parents were being extra nice to him,
even prompting him to stay for dinner, which he had no choice but to oblige.

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"Hey!! No fair!! Just when he was about to find out who did it!" Cord burst out in rage.

They had all been watching the prime-time show when the electricity went out in the house, and
both Anne and Louis went outside to look out beyond the road in the distance to see if it was the
whole neighborhood or just their house, while Cord lit the lamps in the living room. It was
completely dark everywhere, and Harry hadn't come home yet. Anne had been trying to call him
for the past hour, but as usual, he ignored her. As they went back inside, she tried again, this time
successfully. It had rained heavily that evening, cooling down the green countryside, and Louis
suspected that to be the reason for the blackout.

He stood by the kitchen doorway in his grey hoodie, listening concerned as Anne argued with
Harry over the phone. Niall had sent him a brief voice message sometime during the day when he
had missed his call, that said; “Hey, Lou, can't talk yet but I told him about my parents and he's okay. At least he seems okay. We also established that he likes you. It's actually the way he came out to me. Literally, his 'I'm gay' was 'I like Louis', but he didn't really want to elaborate so I didn't press. But this is good, at least he's made a step. Talk to you later!”, which brought a sense of relief to Louis when he listened to it a few hours ago, just like when Gemma had told him in his room a couple days ago, that Harry liked him.

Since he got the message he had spent the rest of the day imagining Harry saying 'I like Louis' in place of 'I'm gay', comparing the two sentences, and he found himself smiling at awkward moments in front of everyone. But he was also scared, and didn't want to put too much faith in it because Harry told Gemma basically the same thing and since then he had pushed Louis away more times that he could count. He was so scared this time of saying something stupid or doing something stupid to make Harry push him further away, that he tried hard not to be too excited. As a matter of fact, when he thought about it, 'I like Louis' should have really been 'I'm gay' after all because he realized how stupid he was to expect Harry to jump into his arms the minute he came out. Coming out takes time and effort and Louis was expecting way too much from Harry at this point when he should be supporting him as a friend. So, yeah, he was scared too.

"You should have called me! I'm sending Louis to get you!" Anne barked at her son. She hung up the phone, irritated.

"Is he alright?" Louis asked, easing off the wall.

"He said he lost track of time, and the rain made him miss the bus!" Anne said, eyes pushing her brows upward. "Excuses, excuses!"

Gemma, who was listening from her resting position on the couch, looked at Louis with mischief in her eyes. He was not up to it. There was no way he was going to pick up Harry. He was always completely stupid around the boy and would find himself saying dumb stuff to make things worse anyway. He wasn't about to go another rounds with Harry tonight.

"Gemma, you should go," he tried.

"I can't. I think I'm coming down with something." she said, winking at Louis, her legs crossed as she laid punching the cushions under her head.

"Don't look at me! He hates me too!" Cord said, as everyone's eyes landed on him.

"Louis, just go get my brother! He needs to be home safe!" Gemma said in a completely fake-concerned voice, flashing him a secret smile. He didn't tell her about Niall's message so he didn't know what she was so happy about.

Louis sighed, annoyed with her. After what she did, Harry wanted nothing to do with any of them, but somebody had to go get him. He grabbed the keys and his jacket and headed out the door. He wasn't sure he should be around Harry right now. He did leave because of him in the first place, now he has to go pick him up? How long is Harry going to keep this up this game?

**

*Honk! Honk!*

Louis blew the horn and waited. It was dark even on the street where Niall lived, with not a streetlight on. The only reason he was able to see Harry leave the house was because of the dim light coming through the front door as it opened. He waved to Niall as he watched Harry run up to
the truck and throw his guitar in the back. Harry didn't say anything. He just sat there, waiting for Louis to start the engine.

"Is that lasagna?" Louis asked, eyeing the foil-wrapped bowl in Harry's hand, trying to make the most of an awkward situation.

"Yeah, Niall's Mum had a new recipe. I was helping her make it. That's why I didn't answer the phone."

Louis shook his head. "You always do that to your Mum. No matter what you're doing, you should answer her."

Harry shot him a 'dude, seriously?' face, and Louis gave him an eyebrow as he pushed the gears. Harry rolled his eyes and shook his head, as he stretched to rest the lasagna on the back seat.

"So, everything okay with Niall?" Louis asked.

"He's not that sick anymore," Harry said, tone dead, as he started going through his phone.

"Okay, well, let's get you home, baby boy!" Louis said, as they pulled out of the street.

"Don't call me that!"

"What? Baby boy? That is what you are to your mother, isn't it? But of course, to me you're just an angry child who needs love."

Harry shot him a glare. "You're disgusting; you know that?"

"Just stating facts as I see it," Louis quipped, feeling like teasing Harry, now. "I'm curious- What was in that box to make you so mad, Harry? Let me guess? You're a cross dresser. I never thought about it, to be honest, but if that's what you fancy, I'm game. I'd dig a skirt if you're the one wearin it."

"Stop it! You should shut up! You never know what you're talking about! Why in the hell would you say that!?" Harry blurted out hotly.

It only served to make Louis more amused. He smirked as he answered, "We both know why, Harry."

Harry retorted, "You are so full of shit, you know that, right?"

He flashed an annoyed glare at Louis, who kept his eyes on the road, and veered off into his phone. Louis kept driving, deciding they needed a quiet place to talk, and it took a while before Harry raised his head from his phone to realize where they were; Louis was going through the dirt road to the lake. He stopped in their usual spot and cut off the engine, but left his seat belt on.

"Louis?" Harry eyed him nervously. "Why did you bring me out here? It's totally dark!" He exclaimed, looking tentatively out the window. The light from the truck was the only light in the dark lonely lakeside.

Louis raised an eyebrow. "I'm not gonna kill you and throw you in the lake if that's what you think!"

The look on Harry's face made his eyes widen. "Oh my god, you really think I'd do that!?"
"Why are we here!?!" Harry said, louder.

Louis just sat there thinking. He needed to find a way to get through to Harry. He couldn't just leave Champton without knowing where they stood.

"I want to be with you." he breathed out, plain and clear, hands nervously on the wheel. "I told you that after the concert and I tried to tell you so many other times..." Louis fought back the lump in his throat. "But none of that matters anymore because you made it clear that you're not ready for any of that, but I'm leaving on Monday and I don't know if I'll ever see you again or if you even want to see me but I just want you to know that if you ever need someone to talk to about anything under the sun, I'm here. Just call or text or...whatever, I'm serious about that. And it's no strings attached. I'll never come on to you like that again."

Harry opened his mouth, but struggled to actually answer. Louis stared at him expectantly, but then he closed his mouth and looked out his window.

Louis didn't know what to say anymore to make Harry talk to him. "I don't know, It's just that my Mum died and I guess I'm not properly grieving or some shit and I just shifted my focus on you to numb my own pain. I know that sounds shitty and I'm sorry about that. I shouldn't have treated you like that."

The words sounded better in Louis' head. They were exactly what his mother would say if he was one of her patients. But was it so bad? Was it so bad to swap pain and grief for something so pure and beautiful? For someone he could see himself with even if he wasn't grieving, and laugh with, and look after protectively while he experienced all his firsts like beer and parties and vacations- because he wanted to take Harry everywhere and anywhere he wanted to visit- and just be happy with? Him meeting Harry and falling for him wasn't a bad thing at all, it was a blessing, and he hated that he made it sound so demeaning that Harry- who was already fighting his own inner battles- just rolled over and accepted that all he was to Louis was a distraction from his grief.

He wasn't about to leave it that way, so he continued, muttering, "I need you to know that to me, Harry, you are the person who kept me from falling to pieces that night after the rodeo show. I've never seen a lake before in my life and I shared that for the first time with you. You took me on an adventure, and you made me fall in love with this place. With this town, with these people, with you...And I will never forget you as long as I live. I will never forget how you made me laugh when I was at my worst."

He glanced between the dashboard and Harry, who was now looking at him intently with deeply furrowed eyebrows. "I don't know if I might stay with my Dad, or with my Grandma in Doncaster so I can't." - the last word came out like a squeak - "I can't say if or when I'll see you again. But like I said, we're friends. I'll never not be your friend."

_God, this hurts so much! I need to shut up now before I make a total fool of myself._

Briefly nodding himself back to sanity, Louis shifted, trying to find the strength to start the engine again, or even move his feet on the pedals. He gave Harry a quick half-smile and turned the key trying to forget all the moments they were closer than friends. Trying to forget the stable, and the community centre, and this stupid lake. So this is how it ends, with so much left unsaid... Louis was a fool to think that helping Harry overcome his fear could reside alongside them being more than friends. He just had to go and ruin their perfectly fine friendship.

_But I always felt more than that, so much more..._

Starting the engine, he was about to push the gear lever when he realized something was gripping
his arm. He looked down to see a huge hand tightly gripping his bicep, then slide down to his wrist, then his fingers, as Harry fumblingly clutched them, pulling his hand over to his chest. Louis had his jacket on, but felt the warmth pressing through his skin with the nervous movements.

He looked up from his hand resting contently in Harry's, to his face; Fresh tears smudged his eyelashes, leaking down his hot cheeks.

"I don't want you to go," Harry said, almost choking on heavy sobs. "Is that what you want—me to say."

The reality of what was happening sinking in, Louis reached over and started whispering softly for him to stop crying, while wiping Harry's tears with his jacket sleeve. "It's alright, Love. Don't cry."

Harry pressed his hand onto his chest, eyes glued to Louis', who could tell how much he wanted to say something. Louis wished he could just relax and say it, whatever it was, he needed it to come out so that Harry didn't have to be sad and scared anymore.

"I can't be doing this. . ." Harry said, in between hiccuping sobs. "She's different with you, Louis. She's happier, she goes out more. . .She's baking now. You're like a son to her. Having you here is good for her. I can't- I can't do this- It'll ruin everything. She didn't bring you here to get involved with me."

He was making cry noises now that were still heard over the sound of the roaring engine, as Louis lifted his arm to wipe his tears again, the same hand still in Harry's.

"But I did. It happened. At least I want it to happen," Louis stressed, leaning in to hug Harry with his free hand. "You could never ruin anything. I never knew you thought these things. You really think I'm not here for you too?" -he tucked a patch of hair behind Harry's ear- "I stayed because of you. I want a relationship with you. It's a good thing she thinks of me like a son because if she loves us both, she'll accept this."

"You don't understand," Harry cried, holding Louis' hand like he planned to never let go. "She was so sick. She was sick my whole life, and every day she got the tiniest bit better, but never there yet. Then you came along, and she's not the same anymore. She's completely changed. It's like you fixed her."

Just as Louis was about to answer, Anne called. Harry let go of Louis' hand and looked out the window. Louis quickly leaned upright as he answered the phone, letting her know they were on their way back, and hung up.

"We better get back."

Harry closed his eyes, his lips twitching with the burning need to let out something plaguing his mind, but he only managed a rough nod as his sobbing restarted.

"Stop crying if you don't want me to start singing again." Louis teased, his hands swiping Harry's face again. He felt the boy's wet cheeks rise underneath the moist warmth of his fingers, and embraced the pinch of satisfaction. Pulling his hand away to drive the truck, Harry suddenly grabbed it and pulled it back.

Louis turned to see why, and was met with a sudden kiss on his lips. It was motionless and
awkward at first, but then Louis' shoulders drooped to an ease as he took the side of Harry's head in his free hand, intensifying the kiss, moving his tongue over Harry's, wanting him to use his as well. Harry gratified his wishes, pushing his tongue further into Louis' mouth making his head lean back into the corner of the seat.

It wasn't long before the majority of the boy's weight was leaning on top of Louis, a position he had no objection to. He proceeded to move his hands to the back of his neck, raking his hair as he kept the pace of the kiss. And after a few minutes of hungrily exploring each other's mouths, Harry pulled away breathless.

Not wanting to lose contact so quickly, Louis abruptly leaned forward into Harry's seat, and started running his hand through his hair.

Then suddenly, Harry threw the door open, and Louis let out a terrified gasp, realizing that he wasn't just panting from the kiss; He was struggling to breathe!

"Harry, where is your inhaler!?” Louis demanded as he grabbed hold of his shoulders to stop him from falling out the truck.

He shoved his hands in his pockets, looking for the device, but he didn't feel anything, and Harry, now gasping wildly for air, kept shaking his head and pushing Louis' jaw towards the head rest. It took a few takes for Louis to realize what Harry was trying to do. Sweat beading on his forehead, he jumped in the back seat, unzipped the guitar case and found the inhaler in an inside pocket. Leaping back in front, he held it to his mouth, throwing his right arm around him, gripping his right shoulder to steady him.

Harry inhaled in large frantic gasps, holding on to it with both hands. Louis planted his lips on Harry's sweaty temple and kept them there, breathing heavily himself. His own heart beat so fast he was certain he was about to collapse from fear. How was he supposed to forgive himself for this?

Diving back into his seat, he pulled the gear into 'drive'.

"I'm taking you to the hospital right away!” he shouted as he pulled away from the lake. Harry shifted to face him, squeezing his arm as he pulled the inhaler out of his mouth.

"I'm fine! I-" he panted, large eyes trying to convince Louis.

"Harry, no! You're not fine, and it's all my fault!"

"No-no-no! Don't do that, I'll choke up again!” Harry pleaded as he grabbed a tearful Louis' hand, stopping him from turning the steering wheel. He then tugged him into another kiss, causing the older boy to mash the brakes. He moved his lips and tongue around boldly, breathing deeply now through his nose, holding on tightly to Louis, jacket collar. They took a long time to pull away, and Louis felt his neck strain as he lifted his head back up.

Harry grabbed his hand again desperately, staring into his eyes deep and pointedly like he wanted to say something that he didn't how to communicate. Louis stayed, hoping his engaged expression alone would be enough for Harry to gain the confidence to just say it already.

"How did you know about," Harry started then paused to consider, "the underwear?" he finished, biting his lip as he looked out Louis' window for a second before becoming engrossed in a few strings of loose thread on the thigh of his cut-up jeans.

Okay, that's a surprise...Louis thought, pulling the gear into 'park' again but not taking off the engine, as he looked closely at the younger boy, not quite sure he was breathing alright yet.
He peered at Harry. The boy was talking to him. He was actually talking to him. Not kissing and running away and sending all kinds of crazy mixed signals, but actually talking things through. Or at least trying to.

"I saw you wearing them once- like- just the edge of it over your jeans. I tried to tell you at the lake but it came out all wrong. I wish I could go back and change the way I approached you. I totally drove you away," he answered nervously, scared he would get another asthma attack.

The skin between Harry's eyebrows twitched. "No, you didn't. I drove you away. I'm still driving you away..."

There was a huge pause after that, the engine taking over the conversation. Then...

"I told Niall about... It was so weird. It was like we talked about it but we didn't talk about it? I don't know if I'm making any sense-"

"It's okay, I understand. I know he cares about you. You have an amazing friend." Louis pointed out.

"Yeah, I told him, but only after he'd told me the craziest thing. He said his parents thought me and him were together," he slapped his palm on his face.

Louis brain went into a slight panic, determining whether to tell Harry that he already knew about that or not. He figured he should just tell the truth up front.

"Yeah, he said he was really mad at them and finally stopped feeling guilty for hooking up with Shawna." Harry froze. "What!?"

"He didn't tell you? He quit wearing his purity ring on his finger since he did it a couple weeks ago."

"Wait- They haven't even been dating that long! And wait- Niall told you about what his parents did!?" Harry was livid. How could Niall tell Louis before he told him? How could Niall tell Louis that in the first place!? Louis held his breath for a moment. Harry's voice was veering out of normal range, and he was getting scared that he'd close up again. I wonder if there's some way I could backtrack before this turns ugly.

"Yeah, he's my friend too, Harry! He didn't know how to tell you! When he told me, I ended up telling him about us and we gave each other advice. That's what friends do!"

Louis knew he partially lied there, but he didn't want to tell Harry that Niall really found out about them through the group chat. Harry's jaw dropped. He pulled his jacket closer and shook his head, looking the other way. He was angry that Niall didn't tell him he already knew about him and Louis. But did he have any right to be since he basically kept the truth about himself from Niall, his best friend, for years? Harry let out a surrendered sigh. He swung his head back in Louis' direction and squinted his eyes at him.

"I can't believe you!? What exactly did you tell Niall about us!?"

Louis flashed him a 'overreacting much?' look but didn't answer, and Harry snapped his mouth shut, feeling his cheeks flush.
Louis sighed breathily. "We should get back. Anne was hysterical when the lights went out knowing you were outside."

Harry rolled his eyes. "She's hysterical about the least of things."

"As you're on that topic," Louis stretched his arm over and took his hand in a firm hold. "Okay. You said that I fixed your Mum. I get that she was depressed after your dad died and that can be really tough. If I hadn't come here when I did, I think that's where I would have been headed. Don't get me wrong, my friends are great and my family is amazing but I think it might have been hard for me to be in the house and try to fall back into the same routines so quickly without my Mum around. Point is, I get it. I get her. And if me being here has something to do with her getting better then I'm glad 'cause it's mutual."

Harry felt the same way about Louis. He too was springing fresh leaves of vitality that made him feel all fluttery inside. Louis was good for Harry too.

He leaned into him and buried his face in his neck, wrapping his arms around his shoulders as he took in his shower-gel smell. He felt his warm lips and nose press into his hair and kiss him just like he did he fell apart at the lake last week. Harry didn't want to go home yet, because going home meant that they'd have to stop kissing and holding each other. He wanted to stay with Louis in the dark lakeside for a while longer...

MOOOOOOOOO!

The sound bellowed into the dark night air, disrupting the moment.

"What the hell was that!!??" Louis jerked away from Harry and stuck his head out the window.

MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!

"Oh GOD! It's a lake monster!" he jumped into action, quickly pulling away from the roadside.

Harry burst out into laughter, clenching his belly, and his inhaler in case. He pointed teasingly at Louis, whose face was ghostly white with fear in the truck light.

"It's a cow!" he giggled. "Ohmygod- The look on your face! HA!!"

Louis lips creased into a smile as they sped off, his shoulders bopping up and down as he picked up Harry's high pitched squeals.

"Are you sure that was a cow!? There weren't any cows there before!" Louis squeaked, not convinced.

Harry's response to that was to fall into an even bigger fit of laughter, roaring through the otherwise peaceful countryside. To Harry, Louis was like sunshine in the dark, or on a rainy day, in this case both. He made everything around him joyous.

Harry coughed as the cold air hit his lungs, and Louis offered his hand, rubbing his back as he drove straight ahead. Harry smiled and took it, playing with the older boy's fingers. Louis wasn't mad at Harry for being a stupid kid with issues. Louis still tried with Harry even when he told him not to. Louis still wanted Harry.

*Louis was leaving soon*...
A/N: Once again I apologize for the late update.

Don’t panic! What do you think about Niall’s parents? In every fic I’ve read so far Niall always knows that his best friend is gay before he’s told (because he’s captain Niall Horan) so I hope you all are not offended by him being basically clueless in this story. As you can see he had his own problems going on with his parents etc.

Okay I got my Notebook on with that porch scene. Why not include at least one line from the most beautiful summer based love story ever in a summer themed fic? Lol.

Next, the last scene started off with Louis; pov then kinda eased into Harry’s pov if that makes any sense. The slightly creepy intonations stemmed from me watching an LMN movie recently that was based on a true- you don’t wanna hear about that.

Kudos? Comments?? Let me know what’s on ur minds!
Harry pov

Thursday…

“Stay away from me!” Harry sneered, stomping off.

“But you’re talking to him!” Gemma complained, pointing a finger at Louis, who was quietly spectating from the couch. She had been following him around all morning, annoying the heck out of him. “You should be thanking me! And after all the horrible things you said to me the other night!”

Harry glanced at Louis and met his eyes; Louis smiling so knowingly with deep blue eyes piercing into his soul. He fought back a smile as he remembered earlier in the morning when they were cleaning out the pens and Louis unexpectedly pulled him into a corner, kissing him, and the whole
thing turning into a secret make-out session.

“Do you want me start on why I never want to speak to you again!?” Harry spat at his sister. “Let’s see, first of all, you drag me under the bus to stick it to Mum, then you told Aiden something I shared with you in confidence! And you messed with my stuff! You treat me like a little kid you can push around, and I’m done with you.”

Gemma folded her arms and flipped her hair, huffing.

“You-” Harry started again, but Louis jumped up from the couch and stopped him.

“Uh? Let’s go for a drive.” He added an ‘okay?’ in the form of a look toward Harry.

Gemma raised an amused eyebrow at him, but he returned a serious look, that read ‘Quit upsetting him!’

Harry made an irritated questioning face, wondering when those two got a secret language rapport, then he stormed out the front door, grabbing his guitar.

Following closely behind him, Louis shut the truck door as Harry buckled up, and jumped in the drivers’ side. Harry checked his pockets then let out a tiny gasp.

"Oh! I forgot my pick! I'll be right back!" he said, jumping out and flying back into the house. A few minutes later he darted back to the truck as he ignored a badgering Gemma who was already on his heels again. As he re-buckled he caught Louis staring at him.

"What is it with you and that guitar pick!?” Louis picked, as he started the engine.

Harry huffed. ‘I’m not being a diva!”


“Uh? You did! After the concert when you were...talking to me, you said I go all diva for it. It’s not like that.”

Louis snorted, his eyebrows momentarily furrowing in confusion as to why this was important. “Okay?”

“My Granddad gave it to me. When I was little. He also got me a guitar but I grew out of it and don’t know where it is now. But this pick is special. It’s my lucky pick. At least that’s what he told me. I can’t use another one. I feel close to him when play with this one.”

"Oh! Harry!?” Louis grinned breathily. He was such a little scrunch-eyed cutie pie; Harry couldn't help but fond over him. "Why do you keep doing that!?” Louis asked. "...stealing my heart away piece by piece and adding to the million reasons I love you?” he explained when Harry gave him a look.

"Didn't know a guitar pick had more than one use; did you?” Harry answered with a tease, dimples making an appearance.

Louis reached over and pressed his thumb on his right dimple. "Everything that's associated with you amazes me..." Then after a pause; "You know...You should talk to your sister. I know you're mad at her but I hope you can forgive her soon."
Harry rolled his eyes toward him and leaned his head in to observe the seriousness of his demeanor.

"She deserved it." he answered dryly, now turning to look out the window.

They pulled out of the yard and cruised down the road. Louis kept glancing over at him every five seconds, and every time he did it, Harry got less and less angry, eventually settling into a hearty smile.

“You are so annoying!” he laughed. Louis flashed a brief smile in response, furrowing his eyebrows in concern as he reached his hand over to touch his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” Louis asked softly as they drove down the road to the lake again. The afternoon sun shone brightly over the greenery, butterflies dancing over the flowers that scattered throughout.

“Yeah,” Harry answered, taking Louis' hand and resting it on his lap.

As they neared, they passed a cow munching on some grass a little too close to the road for comfort.

Louis grinned, rolling his eyes as he stopped the truck. "Okay, get in the driver's seat!” he said as he got out.

“Alright, but if I hit the cow, I swear…” Harry warned as he unbuckled and jumped out.

“You won’t, babe,” Louis cooed, assuring, as he took Harry’s place.

He took his time on the road, being at an advantage that no one really used the road that often. He was getting pretty good at driving, and smiled to himself as he made a clean reverse to turn the truck, another thing to thank Louis for.

After an hour of practice, Harry parked by the lake and they sat leaning against a tree. Louis rest his head on his shoulder without a word being said for a while. Harry was surprised because wasn’t he usually the one going all, ‘We need to talk- Why won’t you talk to me?’ all the freaking time. Now that he was alone with him and they basically started a conversation the night before that needed finishing, Harry was curious as to why he was so quiet now.

“What was in the box, Harry?” Louis asked, finally, like he had a right to.

Harry blinked at him. He propped his jaw, elbow on his knee, eyebrows creasing.

Spoke too soon…

“Nothing,” he answered. He had no idea how to even start about the box.

Louis, thankfully, didn’t press, opting to hold both his hands and nuzzle into his neck playfully, causing him to laugh with the tickling sensation.

“Did you throw away your rings?” he inquired as he combed his tiny fingers through Harry’s bigger ones. “And your necklace?” he said into his neck, “Well, I know you didn’t get rid of your perfume…”-he said, breathing in his scent.

Harry closed his eyes. He wanted to run again. He felt it almost yanking at him, beckoning him to pull away from Louis. But he couldn’t this time. Not after he promised Louis he wouldn’t. Another boy would have been long gone by now, but Louis stayed extra time for him and now he had to be
open and honest with him. He had to trust that Louis was going to listen to him and understand
him. It was all Louis had been trying to say all this time anyhow.

“About the underwear; My sister got me them when she came home for the summer. That day you
saw it I was just trying it out. I haven’t worn them again since, so you were wrong at the lake when
you assumed it was why I didn’t want to jump in the water,” he said, suddenly. *He had to start
somewhere.*

“Oh? Then why didn’t you want to swim that day?”

“Because you were right about everything else you said after that; about me being different and,
and that I shouldn’t be so hard on myself,” Harry marked off in his head as he swallowed back a
lump. “I really like you, Louis. I mean, I know all these things but I just… I was scared and didn’t
want to get too close to you, not knowing if it’d lead anywhere, and after what you had told me
about what Liam and Zayn did to you; I didn’t want to be next on the list of people who hurt you or
disappointed you like that, so I needed to stop… swimming with you. To stop doing anything with
you.”

Louis eyes were thoughtful and hoping as he waited for Harry to answer. A dim shade swooped
over his face as the sun went hiding behind a cloud, taking away all the sparkles from the lake and
the small creases in the tree leaves.

Harry blow an agreeing breath. “I tried really hard to ignore you but you wouldn’t let me. And you
just had to write that song for the concert and make me fall for you even deeper. You’re like quick
sand!”

“Now, there’s an idea for a song!” Louis chipped, to which Harry snorted then nodded decisively,
liking the idea. Then he quickly added in a serious tone, “I’m in love with you too. That’s why I
don’t want you to hide anymore. I want you to wear whatever you want, whenever you want!” he
said, Harry’s eyes narrowing, giving the sign that he got Louis was obviously referring mainly to
the pink underwear.

“It was that one time!” Harry interjected, already blushing as he remembered Louis before openly
expressing how much he fancied that sort of thing… even dreaming about it and all as he said on
the porch. His breath shuddered to a stop as he pictured himself in the panties again kissing Louis
in his dreams.

“I know. You’re still figuring yourself out. Nothing wrong with that. I just want you to feel
comfortable doing it around me. There is no need to hide from me, Harry.”

Harry gave a drawn out sigh. He looked away from Louis scoping eyes and massaged his aching
neck. Louis was making it sound so easy like he could just walk down the road in his makeup in
full view of all the town folk. From what he knew of Louis, he wasn’t the type of person to wear
makeup and stuff, and he could easily blend in a typical crowd any day, but he was so open about
being gay that he didn’t care what others think about him; he just told whoever asked and was
proud about it. Deep in Harry’s belly, on the other hand, he wanted to wear makeup. Not all the
time, but sometimes. He honestly wasn’t even sure, really. He never had the opportunity to test
things out and see if he’d want that kind of makeover, to be honest. He always hid in his room and
tried stuff on, taking it off before his mother caught wind of it, which she did quite a few times in
the past. But that was all behind him now. At least until Louis showed up. Now here he is talking to him about all this stuff he never thought he’d bring up to anyone. Now he’s confiding to Louis his secret. But how could he truly confide without starting from the beginning?

He ran a wary hand through his hair as he deliberated how to even begin telling Louis why he was so messed up in the first place. Sure he already gave him a rundown or two about it, but how does he explain in detail how his father’s death influenced his entire life? Suddenly he found himself wondering what advice his grandfather would give him in this situation. Louis- for some weird reason- reminded him a lot of him. It wouldn’t hurt to just talk to him.

“My Granddad knew.”

It didn’t come out the way he planned. He had no idea where all the tears came from, or the mangled sob that made the words sound like he had a shoelace wrapped around his tongue. But it was a thing he’d been wanting to let out of his system for a long time. He continued sobbing as he embraced the gentle hug Louis offered him. “He knew I was gay and I never even told him.

He was so cool about it. He told me I was special and that he loved me especially because I was different. He’d always tell me that we were the same and that the child in him wanted to be like just like me when he grew up- And I know that makes no sense to you, but he loved me and I miss him so much.” Harry buried his face in Louis chest, full on bawling now. As he convulsed in his pain, he felt Louis’ hand tighten around him.

“I’m sure he’s up there with your Dad and my Mum, they’re all having a party and smiling down on us. Granddad Emmet too. I wish I knew him like you know your granddad-”

“I know he loved you too!” Harry stressed, “From what I heard, he loved you buckets and regretted never meeting you.”

“Yeah, well I’m good just imagining them all partying over us so…”

“Maybe we could sing that beautiful song you wrote for them and they’ll come and listen to it.”

“That would be splendid, Harry! Your Granddad will surely be there when you play the guitar with your lucky pick!” Louis started rocking him gently side to side like a baby. Harry stopped sobbing when he started feeling weird. Half expecting Louis to start humming, he sat up and pulled himself together.

“Well, my Granddad didn’t mention uncle Emmet that much except when he came up in conversations about my Dad.” Harry’s voice fell as he recalled his father. He already told Louis about him but he didn’t reveal much about the aftermath of his death. He felt like this is the biggest thing about him, much bigger than being gay. His father’s death did a lot to shape Harry into what he was today; a broken boy in the dark, not knowing which way to go. From reading Louis’ Mum’s letters and meeting his friends, Harry saw that he had so many people around him to support him and even then, according to Louis, he barely made it through. But Harry, on the other hand, had no such help. Sure his sister was a rock-a very wobbly rock- and he’d never replace her for anything, but most of the people around him either didn’t know he was gay or if they did, simply kept it to themselves. Except his mother who at one time made it her mission to berate him every turn.

“When we came to stay I asked him what happened to my dad,” he began, as Louis sat quietly listening. "because I only heard bits from Gemma’s memory and, Mum only ever told me he had an aneurysm. She never went into the details. I made my Granddad tell me what happened. After he told me I just…understood. I understood why Mum and Gemma were so affected. Louis, I’m affected and I don’t even remember.”
Louis slid his arm around Harry’s waist and drew closer to him. He snuggled his head in the crevice of his neck and thought about what he just said. Harry was a baby when it happened, and he still had to suffer the effects of it all through his life. Had to practically nurse his mother back to life and be there for his sister as well. Louis knew exactly what that was like. It’s what he’s doing for his sisters, particularly Phoebe. Louis shuddered to think what it will be like for her in Australia without him. But it pained him even more to think of being that far away from Harry now that he finally had him. Now that Harry finally expressed how he felt about him.

“Mum was real sick. Sometimes she’d cry and call me to her and she’d hold me and cry, and I couldn’t move because her grip was so tight on me. She’d tell me how proud she was and how beautiful I was for hours. Literally. Then the next day she’d make a total one eighty on us. Louis, we were miserable as kids. The only time we felt at ease was when Granddad showed up and brought us to the ranch for visits. Gemma loved being with the horses and watching the athletes training. I guess she resented Mum for closing it after he died. She wanted to be an athlete. That’s why she went to college in the city. To broaden her opportunities. The Cowell Ranch takes interns and college athletes with potential.”

‘Wow,’ was rolling around in Louis’ head after that. No wonder Harry was so edgy around his mother all the time.

“I wanted to stay and talk to you after the concert but. I. I was scared.” Harry whispered, changing the subject, as he stared at the grass.

Leaning in, Louis cupped Harry’s face in his hands. He waited for him to say something along the lines of ‘You don’t have to be scared anymore,’ but Louis just ended up pecking little kisses to his forehead, moving down to his nose and mouth until they were both drinking each other in, moving their tongues around as they let out tiny moans of pleasure.

“What are your boundaries?” Harry asked, changing the topic again when they finally pulled away.

“Whadyou mean?”

“I’ve never had a boyfriend or anything so I don’t know. Are there rules for restraint?” he added as he folded his arms sheepishly while looking at the ‘Lacoste’ logo on Louis’ left breast pocket.

Louis gave him the raised eyebrow smirk. “The fact that you’re asking that is making me curious as what zero restraint means to you.”

Harry laughed, throwing his head backwards and making Louis want to kiss that exposed skin under his chin. Louis opted to reply instead, “It can only go as far as you’re comfortable with.”

“Can I wrap my legs around you?” Harry asked awkwardly. Louis grew a smile as he observed the cute dependent face he was showing him.

“Yeah,” he grinned, and barely a moment later he was being enclosed by the boy’s long legs as he latched on to him, gripping his arms around his neck and burying his face there. Louis held him tightly around the waist, trying not to freak out that the boy was sitting on top of him with their crotches touching while he breathed into his neck.

“Hmm? Something’s wrong…” Louis said.

Letting go right away, Harry eyed him curiously. “What? Am I being too weird? I knew I should have stayed put!” he muttered as he scrambled away from Louis, who grabbed his hand and pulled him back closer.
“No, it’s nothing like that. I was just thinking; We’ve never been on a date before. I’d like to remedy that.” Louis said smugly, raking a tuft of Harry’s hair behind his ear.


Louis’ mouth fell as he wasn’t expecting… “What do you mean ‘risky’?”

Harry moved his gaze to the trees. “I mean, like, wouldn’t people see us?” Louis’ eyes narrowed as he took a second to digest.

“Okay, then we could hang out in private if you want.” he said, his heart falling and bursting into one big puddle on the floor. He quickly dived in for a hug, not wanting Harry to notice the disappointment; not in him, but in the realization that he was basically back in the same situation he was with Liam three years ago. But it was too late this time. He was already head over heels in love in a way he never was with Liam, making it hurt so much more knowing he’d have to now be more patient and actually stick around this time. But weirdly, and luckily, he wanted the pain. He wanted every minute of every hour of pain he had coming with being in love with a boy who was worlds away from being as open and proud as he was. Louis decided there as he held Harry close to him that he would gladly take that pain if it meant that Harry got all the time he needed to find himself and come to place where he was comfortable being that amazing self.

“We can just hang out like normal friends in public, but I’d rather be private about us. I just-” Harry was cut off by a deep kiss on the lips where Louis grabbed his face, pressing gently but firmly into his skin.

“I know, Love. I agree, that’s the best thing right now.” Louis agreed as he peppered a few short kisses to his lips before they headed back to the farm.

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**Louis pov**

…**Friday**…

“You were right! This is beautiful! I’m so glad you stayed because I’d be in so much trouble to find an outfit for my date tonight! I probably would have declined the whole thing if you hadn’t convinced me to go!”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, a beaming Louis held up his phone and took a few snaps. “You’re gorgeous! Robin will be speechless all evening, no doubt!”

Anne let out a high pitched laugh, spinning around in her new knee length dress, hair left out to hang in waves over her shoulders. Robin was due to pick her up for their first date any minute now and Anne was having a bit of cold feet, which Louis quickly batted away with reassuring words.

“Well, I hope to god that’s not true, because I wanna at least have a conversation on this date!”

As they both laughed, Louis unconsciously looked to the open door of Anne’s bedroom and saw Harry standing, hand on the doorknob, about to enter his own room. His left eyebrow was up high and his expression was like ‘You two are acting like teen-aged girls.’ Louis just grinned back and stared at him as he ran an intrigued eye over his mother’s new look. Harry then flashed Louis an ‘I can’t wait till she leaves!’ look, disappearing into his room.

Diverting attention back to Anne as the sound of Harry’s guitar started ringing through the second floor, Louis looked on as she basked in her glee. Louis was happy for her. He was happy she was in
the first stages of love; that puppy cute stage where the person just made you feel all tingly inside. Louis related...because it was happening with him too.

He wanted to tell her so bad. In the kitchen earlier he had been cooking his first meal ever and Anne had been standing in the doorway taking pictures like a proud parent, not knowing what Louis had planned for tonight with Harry. He wanted to tell her how happy her son made him, and about this one and all the other dates he had planned out in his head for them. He wanted to tell her how proud he was of Harry for finally being honest with himself and with Louis and finally putting his fears to rest. After being honest with Anne about everything else in the past, including the whole Aiden plot, Louis felt weird now about hiding this from her, especially now that he and Harry were cuddling under trees, and pecking each other’s necks like literal lovebirds, and kissing each other; tongues and all, for hours until they felt it was getting late, making attempts to peel themselves away from each other like Velcro.

A faint knock on the front door was heard, and Louis’ eyebrows shot up in excitement. Gemma and Cord weren’t home to answer it, and lucky thing Louis’ ears were still good despite all the electric sawing and other power tools he had to endure whenever he helped with the gazebo, so he heard it.

He stood up and let a nervous Anne go through the door first before he closed it behind him as he followed her to the stairs. He heard Harry’s guitar stop as they passed his door on the way down and soon he too was hopping down behind them, stopping on the last step above the landing.

Louis opened the door and a dumbstruck Robin stood in the doorway, smelling like he bathed in cologne, with a bunch of flowers in his hand. “Oh, my dear Sweet potato pie!” was all the man could get out as his eyes fell on Anne. Harry and Louis exchanged amused looks as the man stuck the flowers out.

Taking the bouquet and grinning like a Cheshire cat, Anne took a bashful hand to her hair, fixing it as her shoulder moved up in a nervous laugh.

“That’s ‘She looks gorgeous’ in Swahili!” Louis deadpanned, trying not to laugh, but Harry-slapping himself over the eyes as a result- made a tiny snort escape him anyway. “Right, Harry?”

Harry nodded crazily, as he tried not to look at Louis for fear of his face burning up in hot blushes and everyone seeing how much he wanted to kiss him that very second. “Um, yeah. You look really nice, Mum.”

She stuck a thankful finger on her son’s chin as Louis stood with his lips inward; trying to hide his fond as he took the flowers from Anne’s hand.

“Thank you, sweetheart!” she said, giving a quick ‘goodbye’ in the form of a look, and was out the door in a flash.

“Did you see the look on his face!?” Louis exclaimed as the door shut.

Harry nodded, huge grin on his face. Then out of nowhere, Louis grabbed Harry’s hand and pulled him into the kitchen.

“I wanted it to be a surprise, but I know you smell that, right?” Harry slowly nodded and let out a drawn out “Yeah,” as his eyes moved to the oven where something was baking.

“I cooked for our date tonight!”

“I kinda assumed we were gonna hang out here,” Harry offered, cocking his head curiously toward
the picnic basket to take in the smell of that. He poked the lid open to see a sealed container of some kind of side dish already packed in there along with a bottle of wine and two tall glasses.

Louis giggled as he answered, “You should know me by now, Haz.” - Haz now? Harry thought. ‘Love’, Haz’, ‘Babe’... How many names is he gonna give me? - “I love hanging out here but I love the lake better.”

A slow grin came over Harry’s face as he processed the scene. “You’re the one cooking that? I thought Mum left that baking for us?”

“She didn’t! I did this all by myself while you and Cord were out back and Anne was getting ready!” Louis said defensively as he took the dish out of the oven.

Harry had to admit it smelled delicious. “But, what is it?”

Louis gave the answer proudly, his chest sticking out like a peacock, and Harry was truly speechless. He had never heard of such a fancy meal in all his cooking experience.

“Just let me pack this stuff up and I’ll meet you in the truck,” Louis chirped as he flung the kitchen towel over his shoulder. “Oh! Harry wait!” he remembered, as Harry swung back around to listen. “What we talked about yesterday? I think you should start from tonight,” Louis smiled at Harry like he was a Christmas ornament.

Rolling his eyes sideways, Harry was almost scared of what Louis was suggesting. Either he was talking about Harry’s choice of accessories, or the underwear. Turning to run back up the stairs, he chose to give Louis the benefit of a doubt and go with accessories.

Fifteen minutes later...

Smiling to himself as his date climbed into the vehicle, all adorned in his signature jewelry and smelling like a beautiful bouquet, Louis started the engine and cruised out the front yard.

"You look gorgeous, Love," he said, not even trying to conceal his admiring stare.

Blushing like a peach, Harry showed a little mocking-toothy grin and looked away trying to hide his happiness.

They reached halfway to their destination when Louis realized that Harry had gone quiet. He looked over to him to meet the boy’s anxious eyes already on him.

“What’s wrong, Babe?” he asked as he tried to concentrate on the road and Harry at the same time.

Harry blew a deep sigh. “Do you promise not to laugh?”

Louis looked at him in a series of short glances between watching the road. “I’d never do that!” he answered, noticing the serious expression on the younger boy’s face.

Tucking his hand in his pocket, Harry pulled out a little tube of something... pink. A broad smile came over Louis’ face, brightening up the entire truck, if Harry was to say.

“My sister got me this, but I never wore it for anyone to see…”

“I saw you in lip gloss, Harry,” Louis corrected, eyes on the road again.

“This isn’t that. This," Harry said advertising-ly, "is a lip-stain.”
Louis tossed a quick glance. “Looks like lip-gloss or lipstick from where I’m sitting.”

“Just listen to me, okay!?” Harry spewed, mildly irritated. "A lip-stain is kinda the same as those except you don’t need to apply much to get the desired effect."

Louis knew not what Harry was on about but he loved the way he spoke, all excited and happy about this lip-stain.

“I like it because it’s light and just gives a light hue, enhancing the features without making me look like a drag queen.”

“What’s wrong with drag queens?” Louis said, tone flat as he stole a glance towards Harry and his tube.

Harry stared at him. “Nothing!” he answered quickly, turning to face front with wide eyeballs as Louis’ blank expression remained unmoved.

Then he rushed to grab Louis shoulder as he burst out in his rant again. “I’m not saying drag queens are bad, I’m just saying that it’s a little ‘over the bottle’ extreme for me to even think about looking like that right now, and a simple lip-stain is a good start, and easier to look a pretty without over-doing it, but of course I still can’t wear it in public because it is a lip color after all and will still draw unwanted attention to me in a small reserved town like Champton where everyone is judgemental and unaccepting!”

Louis’ face changed in tune with Harry’s words, trying to process all that as it came out in one big ramble. He settled for focusing on the part which he did hear; the last part.

“Not everyone. Niall’s not like that.”

“Yeah, thanks for reminding me that now his parents are on the list of judgementa-” Harry mumbled as he tucked the tube of lip-stain back in his pocket.

“Harry…” Louis cut across. “The world is always going to see us as different. I may have come a long way from where you are but I’m still a teen with a lot of obstacles to cross just like you! Look at how horribly I handled things that day you didn’t want to swim in the lake. I’m still learning. Harry, this is just the beginning of our lives. Like it or not, there are a lot of prejudice people waiting in our future to try to hurt us and make us feel small. But my Mum always said that love has the power to drown out all the bad things in the world. If you treat people with enough love and kindness, you can definitely contribute to changing the world, one person at a time.”

“Wow! That. Was. Really…Sappy!” Harry spluttered in joking manner. Judging from his tone, Louis measured that he was just messing with him so he gave a dry ‘Ha, ha’ as they turned into the lake road, and reached over to take his hand, which Harry squeezed first. Louis smiled, taking that as a viable sign that he heard him out.

“Aren’t you going to put it on?” -He felt Harry’s stare sear through him as he drove so he continued to explain- “Isn’t the whole point of all of this to wear it? I did tell you to start doing the things you like from tonight. If you like lip stains, I like them on you, so put in on let me see!”

The biggest smile came over Harry’s face as he pulled away to shove his hand in his pocket again. Adjusting the rear-view mirror to see, Harry carefully put some on with Louis watching that more than he was watching the road.

“You’re gorgeous! I can’t wait to park so I can take pictures!” Louis said excitedly as Harry blotted his lips and showed him the results. He really was a vision. Louis needed at least one picture to
gawk over every night before he fell asleep.

After fixing his hair and stuff, Harry was re-positioning the mirror when a vehicle passed them coming from the direction of the lake. Harry heard a ‘Beep! Beep!’ in which Louis honked back, and he swung his head around curiously –and mostly scared that someone they knew saw them sneaking to the lake alone together at this hour- and realized by the lights, that it was Gemma’s car dashing away.

“What was she doing out here!?” Harry panicked. Louis offered a silent shrug as he knew Harry much preferred that she didn’t know every single detail of his rendezvous with him. He hoped he wouldn’t get mad when he saw what she helped him plan.

Louis heard the soft gasp escape Harry as they parked the truck and walked hand in hand toward the dark lakeside, which wasn’t so dark tonight as above them lay a blanket of stars of different sizes. Ironically, below was its own sight-and the true reason for Harry's gasp; There was a huge red checked blanket laid across the grass with little glasses of lit candles everywhere; mirroring the sky, and illuminating the entire area.

Louis rest the basket down and gestured for Harry to sit.

“There’s no way you had time to do this before! Don’t tell me this is what Gemma was doing here!?” Harry said, tone- the opposite of angry.

“I wanted it to be perfect and she offered to help so…” Louis gave shyly; keeping to himself just how far Gemma’s help went.

A dark silhouette lurched in front of him, clasping onto his shoulders as Harry shoved his face into his, breathing him in as he took his breath away with the sudden gesture of a rough kiss.

"It's more than perfect!"

Louis pov

After the meal, they lay on the blanket, holding hands and looking up at the stars. As Harry nuzzled into his arms Louis’ thoughts flowed. He thought about everything Harry had been through, and how he wanted to take it all away. Harry had been so helpless in his situation that he just wallowed in his pain. And when Louis came and showed him possibilities he didn’t know how to embrace him. Louis was finally getting through to Harry. He was finally winning over his trust. His love.

"You're so warm." Harry's eyes kept moving from Louis eyes to his lips, asking all on their own for a kiss, which Louis was more than happy to provide.

“I stopped breathing for a full minute when you texted me that reply after you left my house that night.” Louis said, remembering, as they pulled out of the kiss.

Harry grinned, teeth beaming. “That text was flirting with you, and after you ignored it; I didn't think you liked me," he said, wondering if to just be honest and tell Louis who really wrote it.

"I didn't want to say something stupid. I thought you were serious, or maybe you mistyped." "How does that qualify as a mistype?” Harry said, looking at the text in Louis’ phone as he pulled it out of his pocket and showed him.
‘I was actually sleeping but then I remembered I had to text you.’

“The ‘was’ can be easily accompanied by an apostrophe ‘nt.’” Louis said simply.

Harry rolled his eyes. “That still wouldn’t make sense. She- I mean, I would have used ‘and’ instead of ‘but’.”

Harry considered that. “No. No.” he said in a funny mock voice. “It would still make sense either way.”

Harry shook his head, re-examining the text for clues as to how Louis could possibly think it was a mistype.

“Look, let’s just forget it. I’m glad to hear you actually did flirt with me after all,” Louis countered as he pressed his lips on Harry’s neck, which was no longer bare; His different necklaces were all there again. He ran his palms gently over the back of his hand; his rings were all there again.

"I got so scared when you came to stay with us. I wanted to hide from you after all that flirting, which is funny because I actually wanted you to stay in my room.”

“Your room?” Louis laughed with a look that said, ‘No way, you’re kidding!’

“Yeah, I don’t know why; I just never really thought about how it would actually be once you got here. I asked Mum and she rambled about you being a college boy now who needs space to breathe.” Harry laughed. “I’m so glad you didn’t end up in my room after all because when I saw how much Mum got along with you, I was relieved to not have the opportunity to be reckless like Gemma told me I should be,” he said as he happy-gazed into Louis’ eyes. “I know, she’s the worst sister ever,” he added when Louis gave a ‘really?’ look.

“But then you didn’t let me breathe,” Harry said, intertwining his fingers with Louis's smaller ones. “You started flirting with me!”

Louis laugh-groaned into the air. “How do you know I’m not like that with everyone?” he teased.

“Oh, that’s a good point! It reminds me, you flirted with Murrey too!”

“What!? I did not!” Louis said totally confused.

“Yes you did! You almost broke your neck, getting a chair for him to sit!”

“I don’t remember that!”

“I’ll jog your memory- It was the day I wore the…thing.” Harry said. Louis gawked at him, noting how the boy was still uncomfortable talking about the pink underwear. Louis hid the concern about that in his face but made a mental note to help Harry overcome that discomfort of discussing such a simple thing as wearing underwear, after all; he was his boyfriend now!

Eyes searching the air, Louis grew a huge smile. “Oh, yeah! That part definitely drowned out anything else that happened that day,” he said to a flushed Harry.

As he finally caught hold of the memory Harry was making the point of, he let out a dismissive laugh. “I was only trying to stop you being mad at me, stupid! You were so angry that evening after your Mum came over and grumbled at you. You totally took it out on me after!”

Harry let out a snort and fell into a roll of giggles.
Louis guffawed. “Harry! I hate when you’re upset. I can’t function. That’s why you need to forgive Gemma!”

Harry’s giggling stopped as his gaze met Louis’, trying to read the demanding sternness in his expression.

Then Louis’ heart skipped a beat as a sudden fear rose up in him. A fear that maybe Harry was still unsure of what Louis felt for him. He sat up and scooted closer to sit adjacent to him, careful not to pull the blanket and yank the glasses and remaining wine down.

“I know this sounds corny, but our meeting was definitely the description of fate. I feel like we’re connected, Harry. Our granddad’s were best friends, and so were our Mums,” he said, combing his fingers in Harry’s as he sat up as well. “If that’s not fate, I don’t know what is. I don’t know what I would have done without you. It’s like my Mum sent you for me to make sure that I’d be okay.”

He pressed a deep kiss on the back of his hand as he gazed into his eyes. The candles combined with the sparkly stars made it possible to see the emerald green of his eyes, and Louis found himself slowly leaning in.

Harry stared pointedly at him, then suddenly darted his eyes to the basket. “We should pack up. And. Go. Home,” he croaked out, rising to his feet.

Louis lingered on the blanket for a few extra seconds, wondering where he went wrong. He then started moving to help pack the basket and fold the blanket back up, while Harry ran around blowing out all the candles.

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Both boys pov (Because sharing is caring)

“Why did you really breakup with Liam?” these words sounded through the truck as they drove away from the lake once again, homeward bound.

“I thought we already talked about this?” Louis reminded the source of the intrusive question, in question form himself.

“Yeah but you didn’t really elaborate,” Harry said, remembering that day that Louis wrote the beautiful song for the concert.

“I told you, we were young.”

“You were sixteen; same age as me.”

Is Harry serious right now? Is he seriously bringing up Liam fresh off their first date? Louis thought as he looked straight ahead, trying to ignore Harry, hoping he’d drop it. Harry didn’t know the whole reason why Louis ended things with Liam, and Louis’d like to keep it that way.

“You were my age and I’m officially dating you now, so are you saying that we’re gonna break up soon because I’m too young?”

Totally cornered and confused, Louis sighed exhaustingly. “You want me to pull over so we can talk?”
Harry shrugged. “Did you break up because of Zayn?” Harry really needed an answer to that. It was bothering him for a while and he wondered how Louis could possibly think that Harry, who he just met, could be more connected to him than one of his best friends...Zayn. Harry didn’t know why it bothered him so much that Louis had a past love life. Maybe because he did not have one and he was probably insecure but he really did want to know just how deep Louis feelings for Liam and/or Zayn went.

“What? Why- No, Liam hooked up with Zayn after.”

“You and Zayn were best friends. Maybe you felt connected to him more and that’s why you dumped Liam.”

Louis stared open-mouthed at the boy. He’s serious, he’s really serious… “Where did you come up that?”

“I know Zayn was your first crush.”

The truck made a screeching sound as it skid out of control for a brief moment before Louis got control again. He had almost gone over on the other side of the road as he had been looking at Harry, unable to take his attention off of him after hearing that statement.

“Are you psychic!? Ohmygod you’re psychic!” he blurted sporadically as he pulled over in front of the town park. There was a lovely water fountain there, and lots of pretty flowers, and benches to sit on. Every time they stopped by it or passed it, Louis wished he could pull Harry out for a walk but there were usually too many people there to see him hold his boyfriend’s hand, so he was always grateful for the dark lonely lakeside where he could kiss him under the stars for however long he wanted because that’s what Harry prefers. Whatever Harry needs at the moment; Louis can comply.

“Gosh, this is so funny! I’ve been thinking the same thing about you!” Harry chuckled nervously, watching Louis, whose head and elbow were awkwardly out the window in shock.

“Really?” Louis asked skeptically, eyes flashing all over the boy, completely blown away by the fact that Harry wasn’t freaking out or getting an asthma attack because of the accident he just nearly caused.

“Yeah! It’s like you said; we’re connected. I feel so strange with you, like you see everything, and know everything about me. Sometimes I’d be thinking something like a question and you’d just come out of the blue and answer it out loud! I still can’t get over it!” Harry cooed.

Louis nodded mechanically as he wasn’t quite sure how Harry had just managed to turn the subject around on him instead. “Well, I know I’m not psychic, so what’s going on here?”

Harry smiled unsurely. “Like I said, we must be connected.” He was rather enjoying the look on his face and decided to wait a bit before telling him the actual reason he knew about his crush on Zayn. Louis kept looking at him like he was the ghost of Christmas past, and Harry gulped, wondering if to cut the sentimental crap now.

“Yeah, that still doesn’t explain you knowing such a vivid private detail. And you just basically accused me of having a connection with Zayn, so…” Louis turned to face Harry, a deep furrow setting over his eyebrows. ”Have you been talking to my friends? Particularly the one whose name rhymes with fan?”

Letting out a defeated sigh, Harry answered. “No, Your Mum. I read it in one of the letters.”
Louis eyeballed him. “Okay, first of all; is that all she said? Second; you need to give me back that letter! And third; you are doing the exact same thing Niall’s parents did to you. You’re assuming I liked Zayn because we were friends!”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “No, Love,” he said sarcastically using Louis’ pet name for him, and mocking his tone,” It’s written on paper and in an email as proof, that you my friend had a legit crush on Zayn. I actually had something to go on unlike Mr and Mrs Horan.” He knew Louis was just embarrassed about it and was only throwing blank daggers at him, but he found it kind of cute, strangely.

Louis obviously didn’t have a comeback so Harry went on. “So let me ask again; Why did you break up with Liam? I reckon after you broke up, you were either jealous because your boyfriend got with your best friend or because Liam got with the guy you’d have much rather been with in the first place.”

“It definitely wasn’t because I wanted to be with Zayn.” Louis fumbled with his fingers. “That connection that you and I have; I never had that with Liam. What I had with him was more…” Louis said, looking for the next word.

“Sexual?” Harry offered in a normal tone, but when Louis looked over at him with wide eyes and a bloodless face, the younger boy’s features were full of an awkwardly painful expression that Louis wished he wasn’t the cause of, but he knew he was. And he also knew that if Harry wanted to know about him and Liam then he’d have to come clean with the whole story because the last thing he wanted was for this Liam thing to pop up later and bite a big hole in the pretty little pink bubble he and Harry had going here.

“Look, the reason why I broke up with Liam is because he didn’t want to be seen with me in public. He didn’t want anyone to know we were together,” Louis said plain and clear in a crisp tone with a pinch of disgust.

Harry’s eyebrows skyrocketed as he opened his mouth to say a surprised “Oh!” that came out more like an embarrassed, regretful, and sad ‘Oh!’ instead. Louis couldn’t help fix that even if he tried. Harry just had to let that sink in until Louis could come up with a million reasons why their relationship is different from the brief one he had with Liam, because he definitely didn’t want Harry getting scared that he was going to breakup with him too for obviously similar reasons. He knew the situation was basically the same, but more than anything he knew that his heart was so much different now. It was stronger and more sure of his feelings for this sweet green-eyed country boy and what their future held; however scary and unpredictable it may seem.

“I got scared,” Louis said in barely a whisper, gradually increasing his volume as he continued. “I’d just come out of the closet, and here Liam was, pulling me into his. I couldn’t go back there, so I called it quits. I’d been friends with Zayn since we were twelve and I never even knew he liked guys until I saw him with Liam. He wasn’t out either, so he and Liam were perfect together in that sense…”

The silence hung in the night air as the words settled like bile in an empty stomach.

Then- “Mum was right,” Harry sighed sharply, not expanding on that statement.

Knowing this is the part where he asks ‘What do you mean?’ Louis quickly asked it, waiting for Harry to answer, which, of course didn’t take long at all.

“She said I shouldn’t ask questions I don’t want the answers to.”
Okay, here we go, Louis thought as he gave an in-drawn sigh, It’s ‘A million reasons’ time...

Chapter End Notes

Stay tuned for the aftermath of Harry realizing that he's pulling Louis into his closet just like Liam did! Thoughts?????

Please, pretty please leave kudos if you enjoyed this and have not left any yet!! Love you guys so much! Do you guys want to know how many chapters are left till its done?? Believe it or not. I already started writing book two!
Hello everyone. I want to say thank you for all the kudos, comments and reads! Please keep them coming. I want very badly to start my new older Louis fic while this one is going on. I need your support on this! Talk to me!

Aesthetic songs for this chapter are- Stay with Me by Sam Smith, How's it Gonna Be by Third Eye Blind, Do You Remember by Phil Collins, and plus I listened to some heavy Indie/folk shit (Which is very calming btw) while writing this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Friday night continued...**

Louis' mouth moved down, getting closer and closer to the bottom of the V in Harry's opened brown button-up T-shirt; the latter's shoulders scrunching as he panted with the sensation of the older boy's wet tongue tasting him in such a sensitive area.

"Stop! We can't do this..." Harry's chest seized up just saying that. Even after Louis gave him a whole lecture on why he didn't mind keeping them a secret until Harry was ready, sugar coating it with heavy kissing, he still felt guilty and insecure, and scared.

"Boundaries?" Louis recalled mindfully.

"Yeah, boundaries." Harry copied in agreement, running a nervous hand through his hair.

Louis stared at him with puppy eyes, not moving, as he said; "We should get home before Anne gets back."

Harry mouthed an 'Okay' as he buttoned back up his shirt, but Louis didn't shift back to his own seat; instead he rocked forward again, inhaling the scent of Harry's neck and sending electric flutters through his entire body.

"Uh, you didn't tell me how it went when you told your dad you were staying an extra week?" he asked in a rush, trying to distract Louis from his collarbone. Thankfully Louis looked up at the truck ceiling as he thought about his reply.

"Uh... He yelled..." Louis flat-toned. "...yelled, and then yelled some more. That's the bad news. The good news is, I put the phone on the desk for five whole minutes so I didn't hear most of it. When I picked up again, he was just calling 'Louis? Louis are you there?' I was like, *I'm happy here. Just give me this one week!*' before I hung up." Louis said hurriedly, bopping his head to his words. Then he darted for Harry's neck again.

Harry closed his eyes, letting the pulsing sensation take him over while trying to breathe even. The last thing he wanted was to get another asthma attack.

"That week is almost over. You only have the weekend, before-"

Louis stole a kiss just then, muffling his words, and pausing only to say; "That's why we shouldn't
waste it talking."

Louis was being rather forward for the first date, and Harry found himself struggling to hold back his own desires. But they were parked right in front of the park, with the supermarket, toy store, and community center in plain view. This needed to stop.

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**Harry’s POV**

The next morning was not much different as the boys found themselves rolling around in the hay rather than stacking it neatly in piles like they were supposed to.

"So, if you had a choice now, who would you choose out of the two?" Harry dug up as a distraction, pulling out of a kiss that started approximately twenty minutes ago.

Louis kept moving back to his neck as they lay on the dried grass. The sun had not come up yet but so hadn't anyone else, as the boys rose early just to get the work done earlier so they could spend more time hanging out, or making out, but they might as well scrap that plan because the rate they were going, they were nowhere near finishing their morning chores before the sun came up.

"The two what?" Louis muttered from his concentration. If he didn't stop, Harry was sure he'd have a hickey to cover up soon.

"Zayn or Liam." Harry explained, remembering how angry Louis was with Liam the night they dragged him to the cabin.

Louis came up, blowing a rough sigh; eyes moving all over Harry's face.

"None." Louis said plainly, diving into his neck again.

"I'm serious, Louis. If I wasn't in the picture, who was your choice?" Harry asked, pushing him off.

"Why do you wanna talk about that, Harry!?"

Harry noted the irritation in Louis' tone. "I want to know. I feel like it ran much deeper than you let on. Liam told you he regretted your breakup. Do you?"

"Well your feelings are wrong! My crush on Zayn was just me going through puberty. And that night, Liam was drunk!" he said blinking at his name, "If you weren't in the picture, it wouldn't matter who I'd choose because they chose each other. Looking back on the whole thing; I never felt with Liam remotely half of what I feel for you!"

"Mm..." Harry answered, still feeling insecure as Louis pulled him; burying his tongue in his mouth.

He sank into the kiss, deciding that that was a good enough answer and that he'd let it go. But as their kiss became more intense and involved, with Louis' hands roaming beyond the perimeters of Harry's waist, something else was at the back of Harry's mind, bothering him the whole time; something that was jabbing him hard in the hip. He took in a sharp gasp; dreading the possible cause.
"Is that your phone?" he dared to ask, cheeks already hot as he propped his hands backwards on the hay.

"My phone is in my back pocket." Louis whispered in a fancy tone.

Harry widened his eyes, making them huge. He didn't know what to say.

"Relax, Harry, I can hear your heart beating a mile a minute!" Louis chuckled. He leaned sideways just enough to shove his hand in his front left pocket, pulling out a little object Harry knew all too well; an inhaler. Harry used to get attacks more often when he was little but they hadn't happened in a while. Not until he met Louis.

He reached and took it from him, eyeing it curiously. "Why do you have this?"

"I got scared after you got the attack. I didn't want to take any chances. I put one in the dashboard compartment of the truck too!" he added, chipper.

"That's- precautious of you." Harry said, breathing a sigh of relief that that was the thing jabbing him all along. He shifted himself in the hopes of Louis scooting away because he was beginning to feel something else bulging through his own jeans but instead Louis just leaned in and started kissing him again.

***

**Louis' POV**

Most of the remainder of the day consisted of the boys sneaking around the farm and making excuses to dash away with the truck. Gemma was feeling under the weather so they took a trip to buy her Panadol that took so long she asked them when they finally came back if they went all the way to the factory to learn how to make the pills. It was almost night-time when Louis finally got separated from Harry as the boy went to take a shower. Flopping down backwards on the bed, he held the phone up in front of his face.

Text from Niall to Louis: Hey, Lou. I know you're leaving soon and we haven't really had a chance to properly hang -for obvious reasons- so are you and Harry busy this evening? We can meet at Eddie's Diner.

Louis: I can't tell u how relieved I am that you texted. I need to hang out with Harry in a public place rn. We're spending way too much time alone!

Louis knew Niall meant by 'obvious reasons' his situation with his parents, but Louis couldn't help but project the phrase on his and Harry's situation. His hormones were getting out of control and he was afraid he'd end up doing something he shouldn't before he left for Wales if he didn't at least have a distraction, so Niall was right on time.

Niall: LOL. Well then it's a plan! The five of us.

Louis: Five?

Niall: Yeah; me, you, Harry, Shawna, Liam...

Louis: NO! No Liam! Bad idea!
Niall: Okayy??? Mind if I ask why? I thought you guys were best friends in a band and all?

Louis: Long story short; Liam and I used to be a thing and it might be awkward for Harry.

Niall: Then hanging with Liam is the perfect way to show him there's nothing to be awkward about. Btw I thought Liam hung out with you guys on the farm lots of times?

Louis: Harry makes himself scarce whenever he comes over. But you're right. They have to learn to get along! Text Harry! See you later!

Niall to Harry: Grab Louis and meet us at the deli at 7pm!

Harry knocked the door a few minutes later.

"Uh? Niall texted-" he said, popping his head in when Louis told him to come in.

"I said, 'Come. In. Harry.'" Louis said syllable by syllable as he lay on his bed twiddling his bare feet.

Harry looked behind him and quickly closed the door, climbing over Louis on the bed to sit in the corner by the wall.

"I know! He texted me too." Louis said, mischievous look on his face as he scrambled up to meet Harry's face. "Do you wanna go?"

"You mean to the diner, or?" Harry teased, diverting his gaze to the Freddie Mercury poster Fizzie brought Louis from Australia stuck to the wooden partition wall behind Louis, then the Navajo patterned blanket Anne got him when he arrived which was draped over his headboard. He wanted to hang it on the wall but never got around to it.

"Both..." Louis droned as he moved closer, eyes mesmerized by the boy's lips. He had made him put on the lip stain earlier that day while hiding in the tool-room, and kissed him until the color was removed and replaced by a very red one as he sucked on it, and now hoped

"Sure? I guess."

"Me too." Louis whispered as he closed up the space between their lips, gently easing Harry into the wall.

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Harry's POV

Everyone met coincidentally outside the diner at the same time; Niall hand in hand with Shawna, Liam bouncing up with his headphones on, and Harry yanking his hand away from Louis as the poor boy tried to proudly take it, forgetting their agreement. They all chattered as they huddled into the diner, eyes flashing on some of their peers who had the same idea to chill there this evening.

Liam slid into a cubicle and gestured for Louis to come. He slid himself in next to Liam while Niall and Shawna took the seat opposite.

Louis eyed Harry and called, "Come here," patting the space he just made next to him. Harry quickly squeezed himself next to Niall who scooted into Shawna to give him room, and turned his head just then, pretending not to hear Louis. There was no way he was going to sit next to Louis with some of his schoolmates hanging out in the diner.
Niall started nibbling in Shawna's ear and her huge teeth came alive like someone had just put on a big screen TV. Harry flinched away as he witnessed the braces saying 'Hello!' to him without Shawna even saying a word.

Liam initiated the conversation. "Zayn's actually arriving tomorrow!" he said more to Louis than anyone else.

"And I'm leaving tomorrow." Louis said with a dash of regret.

Harry furrowed his brow at the sight of Louis' shoulder brushing into Liam's shamelessly.

*What the fuck! There is literally enough space for a third person on that seat!* Harry thought angrily. Surely Louis realized that Harry was not going to sit with him after all so he can scoot over and leave about a foot of space between him and Liam, right? Wrong. Louis seemed to have unintentionally forgotten that his boyfriend was sitting right there looking on as his bicep grated into Liam's like cheese.

Liam's threw a surprised face and planted his arm in front of Louis on the table. "Hey, set the time for me, will you? I keep forgetting."

Louis flashed Liam a bright smile and Harry almost bit his own teeth off. "Sure, Liam. Niall, what's your time?"

Both Niall and Shawna started scrambling around for their phones, mumbling and talking all over each other while Harry aimlessly drummed his fingers on the table, looking on. Louis gave him a quick glance as he tried to communicate how funny Niall and Shawna were being but was met with Harry's glare which he chose to ignore which made Harry even more mad as he watched him cradle Liam's wrist to his chest as he set the time for him. A grateful Liam sat contentedly looking on as Louis did it, giggling as he fussed about Louis always wanting to set the time a few minutes earlier. Harry didn't even know that about Louis, and he suddenly felt odd.

"You're always late, Liam. This will help you." Louis said, matter-of-factly.

Nodding like a crazy person, Niall took note, asking Shawna to locate the time settings in his phone so he could set his earlier as well. "It'll help me get up early on a Sunday morning! I'm gonna need it tomorrow because I'm going home late tonight!" he commented, giving Shawna a look, twinkling his eyebrows.

Harry rolled his eyes at them as the waitress approached, a tall cute dark-haired girl from his class, named Kendall. A neatly fitting blue T-shirt with the diner logo on it, and an equally trimmed apron with a pencil behind her ear under a red cap, she flashed them a warm smile as she pulled a pencil out of her hair.

"Harry! Niall! How's your holiday going? I've been so busy here I haven't had time to hang out!"

Harry smiled at Kendall politely, as Louis sent an attentive look his way, finally distracted from Liam.

"At least you still had time to perform at the concert with Taylor."

Kendall put on a frustrated frown. "Yeah, she's my best friend but she's such a snob! She told me I was just there for looks!"

Niall erupted in a laugh that sounded throughout the diner.
"That's not a bad thing," Harry blurted out, frowning. He really meant well. He was only trying to make her feel better about not being able to sing to save her life, but the way Louis looked at him then was evidence he thought otherwise. *The nerve of him...*

"Awe, you're a sweetheart, Harry. But you guys took the whole show that night! And your friend Houey here."

"It's Louis!" Louis retorted coldly.

Kendall just pasted on a quick smile and turned back to Harry. "Sorry 'bout that. So what can I get you guys?"

"One large milkshake and two straws!" Shawna beamed as Niall's eyes widened in a look like 'You're a genius! Why didn't I think of that!'

"A cold glass of water." Harry said pointedly to Louis, who looked back at him regretfully. Certain people need cooling down, Harry thought, wishing to throw the water at him despite his cute apologetic stare.

Harry glanced at Liam to let Louis know why he was so mad, and his eyes ended up lingered on the boy; Liam looked so comfortable sitting that close to Louis in public, ordering food and muttering to Louis about trying the famous Champton burger special.

"You okay, man?" he heard Niall mumble in his ear, making him jump.

"Yep." He sang in response as Louis indeed obeyed Liam and ordered the burger smiling like an idiot when Harry was about to suggest he try something else because he personally hated the burger special.

As Kendall reached the counter Harry's whole face ran hot flashes as he spotted someone else he knew; Nick Grimshaw. There, blending a smoothie and adding a cherry on top for a customer, Nick looked slim in the oversized uniform and apron with cap covering half his forehead. Harry had zero clue as to why Nick would need a summer job but he respected the way he moved; zealous and assiduous. Nick may be a pain but he was always ardent in everything he set his mind to. If Harry had to name one thing he liked about him, that would be it.

But it was also exactly that that made him his arch nemesis, because Harry was equally passionate about his goals.

Nick threw a nervous eye his way as he wiped up the counter, and Harry waved, returning a questioning look. Nick looked somewhere behind him warily and then at Harry with a face like 'I can't leave the counter' followed by another look of 'It's nice to see you, though, you look nice' that kept evolving to, 'Oh you're here with your mundane, subpar friends, I see, I see... But it's really good to see you though...'

Grimmy made a small jump and started wiping the blender as a short husky man of about thirty came out from the kitchen with beads of sweat running down his face and wild eyes red from the heat of the stove. Resembling a neighborhood friendly werewolf with flaming red hair that stuck out in every direction, Harry knew this man to be the cook and owner of the diner. He had a pretty good menu and lots of kids came in regularly to hang out after school. Being summertime, most of the kids were either away to camp or visiting family abroad so the diner wasn't that busy, but it being a Saturday and mid-holidays a fair share of customers –kids and adults alike- piled in. Eddie had some relation to Taylor-probably second cousin, if Harry recalled- so it made sense for him to hire her best friend, Kendall but Harry would have to remember to ask Grimmy why he opted to
spend his summer behind a hot counter rather than swimming in that massive pool in his parents' mansion. Judging from the fact that Grimmy stopped texting him since he didn't answer any of them at all- because, what would him and Grimmy have to talk about really? – Harry knew he would have to ask him in person and make it sound casual.

Louis- now completely invested in Harry's flushed face -with eyes like a hawk, turned to see what he was so engrossed in. Eyes flashing from Nick back to Harry, he sent a solid converse tip to his foot, hitting him on the sides of his shoes and jerking him back to the table. Harry shot wide eyes at him to which he got a dangerous glare right back at him, and looked down at his phone to doodle as a distraction from it. For the next few minutes, he felt Louis' eyes gaping at him, obviously trying to gain eye-contact, and he glanced up once to see the boy's face all sad and worried, but then Harry looked down again when he saw that Louis was still stuck to Liam like old gum under a desk, not wanting to socialize anymore.

When the food came, Louis took a huge bite with Liam watching intently, and let out a moan that made Harry almost choke on his burrito.

"Omygod! You're right, Liam. This is awesome!" he mumbled through a full mouth, as Shawna and Niall stuck two straws into their milkshake and did that 'thing' couples always do in the movies that Harry much wanted to do with Louis and was beginning to secretly hate now; the stupid cliché thing.

"I know, right!" Liam agreed as he bit into his own burger. Louis jabbed him with his elbow and the two giggled silently, and Harry started to not feel hungry anymore. Then, just as he dropped the burrito back in the wrap, Louis reached out an uninhibited hand and grabbed it up, taking an impetuous bite from it.

"Oh god! This is even better!" he exclaimed in glee as he gave Harry the biggest smile ever that seemed reserved just for him, making Harry instantly feel included again.

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Louis' POV

"He was sitting too close to you." Harry answered when Louis asked why he looked like he was marinating in resentment.

"It's a diner! That's the way the seats are!" Louis spat back as he stole glances away from the road on their way back home from the diner. He shook his head, befuddled. Harry's feelings of jealousy were absolutely unwarranted.

"Yeah, well there's a little phrase you can use called 'MOVE YOUR ASS!'" Harry jabbed.

"What is your problem!? I'm not mad at you for sitting next to Niall, or flirting with that girl, or making puppy eyes at Nick! And I should be!"

"I didn't make eyes at anyone! Kendall's my classmate since kindergarden! I was just being nice to her! And Niall and I never dated!" Harry elucidated, visibly and angrily counting off on his fingers.

A brand hot eye-roll, Louis shouted; "News flash- neither did Liam and I!"

"Yes you did! Liar!"
"I told you, we never went out!"

"Ughh!" Harry shoved Louis hard and he slammed into the door as he tried to navigate the truck. He let out a whimper as his arm hit the hard window edge. A new look of pure anger in his eyes, he stepped on the gas and sped around, going in the opposite direction.

"I wanna go home!" Harry shouted, voice trying to sound angry but coming out more scared, as Louis' face looked livid.

They came to a stop halfway down the lake road and Louis cut off the engine. Harry sat quietly, eyes on him. "I'm sitting next to you now." Louis said, looking at him.

"I sit next to you every single day; in this truck, by the lake, on the farm! If I wanted Liam, I would be with Liam!" he added louder and louder with every syllable.

"Why are you yelling!?" Harry said in a squeak. Louis was breathing heavy and his face wasn't softening at all.

Louis cradled his hurt arm. "You hit me. I don't see how I deserved that," he said, voice steadying.

"I'm sorry." Harry said in a small heartfelt whisper. "I'm sorry," he repeated, reaching out a timid hand towards him. Louis' eyes momentarily closed as Harry touched him, breath evening out. How can one make you so mad one minute and totally calm you down the next? He looked at Harry again; his eyes were wary, concerned like he was unsure of how this was going to end. Louis didn't want him being unsure, because Louis was not unsure. He knew no matter how angry Harry got him, he still craved his touch. Harry had nothing to worry about because Louis wasn't going to break up with him for being a bit jealous. Louis kind of found jealous Harry cute... in an irritating way. Needing to communicate it, Louis leaned in and softly touched lips with Harry.

Half an hour later...

Louis sucked hard on Harry's neck, breathing in his smell. Harry whimpered and made tiny noises of pleasure, grabbing Louis' hair with ring adorned fingers.

They were supposed to be back at the house by now but both found it difficult to stop. It's like Louis had desire for Harry so badly before and now that he got a taste of him, he couldn't get enough.

Stealing away one last kiss on the lips, Louis intertwined their fingers on both hands he was already leaning awkwardly into him and was starting to get a cramp from the gear lever pressing on his leg. He sat in the driver's seat and looked out his own window. He wanted to get closer to Harry without rushing things, but it had become increasingly difficult. He felt like they needed more room to explore one another.

"Harry, do you want to go in the backseat with me?"

"Louis?" Harry breathed, tilting his head in dismay.

"I'm not gonna force you into anything, if that's what you think. I just think we'd be more comfortable." Louis explained, hand around his waist.

Harry didn't answer. Louis sighed and let it go.

He started the engine and pulling away.
"Louis..."

Louis didn't answer.

"Louis!"

"What, Harry? If you don't trust me what's the point? I'm tired anyway, so..."

Harry gaped at him. "Louis, stop the car."

Louis looked at him, puzzled as he mashed the brakes. "What now?"

"So, you're mad at me because I don't wanna do stuff..."

Louis was hurt. Harry made it sound like he was a mean selfish dominating jerk, and that was far from the truth.

"No, of course not!" he said passionately. Harry looked back at him, his expression unbelieving.

Then Harry jumped out the truck, opened the backseat door and climbed in.

He stared at Louis blankly. "Come on!"

Louis hesitated, watching him.

"Harry..." he said before finally following suit, climbing in next to the curly haired boy. The two just sat there looking at each other.

Harry's eyes were scanning Louis with desire that made it hard for him to breathe slowly. "I'm really trying here, Louis...I feel like maybe you want to squeeze in so much in so little time..."

"I would never rush you. You have to know that. We have time. We'll make time. I just find it so hard to be close to you and not want to touch you everywhere." He touched Harry's lips with his thumb, and the boy closed his eyes with the feel of it.

Louis settled his forehead on Harry's forehead. Everything playing back in his head, from the time he first saw Harry, to his mother's death, and meeting Harry. He leaned in and kissed his lips, believing in fate. Believing he found his one and only love in an unexpected way. It was as though Harry erased all the things that Louis thought was important before he came to the ranch.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Louis suddenly dipped to lay on the seat, resting his head on Harry's lap and holding on to his knees.

"I don't want to go home if it means that I can't be alone with you until tomorrow. I'm going to sleep here with you..."

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Harry lay in his bed, still thinking about what he did. While Louis had fallen asleep on his lap in the truck a few hours earlier, his phone had buzzed and Harry tried to wake him but he looked so peaceful that he left him to get a bit of rest as they had hardly gotten any since they started sneaking around like crazy. While he had been smoothing the older boy's silky hair, his phone buzzed with a text, and Harry, wondering if it was from his mother, curiously slid the phone out of Louis' pocket and read it. The text had been from Niall.
'You were right about it being a bad idea to invite Liam. You two were off the Richter scale! Louis, Harry was boiling mad! I know you were innocently fixing his watch but it looked so domestic! Now I kinda get where my parents were coming from with me and Harry! I hope you two are okay!'

Yes, they were okay; no thanks to Harry. He thought about texting Niall about it but he ruled against it as he was not even supposed to see the message in the first place. Besides, what would he say? That he was being a jealous idiot for no real reason? He went over the text in his head as he rolled on his side. Louis didn't want Liam to come to begin with, because he thought about Harry's feelings? Harry felt stupid for fighting with him now. His childish behavior will not make Louis stay. Nothing will, but maybe if he tried to be more mature he would want to come back; he'll find the time to.

A desperate idea sprung in his head. He jumped up from the bed and started folding his blanket. He needed to make up for not being able to show PDA. He needed to provide reasons for Louis to stay, or at least for him to count his time with Harry as a valid relationship.

Creeping down the dark staircase, he turned the corner for Louis room and gently knocked on the door. No answer. He then turned the knob and realized it was unlocked just like earlier that day. Peeking his head inside the dimly lit room, he spotted Louis asleep under his covers. Closing the door behind him, he sneaked up to the bed and slowly climbed with his blanket, covering both him and Louis with the soft material.

Louis shuffled in his sleep and soon he was awake. Earlier in the truck, Harry had to kiss him awake so as not to startle him, and he had to admit he did it for personal reasons as well, ha! Louis quickly drove them home while Harry played some loud party music to keep the both awake for the ride.

Now, Harry noticed his sleepy eyes graze over the huge pink-and-white blanket. He looked a bit confused but nonetheless grabbed the covers over himself.

"This is cute..." slurred out of his throat as he trailed back off to sleep.

"I can't sleep without this. It was one of the items in the box. Don't judge!" Harry warned, which made Louis smile wider than ever. He took Harry in his arms and breathed contentedly.

"You should really lock your door." Harry advised, snuggling into him. Louis hummed pointedly as he kissed his hair. "That's not going to happen if leaving it unlocked means I get to sleep next to you under your comfy baby pink blanket." he mused with a grin as his eyes opened to teasingly look at Harry, who groaned in response as he buried his face in Louis' neck.

"You are so lucky I like you, Louis..." Harry finished, fading into sleep.

"I know, Babe." Louis replied, smiling at the realization that after just under a month of knowing each other, and only two days of being a thing, they were now sleeping in the same bed, wrapped up in each other.

***

Harry's POV

The next day, Harry woke up early, and leaving a sleeping Louis, ran back up the stairs with his
blanket. Landing on his own bed again, he felt rather well rested. Louis' bed was more comfortable than his, probably because the mattress had hardly ever been used before Louis.

When everyone had woken up, the household -minus Gemma who still couldn't seem to beat this flu- went to church on Anne's insistence. It went well; the highlight being when Niall decided to get up from his usual front seat at the beginning of his father's sermon and creep over to sit next to Harry; gesturing for Shawna to come and sit on the other side of him much to Mrs Horan's visible relief. Mr Horan had stopped talking, completely taken aback by his son's interruption but then quickly regained himself to continue preaching, as Louis stifled a laugh.

That afternoon was a whirlwind of phone calls for Louis as everyone in Wales voiced how happy they were that he was finally going to be there the next day. He even got to speak briefly with his baby brother and sister, with Harry eavesdropping on the conversation as he tried for a suspenseful while to make Ernie recognize his voice again. He kept changing it hoping one of his tones will jog the kid's memory but his aunt Kim eventually took over the phone, leaving Louis all sad which broke Harry's heart to see. He also got to talk to his father- who had left waiting in Doncaster and gone to Wales to be with his kids- making sure that Louis knew he only had one week to visit Wales now before Australia. Louis still hadn't made up his mind about the whole Australia thing. If anything, he was more unsure than ever because of his new relationship with Harry. He had told Harry he wanted to tell his father about them but Harry insisted it was a bad idea because, "What if he tells Mum!?

Cord had been watching his afternoon programming when a news bulletin came across the TV screen warning of a summer storm passing in close proximity to Doncaster, prompting Louis to call his Grandma to make sure she was prepared in case it hit the city. The news lady said they were hoping it changes course and headed away from the whole continent but advised that the occupants and environs be prepared for anything. Harry heard Louis reassuring his Grandma that he will only be entering Doncaster tomorrow to hop on the first flight to Wales so he won't be anywhere near the storm if it hit.

Being bored because Louis basically had no time for him as he was busy with packing etc.; Harry followed his mother around the farm as she ran around barking orders at Cord to make preparations for the animals in case the storm made a diversion and passed over Champton instead. Harry was more worried about her than this storm as she suggested buying more stuff from the hardware they didn't have money for. He lifted his hands to the sky showing her how scorching hot it was out and that the storm was on a steady course far away from them.

About 3:00pm when Louis had finally gotten a chance to relax and eat an apple, he sat in the kitchen doorway with Cliff, pushing his furry face away playfully as the dog kept coming in for sappy licks. Harry watched from the couch as he giggled with the huge animal sharing cuddles. Louis got a tiny window of opportunity to peel his apple as Cliff got momentarily distracted by the laugh Harry let out from just looking at them. Harry came over and sat next to them, wanting to be included. Louis cut half of his apple and gave it to Harry then cut a piece of his half for Cliff, who devoured it in no time and resumed licking Louis' face and ignoring Harry.

"This is so not fair! Did you forget me!?” Harry said, fake crying. Cliff closed his mouth as he looked at him and went back to harassing Louis.

"Ha! He's my dog now!” Louis sing-songed as he tucked another piece of apple in Cliff's mouth, "Yes, you are! Yes, you are!

"Is it me or is it hot in here?” Harry said, watching them smooch away.

Not catching Harry's sarcasm, Louis' head shot up. "Oh! Great idea! Let's go hose down!"
"What? Where?" Harry said as Louis pulled him up.

"In the back yard, silly!" Louis said. He was lucky the sun was genuinely hot today or he'd never get away with making Harry and him sick before he leaves the next day.

The boys hopped down the back stairs with Cliff on their heels, Louis peeling off his T-shirt and jeans to reveal his boxers. Harry discarded his own outfit as Louis pulled the hose from standpipe next to the stairs, spraying him as he let out a yelp. As he tried to grab the hose from Louis, his mother showed up from behind them, making Harry's heart skip a beat. She looked herself like she was about to get a heart attack as she witnessed the boys in their boxers monkeying around the backyard.

Then just as Harry was about to make a run for the house, Louis took it upon himself to spritz Anne with a little water, testing her and laughing like a goat. "Mehhhhhhh."

Gasping and choking, Harry went as still as a potted plant forgetting to breathe as he watched for his mother's reaction. Then a tiny crack of a smile appeared on her face, melting away her previous startled expression, and Louis saw an opportunity to spray her with more water as she started squealing in glee.

Harry stumbled backward, out of the scene before him and observed it like a spectator; The sun shining on the white painted exterior of the house glaring in his eyes, Anne giggling at a relentless Louis soaking her, and washing away every trace of sadness from her...Harry tried to remember the last time he heard her laugh like that; so full of spirit. Maybe a few times sparsely between the years of his childhood. Between the periods where he had to get pillows and blanket for her because she failed to get up of the living room floor at night after hours of crying where she lay. Between the days he had to learn to cook because she never got up in time to make them breakfast before school and he got fed up with Gemma's ramen noodles because she was always busy studying for college to have time to cook.

Harry tried hard, but those times were all that came to his head. Those scenes had become almost perpetual to him.

Louis turned the hose on Harry for a second, jolting him back into the scene. Anne giggled wildly at this and shook her hair like a wet dog, as she dived to get the hose from a vivacious Louis who was having way too much fun. Harry watched as she grabbed it from him and started spraying both him and Louis while roaring like a gladiator ready for battle.

Harry, now fully present, screamed in glee as the water hit him. Louis braced his knee with one hand and held out the other, begging for a time out. Harry, not missing a beat, snatched the handle away from his mother and doused her with more water, intent on extracting more noise. They came hysterically, maniacally, scandalously, and Harry let the sounds of it encompass him.

He only had Louis to thank for this. And for a moment, as if jolting him into his senses, he thought how unreal it all seemed, and started to think how selfish he was for feeling the way he did for Louis. For even thinking that his happiness can come from the same person as his mother's happiness. Because he knew deep down that she would never laugh again if he let himself be that happy in that way with her best friend's son.

Stealing him away to the lake? Taking up most of his time, time that was not meant for him? Time that had basically just run out...?

Harry shut off the hose. Suddenly feeling naked with shame, he ran up the back porch and grabbed a towel, retreating to his room.
William's POV

"Tea?" he asked, throwing a monitoring eye on his daughter as she leaned over the banister looking over the back yard where the children were cackling away in the pen as they took their usual riding lessons from the staff. She looked good. Better since she had been in therapy for almost a year. He blew a sigh of relief that he had finally got her to accompany the kids on one of their regular visits to the ranch.

"No, thanks," Anne replied, glancing at him.

William's thick fingers gripped the steaming cup, his wedding band shining in Anne's eyes. "You and the kids can come stay here. The staff can use your help with horse training."

"I'm done with horses, Dad. That part of me died with Gavin. I'm actually thinking of starting a nursing course. I never want to find myself in a helpless situation again." Anne's expression was rigid and cold. She looked at the children riding the horses in a spaced out gaze like she saw right through them and straight into some dark memory from her past she despised. William was surprised she was talking about Gavin's death. He nodded to himself, content that the therapy he paid for was actually working. And he was just as grateful she was at least trying to do something other than mope around her ratty cottage. The kids had been keeping him posted on all her progress and setbacks since she started going to therapy and even though she was doing well, William worried that Gavin's death wasn't the only cause of her breakdowns in the first place.

Anne frowned at the ring. "I can't believe you still wear that."

"I guy can still have a keepsake even though the ceremony never got to happen." He meant for them to come out casual and airy, but the weight of the topic fell on the words like rain.

Hand suddenly becoming unsteady, he rested the cup on the banister. Anne looked back to her children in the pen, expression unmoved. "The kids can come visit, but I'll only come home when she does."

William took that with hope. He reckoned the 'she' she spoke of was never going come back, but at least Anne still called the ranch 'home'.

Anne suddenly let out a loud grave gasp, and William looked to see Harry crash to the ground; dust flaring up in his wake. Anne pushed her weight off the banister and started running down the stairs in a mad dash. William looked back at the round pen and noticed that Harry had already gotten up and brushed himself off, ready for Calum to help him back up on the horse as he laughed it off with Gemma, but Anne was pelting towards them now, screaming.

William sighed, eyelids heavy. He knew immediately that it would be at least a month before he saw the kids again.
Louis' POV

Sunday night...

"Why are you backing away from me?" Louis said, moving in time with Harry, who kept slowly moving backwards until he was almost outside. Louis pulled him sideways and pushed him into Poppy's stall door. The horse let out a light whinny to ward them off from disturbing her sleep, but they ignored it. Both boys were so engrossed in the other's eyes that they drowned out every sound or lack of it around them. They stood silent, breaths heavy as Louis hand moved from Harry's arm to the soft fabric over his chest, causing him to let out a stifled breath.

When Harry had run off during the water fight, Louis assumed it was because he didn't want to get sick or trigger his asthma, but he was beginning to get the sense that something deeper was at play.

He moved an inch closer to Harry's face, and he flinched. "Don't...Don't, please!"

Harry's breath quickened under his hand as it moved up to his cheeks, cupping around his ear as they kept their eyes locked. Louis tried to pull Harry into a kiss but Harry was forcibly resisting him. He was throwing away all their progress.

Easing his grip on the boy, Louis' vision started blurring as hot tears curtains his eyes.

"Where did my Harry go? I want him back, please?" he said, still holding him to the wall as he whispered.

Harry closed his eyes, frustrated. "You need to forget him because he's not coming back."

"How can you ask me that? I can never forget you-"

Harry's lips disappeared for a few seconds they were crashing into Louis', as the latter leaned in and connected them. It was a deep kiss; Louis drinking him in as he pushed his face hungrily into Harry's, and Harry pushing his head forward in crazy intervals as he too sought to taste Louis' mouth. Louis pressed his palm instinctively onto the wall behind Harry's head and pushed his entire body into the boy, causing his head to hit the back of his palm and stay there as Louis' left hand moved to intertwine with the fingers of Harry's right hand, bringing it on the wall next to his face. Harry's left hand moved sheepishly on the side of Louis' waist, grabbing it as Louis involuntarily pushed himself up on him.

Overwhelmed and out of breath, Harry pulled away and turned his head to the doorway, looking out aimlessly. He closed his eyes as Louis pulled himself off of him, both panting.

"This has to be the last time..." Harry demanded, warned.

Seeing how upset he really was, Louis pulled his hands away. "I'm sorry, but no. It isn't. Far from it." He backed into the empty stall door on the other side and leaned on it, arms folded, eyes on Harry.

Harry closed his eyes as he cried. "Please, Louis. Forget me. I'm dead weight-"

"Don't say that! You can't just go around saying things like that! You've never been that to me and you never will!" Louis was shouting and frightening the animals.

Harry started sobbing, unable to stop. "I don't want you to go!"

"I don't want to go!" Louis agreed sharply. "You think I want to move to some country I know
nothing about!? At least I know that my Mum grew up here, so this is home! Australia...Australia is where my Dad ran away to and wants us all to run away to! ...I don't want to go there."

"Then stay with me.." Harry said, barely audible as his sobs threatened to stifle his speech.

"I want to, but I have to go to Wales. I don't want to disappoint my brother and my sisters. After that I don't know if Phoebe is gonna be okay to go to Australia without me."

Running up to him, Harry's face was soaked in tears grabbing him under the armpits and pressing into his shoulder. "I need you too. Phoebe has your dad, and Fizzie, and Daisy, and Lottie. I have nothing. Can't you see I need you more?"

He had some nerve making demands after what he just pulled, telling Louis to forget him and everything they had. For the first time Louis was truly angry with him. For the first time he was scared to death of losing him forever. What if he left for college and came back to visit Harry to realize that his affections were cold again? How long was Louis going away for? If it took Harry only a few hours to go one eighty on him then how is it going to be when Louis has leaves for an indefinite amount of time for school? Or Australia!?

"I told you, I will make time for you! I promise you that. But you have to promise me you won't do this again. Promise me!"

Louis was hysterical. He knew he was being loud enough to wake up the hens in the coup and no one needed the kind of noise that would garner right now, but he needed this. He needed this boy to make him a promise never to scare him by revoking his affections for him ever again.

He gripped on to his coat, boring his eyes on him as his voice quivered. "I love you. All of you! I could be gone for weeks, or months, or years and I would still feel the same about you. I'm that sure! If you feel like you won't then say now because if you want to be with me then you have to be all in, Harry. You have to promise me that you won't do what you just did to me again. Ever!"

Harry said it almost immediately. His voice was squeaky like a tiny rubber ducky, but he said it. "I promise."

Louis searched his entire face for signs of doubt, only letting his grip on him go to receive a desperate embrace from the boy as he clutched the back of his shirt.

Between hearing Phoebe's voice crying for her mother in his head, his father's voice screaming 'Australia, Australia', Ernie sounding distant on the phone like he was slowly forgetting his big brother, and Harry's whirlwind; Louis' heart felt torn.

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Chapter End Notes

Okay so who wants more of the Cord, Gemma, Aiden storyline? Is there anything you guys feel I abandoned that you still need answers to? I feel like I need to elaborate on some side storylines. Don't worry OTS will appear soon! I actually have more storylines for all the boys in book two because-okay ill tell u a bit abt book two later on!
Yes, that is Ed Sheeran in there, lol.

Also-Please read my xfactor Judge Louis oneshot and tell me if you liked it! I wrote it a while ago and it needs some kudos etc.

William's story is a very important one in the grand scheme of things and I feel like it's a whole fic by itself which is gonna take a lot of planning on my part to merge with this one. I love it a lot and hope you will too. I will continue to scatter the story throughout where it has relevance. I think since I started from a time period of William's old age I will keep going backward until he's a young man and voila you will all go like 'OH! THAT'S WHY!' I hope it turns out like I picture it in my head! Please comment let's have a conversation!

I love u guys! Chapter 33 is up next!
Through The Storm

Chapter Notes

Ok I know I took forever to update but that's because this chapter came out of nowhere! It was totally unplanned and I needed to get to know it better and work it into the story. I never want to rush these chapters and make them less than satisfying, and I squeezed this orange dry! (I hope to god it's satisfying!) This chapter is much longer than the others! I'm excited that this story is getting quite a lot of reads and attention lately and I'm so happy and grateful for your support in this! Please continue commenting so I know who is reading and what you guys think! I don't bite! I love you all and hope u are all ok!
Warning- smut.

I listened these songs while writing :- Love Me When I'm Gone- 3 Doors Down, Black Balloon- Goo Goo Dolls.

I drew inspiration for certain scenes from these movies:- Step Up Evolution- movie (solely for one of my airport scenes visual), Raise Your Voice- cute Hilary Duff movie (also for public singing and dancing in public visual), Can't Hardly Wait- 90s teen movie. (Lol I swear I wasn't skylarking. This one was just part of a collection of airport scenes video I watched to get inspiration for a scene and ended up watching the whole movie. ps-I love teen Jennifer Love Hewitt!)

Ok, on with the story...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**

Monday morning bright and early, Louis dragged his luggage out to Gemma's car. It was heavier than when he arrived since he was taking with him most of the stuff Anne bought him like his latest Adidas t-shirt, and his aged looking muddy-colored scarf. Yet, he still wasn't going with everything; he wanted to leave behind little promise-sakes to remind Harry that he'd be coming back, like his keyboard-which, why would he carry that all the way to Wales anyhow?

When he spotted Gemma on the porch, he threw an impatient eye at her and she slugged over to him.

“Do you party every night!? It’s already so late!” he complained, bulging his eyes at her.

Rolling her eyes, she slapped his chest and he held the spot. “Better late than never!” she winked.

Frowning at her wink brought his hand down from his chest and slid it in his pocket, biting his lips as he looked around.

Gemma sauntered to the car, still sleepwalking. She had been sleeping a lot lately and blamed it on her busy college schedule finally taking its toll on her during the summer. Starting the engine
while she waited for Louis to be free of Anne's grip as the woman hugged the life out of him, she took a deep breath determined to make the three-hour drive to Doncaster airport. Anne offered to drive Louis to the airport but Harry pulled her to the side and begged her not to let that happen. He gave the argument that he needed the extra time with Louis on the ride there and Anne's presence would be detrimental to that. Harry made a deal with her that he'd stop being mad at her for touching his stuff if she did this for him.

Gemma soon saw what he meant by 'extra time' as those two were wrapped in each other the entire ride with their legs tangled up and their hands glued to each other's faces, whispering stuff like "I'll miss you so much," and "Promise you'll call me when you get there," and "How am I gonna go home and be normal with you gone?" and the classic "I'll call you and stay on the line so I can fall asleep to the sound of your breathing," when they passed the city entry sign.

'How shalt I eat bread without you!?' 'How doth I clean the stables without you!?' 'How do go back to being a clueless little virgin when you're gone?'

Gemma added to the conversation on behalf of her brother quietly in her head as she neared the airport. Despite all the sap taking place in the backseat she was still proud of her handiwork. Yes, her handiwork.

It was all her doing! She took credit for all of it, even though she had no idea how Harry finally came around. She had asked him and the only answer he had for her was "It just kinda happened," - much to her annoyance - but she was still happy for her brother.

They went in with Louis, helping him drag his luggage to the waiting area. Stetson clad and guitar laden- Seriously? What- Is he gonna serenade Louis into staying? - Harry sat with him and shifted closer. Gemma sat a whole space away from them - expecting Harry to burst out into song - and turned to see a man walking up to the row of seats, a tuna can with coins in his hand. He called out repeatedly, "One dollar, one dollar!"

Harry dipped in his pocket and threw in whatever change he had in his wallet, followed by Louis- who had much more, making Gemma’s eyes widen- followed by Gemma, who turned up her nose as the ragged clothed man came closer for her to drop her bills in. After she had done so, he dipped his head to them and continued along the row. "One dollar, one dollar!

Gemma wondered why he didn't immediately find the KFC outlet now since he looked starved, and besides, Louis had practically emptied his life savings into the tuna can quickly so he and Harry could get back to staring each other down like they'd never have the chance again.

Twiddling with Louis’ fingers, Harry’s gaze drifted and glued to the homeless man. Without a warning he flew up- guitar in hand- stumbled through the row to reach the man. He turned, bewildered when Harry poked him.

“Can you sing?” Harry asked the middle-aged man, the people in the row watching him and murmuring. He took of the brown Stetson and handed it to him.

The man took it, mouth agape, and answered “Sure can!” He flared his arms to demonstrate while wailing off into a symphony. Harry smiled as he started to play a tune from a popular song. “Do you know it?” he asked the man, who looked around the large hall, a tinge of colour peeking out from behind the dirt on his face.

Louis and Gemma looked at each other. “He’s really going in for the jugular isn’t he!?” Gemma quipped. Grinning, Louis pulled out his phone to make a video.

“She calls out to the man on the street, ‘Sir, can you help me?’

...He walks on, doesn’t look back. He pretends he can’t hear her!
Harry sang looking down at his guitar pick strumming while a small crowd gathered around them digging in their pockets and holding up devices. *Ping...Pang...Ping...* went the sounds of coins hitting the tuna can in contrast to the sultry echo of Harry’s voice. A young girl waiting to board a flight with her parents had to take the homeless man’s hat off of his head and place it in murky hands as the falling coins grew so heavy that they started to sound like a cash register opening and closing.

“Oh, think twice...It’s another day for you and me in paradise.”

By the time the song was over there was not a dry eye in the area as the crowd clapped. And Louis, proud of his amazing boyfriend thought to add a bit more fun to the atmosphere.

“No offense, Haz but your making everyone cry,” he said sassily, adjusting his coat.

He then leaned and whispered something in his ear, and started to sway on the spot as Harry’s face lit up and started strumming a more upbeat tune. Then Louis broke into his weird version of a jig, hopping on one leg and flapping his elbows like a duck, his silky fringe flipping side to side from under his red beanie. Harry’s head bopped in perfect time with Louis’, mirroring his movements.

“One day, maybe next week. I’m gonna meet ya! Meet ya, meet ya, meet ya!” Louis sang above everyone else as Gemma stood stationary holding Louis’ iPhone up, giggling.

Everyone joined in singing “I will drive by your house and if the lights are all out I’ll see who’s arrooooooouuuuuunnnddddd!!!!”

Everyone cheered and suddenly Harry was engulfed in a stale-sweat embrace complete with a pat on the back by the vagrant, dollar bills flying out of the hat as he gratefully said his thanks.

In the moment, Louis grabbed the boy from behind and enclosed his arms around him, turning him towards the flash of the camera from the phone in Gemma’s hand. They grinned ear to ear as their cheeks rubbed together.

“Louis! I’m sending this to my Bluetooth!” Gemma shouted over the crowd that was now dissipating.

“Sure!” Louis answered, taking Harry’s hand and pulling him back into the seat. “Have I told you how absolutely amazing you are?” Harry made to say something but Louis pressed a finger on his lips and took both his hands, rubbing his rings as he looked down at them. “Actually, I wanted to-” he stopped mid-sentence. He looked up, big blue eyes on him.

“What’s wrong?”

His tongue caught in his throat and a thousand darts stabbed into his breast plate. He had seen that the purity ring was back on his finger. The finger that he wanted to- Well he might as well forget it now. He let go of his hands and pushing his fingers in his own pocket to grip the little box he was planning to…Why would he still be wearing that? I thought since what happened with Niall’s parents he’d not want to anymore?

“I know. This is killing me too. I don’t want you to go. It’s not too late to change your mind.” Harry presumed.

Eyes raking over him, Louis pulled his empty hand out of his pocket and held his again and said;
"I will come back. I promise."

Outside was getting worse as the clouds grew darker and larger. And just as Louis' phone rang, a robotic voice came over the speaker;

'All flights are cancelled until further notice due to the storm watch! Repeat- All flights are cancelled until further notice! We apologize for any inconvenience!'

Harry's entire demeanour lit up for someone who just heard a natural disaster warning. Gemma caught Louis' mimic of her own confused gaze towards her brother.

"See? It's that fate you keep telling me about." Harry explained, lips thinly stretched. "You were meant to stay. Your Dad or siblings can't be mad at you for something that's out of your control."

"The storm is gonna pass, Harry. Then what?" Louis said in a low voice that was laced with hopelessness as he sought to answer his phone which kept ringing like crazy.

"Come home and we'll figure something out together. You'll see the girls before they leave for Australia but you're not going. You belong here with us!" Harry sounded in total control of the situation, hands batting away the illogicality of what he was suggesting.

Gemma had to give it to her little brother; he could make a pretty good argument. *He learned from me... Besides, he didn't make it on the school debate team just by batting eyelashes, although it could have worked.*

Louis' opened the call.

"Yeah, Dad?" he said as he locked eyes with Harry. "...Well, I'm kinda stuck at the airport. They've stopped all the flights because of the storm."

"This is exactly why I moved in the first place!! What kind of place has a storm in the middle of summer!!!!" Mark fumed.

"He's so angry!" Harry pointed out after the call. Half the row of seats heard the man's booming on the other end- *even with the loudspeaker off.*

"I don't know why he does this to me - like you said; it's nobody's fault I can't make it to Wales." Louis shrugged.

"What next?" Gemma piped up. "Sorry to burst your bubble, Harry but I don't think we can make it back home before the storm!"

Louis leaned over Harry and grabbed her hand. "Even Grandma tried to call-in" Louis said looking at his calls list. "Don't. We can go stay at hers until the storm passes. It's a good thing we're in Doncaster because I rather her not be alone during this."

Gemma sighed sharp relief. "Well, we better get going before it comes down!"

**

"Are you sure that's all you need, Grandma? Okay...okay, we will. See you in a while."

"Harry! Ha!" Gemma burst out laughing as they stopped in an isle of the grocery store. It was jam-packed with people rushing to get last minute supplies before the storm and the three had to huddle together with their trolley unable to move fast through the pushing crowd.
“Harry, that would look lovely on you! We're taking it!” Louis bubbled excitedly at the pink bow Harry was checking out.

“It's not for me! I want it for Tamar!”

Louis grinned thinking about the pink bow on his Grandma's cat's collar.

“If we have everything, we best get going!” Gemma said pushing her brother ahead.

Louis dragged his hand on Harry's back, guiding him along to the cashiers’ counter as they revised all the stuff in the trolley.

He noticed how he was more at ease with being touched in public when it was not his home town where everyone knew him. His chest panged for the warmth he was getting from Harry's fingers as he wished the same for them while Champton Valley but he did enjoy the significance of the moment. They quickly cashed and hurried back to the car.

On Louis' insistence Harry then called Anne letting her know of their change of plans. Gemma added in the description of the scenery, making Anne worry even more. Louis eventually took over the call and made the case that he didn't feel it was safe to drive back to Champton with the winds threatening. Anne was hesitant at first but reasonability took precedence in her tone and she agreed that it was not wise to leave the old woman alone in the storm.

When they arrived at the house, they stalked up to the door with Louis stealing a tiny kiss on Harry's cheek where he started blushing and biting his lip with unease.

As the door opened Louis' hand found their way on the small of his back, making him wind awkwardly as Louis' great aunt greeted them.

"Oh! Come in! Come in, you lot! I was just about to call Tamar back inside! - Tamar!"

"Oh- I'll get her for you, ma'am!” Harry offered, giving Louis a quick look to ask if it was okay.

Louis cracked a smile that said 'Sure, Babe' and the old woman batted her hand.

"Awe, do come inside! She'll come when she's ready." she replied, leaving the door slightly ajar for the small creature to have access.

Inside the little town house was vastly different than its mundane exterior. As they passed the foyer, they entered the muffled, heavily draped living room filled with Victorian ornaments and other keepsakes from that era. Harry saw it as hospitable and savvy, and the only thing out of order was the clean, empty square on the not-so-recently painted wall where a picture once was. He looked up the stairs to see the same dark, flowery-patterned carpet theme stretched out, slithering up the stairs and disappearing around the corner to the bedrooms.

As he watched Louis set down his luggage, a cashmere ball smoothed over Harry's foot. Tilting his head downwards, a pair of keen green-gold eyes bulged up at him.

"Oh, I see you finally came in! As soon as you saw Louis and his friends- oh, she's rather buddy-buddy with you my dear!"

Louis dropped in a squat, picking up the grey fur ball in his arms, and his swishing hair cascaded over the cat's eyes. "Hey, Tamar. Haven't seen you in a while, Love... This is Harry, and he brought you something- yes he did."

Grinning from dimple to dimple, Harry ran his ringed fingers inbetween the cottony fur and Louis
beheld the purity ring again. It bothered him so, but he put it out of his mind.

"My! Someone's due for a haircut!" Sophia commented, spectacles on Louis.

"I'll just let Fizzie do it when I get there." Louis said, combing his fingers through the almost shoulder-length mane.

Soon they were busy unpacking groceries and helping tape down all the windows while Harry explored the little town house. Harry joked around all day with a magnifying glass he noticed in a cupboard in the living room while looking for the scissors to help.

"Elementary, my dear Watson. Elementreya!" he kept saying to Gemma's annoyance.

"No, Grandma!" Louis shouted when she took the scissors from Harry and started snipping at his hair anyway.

Harry grabbed her hands and started staring at them as a distraction. "What lotion do you use? Your hands are lovely."

"Why, thank you dear! Nivea is quite good!"

"Yes it is! It is!" they chatted together, making Gemma and Louis exchange looks as they plastered the tape around the window edge.

In the afternoon, when they were done making sure everything was secure and that the flashlights were fully charged they played a few rounds of a Scrabble he spotted in there as well, with Sophia dominating the game every time.

Harry played his guitar for Sophia in the evening when he was finished, it was dark outside, and the winds had increased greatly.

A little while after dinner, further seeking to comfort her new housemates, Sophia took to the kitchen to make some hot chocolate while Gemma and the two boys huddled together to see the storm update. The single chair had small sink in the cushion, telling that it was Sophia's usual spot, so Gemma took to the love seat with cell phone in hand.

Although it was on the edge of Doncaster, the storm was still causing quite a ruckus in the city. As they watched the television, they saw that someone's house got partially crushed by an old tree.

"Whoah!" they said in unison.

After the news had finished the old lady clapped excitedly as it was time for her favorite prime time show.

"Jack is going to propose in this episode! And I'd like to see what Marjorie is going to do about the job interview!" she chippered but as she rested the tea tray down and motioned for Louis to shift over, the box television channel scrambled. Gemma looked at Harry who looked at Louis who looked to Sophia who looked stood yelled "Shoot!" causing her niece's son to burst out in a laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!!!! Ha! Haaaa!!!!"

"What in the- How am I to know who Delilah chooses!?- Ah! - Stop that!" she said in irritation rolling up a Style magazine and hitting Louis with it. "Rats!"

A hitched cackle paired with a soothing hand was extended by Harry to Louis who made a fake cry
noise as he burrowed his head in his neck. Gemma peached up as Louis lifted it again to fake cry even louder at the woman before he was nestled in again by an over amused Harry who patted his back sympathetically.

Sophia's hands reached her hips. "Oh, what am I going to do with you?"

Head popping up like a bunny, Louis began, "Let's see...My birthday is in four months-" but he was cut off by the clang of something hitting the roof.

Then- the lights went out. Louis gripped Harry's sweater, and the younger boy nuzzled his ear in an attempt to take advantage of the lack of illumination.

Louis' lips aimed and did not miss the soapy-sponge like glide of Harry's parted lips. Louis drew a quiet breath as he involuntarily nudged closer, moving in new, exiting world with him.

Then he was alone in it, and he opened his eyes to unexpectedly see the lights back on, only then realizing his eyes were actually closed before in the dark.

Tiny termites nipped at Louis' heart as he found himself gazing apologetically, dolefully, longingly at the back of Harry's curly head.

It felt like forever, yet only a few seconds had passed before the lights went out again, but too late as the couch fibres next to Louis crunched with the leave of the other occupant.

He only heard the flumping of the chair opposite as Harry must have opted to impose on Gemma's solarity, she herself was now a deep crimson as she pulled her gaze from him to stare fixated on the scratchy grey screen of television as the lights flashed back on once again.

"The winds are getting stronger. Prepare for a whole night of this!" Sophia commented, hobbling away in the dark, muttering about lighting a few candles. She called back to Louis to get the flashlights out.

"I'll go help with the dishes." Gemma said, pressing the flashlight icon on her cell phone and dashing away.

"Where on Earth is Tama- Tamar!!" The boys heard as Louis opened a drawer in the side table containing flashlights and other knick-knacks.

"I'll look around for her?" Harry said to the creek of the top of the stairs as Sophia' footsteps echoed into the hallway.

Taking a flashlight from a despondent Louis' hand, he offered pursed-lipped smile in lieu of a 'thank you.' as they turned to hear Sophia say; "Check in the garage! She likes to hide under the buggy!"

"Are you okay?" Louis questioned, clinging to the warm material on Harry's elbow.

"Mhmm." was all he got as the boy gently pulled away from him.

Opening the cosy drapes to reveal large glass double doors leading to the garage, Louis opened them, looking expectantly at Harry, in the hopes of getting some 'alone time' with him, but he declined with a stiff shake of the head and sauntered away.

"Come on, girl. You have to come inside now!" he sweetened as he entered the garage, getting down on his hands and knees to peer under the old stationed buggy to locate Tamar.
Turning back into living room, Louis slumped down on the couch as Sophia finally emerged from her pitter-patter. She eased into the couch beside him and blew a raspberry.

"So how is Champton, dear?" she asked.

"It's...It's the most incredible place I've ever been! I never would have imagined I'd like a place so isolated and small but I love it. Harry and I go swimming in the lake and Anne's so nice... she's protective of Harry but she lets me drive Harry's dad's truck- which is awesome- and I made some new friends... There are a couple people I don't like but overall it's so peaceful. I wake up every morning and smile when I realize where I am. I feel so close to Mum there, like I'm going down memory lane with her, seeing and experiencing everything she did as a kid, you know?" Louis elaborated as he looked through the glass door at Harry picking up Tamar from behind the front wheel of the vehicle.

Smirking, Sophia said, "I'm glad you found your place there. I knew you would fall in love with Champton."

Louis met her eyes. "What?"

Grandma said louder over the slapping winds. "Does Anne know about you two?"

Catching her meaning, Louis briefly closed his eyelids and quickly said, "No, Grandma, please, you have to keep quiet about this. Harry doesn't-"

"Believe me, I understand. Just know that all secrets come to light. Don't wait till she finds out the wrong way."

Louis caught her tone that came complete with a side-eye, and knew she was hinting on earlier.

"I'm sorry, Grandma. I know I should have-"

"Ah, stuff it! Who wants to rant about their love life to an old woman!?"

Louis snapped a frown. "Don't say it like that. I remember I used to tell you everything! Just-since..."

Sophia winged her arm over his shoulder as he rested his head on his usual spot on her shoulder. "I know... I can tell that you're struggling with more than your share on top of what has already happened. But, my dear boy, if life brings you something exciting that makes you happy at a time when you would otherwise be sad, embrace it. It's a God send."

She notably followed Louis' dreamy gaze to where Harry was now cuddling with the cat, newly adorned with her pink bow.

"So, what's he like?" she spoke a bit higher than a whisper. The ring was falling so hard that he was sure neither Harry nor Gemma could hear them but yet they still spoke low.

A wide scrunch-eyed smile spread across his face as he answered in a low whisper to equal hers. "Well...He's adventurous, he was ecstatic to come here, actually. He wanted to get to know you better. He's so talented, Grandma; he can talk to horses, and you saw before how well he can play the guitar, and write songs. He's smart and really sweet. He's only sixteen, but he cares so much about things. You should see how he is with the animals on the farm."

"I know. I see how he is with Tamar. He's special, that one. I'm happy that you're happy, but taking into account his age and the way he was raised; you ought to tread carefully. You were never one
to sit around and wait. Mind his age, Lou.”

Louis blinked slowly as he soaked in her advice. He knew she had a point with the unpredictability of life at such a young age, and Louis got it, seeing he was only eighteen and had not a clue where his own life was going, but he knew where he wanted to be; next to Harry.

Both Gemma and her brother returned to the living room at the same time. Louis flew up and shut the doors for Harry while he set Tamar on the sofa.

Gemma yawned causing the old woman jump up and take to the stairs again muttering about extra blankets.

"I have a duvet you can sleep on, Loubear!” she shouted back at Louis.

There were only three bedrooms and Louis already deduced that he would have to share a room with Harry and that there was no way his great aunt would let him sleep on the bed with him.

"Loubear!?” Both Harry and Gemma repeated, cackling like two hyenas as the old lady disappeared upstairs.

"Ha. Ha.” Louis said, not at all finding it funny.

"Mum used to call me that!” he said, the words coming out surprisingly lighter than they felt. He swallowed and stepped into the dark shadows of room, listening as Harry and Gemma's laughing abruptly cut.

"I like it.” Harry said in a drone to fill the awkward silence.

Gemma rolled her eyes. "Of course you do!"

Happy, 'ice-cream' feelings rising up in his torso at the sooth of the younger boy's voice, Louis took his hand and led him up the stairs, ignoring the frightened resistance to his hold.

He gave Harry full access to pick out whatever he wanted from his luggage, stepping out to allow him privacy to get ready for bed.

"Goodnight Harry! Goodnight Louis! Goodnight Aunt Sophia!” Louis heard Gemma chirp as she ducked into the room adjacent to his and Harry's. He breathed a laugh into the sink, looking at himself brush his teeth in the mirror. He heard the timid reply of Harry echoing his sister's words, and welcomed the tiny fairies buzzing around in his heart as his cheeks flushed. The comforting familiarity of the smells and textures of his great aunt's home paired the surreality of Harry being there made his eyes twinkle like stars in the candlelight reflection of the bathroom mirror.

"Goodnight lovelies!” came Sophia's mutter as she closed her bedroom door.

"Grandma, wait! I have to get the duvet!” he shouted, spitting out the toothpaste.

Watching as he dragged the duvet across the hall from her room, Sophia put on her warning glare. "Now, I don't know what frolicking you been doing on the ranch but I trust you to behave while you are here."

Louis' eyes moved embarrassedly around the hallway. "Frolicking?” he repeated, laughing as he sank backwards into the bedroom door, "Goodnight, Grandma.”

Louis closed the door quietly not to wake Harry who was already covered from head to toe on the
bed. He tiptoed into the room and set up the duvet before dropping down on it. He let out a sharp sigh as he tried to sleep, only to end up tossing and turning for the next ten minutes. With all the whirring of the wind and rain outside, he just could not get comfortable.

He flipped over on his back and let out an exasperating sigh as he flung his pillow at the door. "You know; you should really come sleep with me. The bed's really nice..." a voice said from above him.

Okay... So Harry wasn't asleep yet.

Without a word, Louis dragged himself off the duvet and onto the bed with Harry, spooning him. Louis' ears witnessed a little giggle escaping the boy as he rested his arm around his waist.

He kissed him on the head. "Go to sleep."

"Um, your-sorry- my inhaler is pressing on my butt."

Eyes wide as a balloon, Louis went against his brain and took Harry's hand, guiding it to his hips, and running it down the side of his boxers to show how he did not have any pockets in them, therefore no inhaler. Harry tensed up next to him as he undoubtedly realized it.

"...I wasn't going to take your inhaler to Wales anyway, Harry." he added.

The boy's breath hitched, and Louis began to think he really should have brought it with him anyway. His own heartbeat leaped to the samba as he placed Harry's hand back to the front.

"Cigarettes?" Harry asked in a tone more like he was begging Louis to answer with a 'yes' so they could get out of this embarrassing situation.

But instead, Louis gave a small, significant shake of the head as he unblinkingly stared back, breathing long and deep. "Where would I put it, Harry?"

He swallowed as Harry suddenly turned to face him, and propped himself up on his left elbow and forearm, finding himself holding his breath over the sight of his soft candle-lit features, and the little opening of his lips; and before he knew it, they were kissing, and he grabbed Harry's waist and they rolled over with Louis landing on top of him as he ended up on the other side of the bed.

Louis kept going down until he reached Harry's tummy, and felt it contract as his teeth gently grazed over the surface. Harry kept making little noises of weakness with every contact... He sucked hard, pulling up his shirt and tasting further and further until he reached the hem of Harry's boxers. His neck was now lightly brushing against Harry's crotch, making his heart skip a beat as he felt the bulge move in reaction to his kisses on his abdomen. He started shifting the hem of Harry's pants, looking for more areas to put his tongue.

Louis looked up at Harry; eyes begging, hoping.

"Can I?" he asked, hands ready...hoping.

A look of pure ambivalence crossed Harry's face. Louis knew it meant that he was conflicted which by extent meant he wasn't ready for such advances. He raised himself up and kissed Harry softly, then peeled himself away getting back on his side.

"Are you angry with me?" came his bed-mate's voice, as Louis fluffed his pillow, his back now turned to him.
"Never." he answered, settling himself. He remembered the purity ring again and figured Harry must want to still adhere to its sentiment. He wished he had stayed on the duvet, as being this close to Harry- who was apparently saving himself- was torture.

*Problem! Huge, huge problem!!* his brain complained as the bulge in his pants grew to the smell of Harry's hair as the boy shuffled next to him. Then, in the spur of the moment, Louis lunged back around and dived into Harry's stomach, leaving vigorous kisses where his mouth landed. As he ran his tongue over his belly button, Harry gave little surprised whiny noises before pushing him off.

Then in a flash of a second, Louis was sitting up. Harry sat up as well, holding his face steady.

"Hey, hey- What's wrong?" he said as he caressed Louis' hair with his fingers. Breathing heavy, Louis soaked in his guilt. Droplets of tears cornered his eyelids. He understood he had to be patient, but needed Harry now. He wanted him in a *selfish* way.

"I'm sorry. I just have a lot on my mind right now," he said, forlorn.

"Okay...you want to talk about it?" Harry whispered so softly to Louis, like a rock-a-bye, and he felt his muscles ease under the sound.

"It's everything. It's my dad, it's Phoebe. And, God I miss my brother..."

All of a sudden, Louis started crying. He quickly covered his face with both hands as he cried.

"I just- I can't choose between all the sets in my family. Dan and my dad have it all mapped out how we're all going to move on and I can't help but feel like I'm losing everything. I can't live in Wales. And no matter how hard he tries, Dad can't ask me to say yes right away to a foreign country and forget that I have a baby brother and sister. I'm the oldest. I'm supposed to be there for everybody and I'm failing."

Harry wedged his fingers in between Louis'. "And I'm making things more complicated for you."

His head bent and tears dripped from under his lashes.

"I want- What I really want is to go back with you. I wish we could all live together on the farm and have lazy days by the lake, and feed bottles to baby lambs so you'd have more time to be an amazing horse trainer." he said. Then, reacting to Harry's timely expression, Louis asked, "What are you *smirking* at?"

"You said *baby lambs.*" Harry answered with emphasis on the adjective and gave a little smile which Louis copied before deflating his own.

"You're going to be with your family like you agreed." Harry said, the dull in his eyes not doing a good job of being optimistic. "You gave them your word that you'll spend a week with them all in Wales and then at least the last two weeks of vacation in Australia. While you're there you can figure out how to tell your dad you need to be in Doncaster for school. You can stay here with your Grandma and-" he stopped when he noticed the teary grimace forming on Louis' face.

"You don't understand. Since my mum died it was the most time I've spent with Fizzy and Lottie since they left with Dad. Before that the longest we spent together was a week when my dad made me and the twins visit him a couple years ago. I missed those two so much when they left. I missed talking to Fizzy about stuff only she was old enough to understand. I missed Lottie trying to dye my hair blonde to look like hers." - Harry grinned, grabbing a handful of his hair to which Louis tickled him- "Point is, I don't want to far away from any of my siblings and any angle I choose is bound to hurt them. Is bound to hurt you too, Harry."
Sighing, Harry pulled the older boy down on the bed in an embrace. "You said we'll find a way, so let's just not worry about us. What we need to do is get you to Wales so you can talk to your family about what you need. Nobody wants you to give up on college in Doncaster. And your football. You have so much opportunities there to play! Phoebe and Daisy are going to understand; I just know it."

"It's hard to think about college and footie when your mum dies, Harry." Louis dug his sobbing head in the side of his neck. "I just want to curl up and sleep with you. Throw out everything else and just think about you and your coconut shampoo..."

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Louis watched as Harry slipped into his Vans t-shirt and skinny jeans, running a gel-dipped fingers through his bed-hair.

"Something's missing."

Harry's hit him some sideways furrowed eyebrows.

Louis chuckled as he swerved his eyes around the boy and hopped over, poking around his sides. Harry started giggling and wobbling in bewilderment.

"Where is it? - Aha!" Louis declared, picking at Harry's pocket and pulling out a little familiar tube. In the commotion of grabbing the lip-stain, something else fell out of Harry's pocket; the guitar pick.

"Oh, sorry!" Louis said, shoving the lip-stain onto Harry's chest then stooping down the pick up the small object he had seen many times but had never really gotten a good look at.

"Go on! Put some on!" he said, looking down at the flat object in his hands. His eyebrows drew closer together as he observed the red squiggly pattern along the edge of the ivory pick; Strange, almost like a tiny indecipherable font.

"Louis? I- but" Harry looked at the door pointedly.

Louis looked up, aloof, staring at him for a second. "Oh! No, no! Grandma won't mind! You don't have to be nervous around her. She'd want you to be comfortable with it."

"I don't think-"

"Just put it on." Louis said, smirking at the flusters of color appearing on his boyfriend's cheekbones."

When Harry was done putting on the lip-stain, he flashed a smile that asked for approval, and Louis beamed from ear to ear, pushing his lips into his.

Harry's lips opened and Louis let out a groan of pleasure at the warmth of his mouth. He swiped his tongue inside, licking. He felt Harry's arms brush against him, grabbing his hair and closing in space between them. This turned Louis on and he felt himself get hard.

*Problem?* his brain asked. *No! No problem*, he answered back delinquently, and pushed himself
and Harry into the dresser a few centimetres away, grinding into him.

Harry squealed as his lower back hit the edge of the dresser momentarily pulling them out of the kiss, and a sorry Louis ran his hands under his t-shirt, caressing the spot, whispering apologies into his neck. He snickered at Louis, explaining that he was more surprised than hurt, but Louis kept saying sorry.

"Shut up and kiss me you fool!" Harry interrupted, and the two burst into laughter before closing in on each other again.

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"I hope she's having fun at the dance!" Emmett clipped, as he cut the potatoes in halves, his apron already smudged from seasoning the meat. "A little help will be so appreciated right now, Will!"

William, who was sitting lazily at the table, turned up a teasing nose at the comment. "I wanna catch every detail of how you go about making that."

The light music played, filling up the house along with the smell of stew. Emmett shook his dusty brown head and skimmed the sliced carrots off the cutting board and into the boiling water.

"I'll play the girls something tomorrow."

"Yep-oh! I almost forgot!" Emmett grinned, dashing to the knife drawer. "I got you something!"

He held out a little box and waited for William to open it.

"I made it myself- Larissa painted it," he chattered as the dirty-blond haired man uncovered the gift and carefully pulled out a necklace with a wooden guitar shaped pendant. "It has an inscription. But I'm not gonna tell you what it is! You have to use a magnifying glass later to see...Happy Birthday."

William inspected the perfectly crafted item. "It's-" He pushed his thumb through the middle and a guitar pick fell out into his hand leaving a whole in the middle of the guitar pendant. His mouth fell open. "This is amazing! Thank you! You should make more of these to sell!"

"Absolutely not! Do you know how long it took me to carve this one!?" Emmett shot, grinning like a crescent moon.

"Dadddddyyyy!!" came the sound of a high voice, followed by the slam of the front door.

William jumped, and Emmett popped his head back in the kitchen doorway. "Jay? What's wrong, Honey!?"

The crying girl in a pretty a coral colored dress and her hair done up ran in the kitchen and almost stumbled as she backed up. "OH! I didn't know you were here!" she said to William who got up just then. She observed the set table and the herbs aromatizing the kitchen. "Why are you cooking this hour? I thought you said you'd eat left-overs from the big dinner we had yesterday?"

William's eyes shot at him.

"The food was spoiled-" Emmett answered hastily. "What's the matter? Why are you upset?"

"Troy dumped meeeeeeee!!!!!"
After having reapplied his smudged lip color, Harry was led down the stairs and made to sit down at the table.

Gemma wasn't up yet, and the electricity was still gone.

Snailing out of the kitchen with breakfast, Sophia peered from over her spectacles and nearly trashed the tray.

"Grandma!" Louis bellowed, flying out of his seat, terrified.

"Grandma, please be careful. If anything happened to you..." Louis said, setting the tray down and grabbed her arms.

"Oh, shut it! I'm as strong as old oak!" Her eyes gawked back at Harry.

"My dear, I never seen anything so striking in all my years, I nearly tossed everything on Tamar!" Louis broke into a smile at Harry who ducked his head, speechless.

Grandma pushed her spectacles up and said, authoritatively, "Chin up, now. You were born to wear that, darling!"

"Grandma, imagine what it's like for me to see him every day for the past three weeks! I told him to wear it all the time. It's hard to look away!"

"See? I told you she's fine with it!" Louis whispered to Harry as they settled down for breakfast.

Gemma eventually came down in one of Sophia's ancient nightgowns; eyes red, and skin like a marker board. The boys were ready to laugh, but she looked so pale that Louis began to worry.

He placed his hand over the doughy skin under her hairline and frowned. "I can go to the pharmacy for you!"

"No! It's too dangerous!" Harry voiced out of normal range. The storm was over but the authorities were just waiting for the okay to lift the warnings, and although Louis was only waiting for flights to reschedule, Harry didn't want to risk it.

Grandma quipped, "Harry's right. Best be safe until! I think I may have an old recipe for the collywobbles here. Stay put! It's as good as Buckley's! Maybe even better!"

As soon as she disappeared into the kitchen Louis raised an amused eyebrow. "It tastes like Buckley's too!"

Deciding that some fresh air was what his sister needed, Harry moved to the window and pulled the curtain.

"AAAHHHHH!" Louis- who had followed closely behind him- almost lost his front teeth! He got panned in the lip by the back of Harry's skull as he mashed brakes.

"Granddad!?!?" Harry said to the portrait of a man standing in an outdoor setting, in a proud pose with one hand in his trouser pocket and the other on his navel area, smiling brightly at something
"What-- this portrait has been hanging on that wall forever!" Louis hollered, checking his lip for blood with one hand and darting the other hand between the portrait and the clean spot on the wall. "Why on earth would Grandma put it behind the drapes to scare people!!!???

"I'm so sorry!! Oooohh!!" Harry said, an attentive hand near Louis' busted lip but eyes still focused on the portrait. Louis, this is my granddad!!"

Gemma got up and took a look. It was difficult to see in the shadow of the drapes. "No way!! How do you know that's him?"

"I know my own granddad! Look! It even has the gold ring he used to wear! I thought you had the fever, not going blind!"

"Anyone tell you how sexy you sound when you argue?" Louis informed, moving closer a few inches with hooded eyes mooning over him. The younger boy froze, eyes flashing from the entryway to his admirer in the same second it took the blood to filter into the room of his cheeks, ripening the paleness left by the cold weather.

"I'm not arguing," he countered. "I'm just saying. That- looks -like part of our house in the background..." He gestured with a raised brow at the portrait. He noticed the tiny blue swish on the top of the painted house and remembered when he was small and the roof of his granddad's house was a galvanized blue, now a modern slate material.

His head stopped when he spotted something else.

He picked up the magnifying glass and took another look as Gemma moved the curtain away. "Look! There!" he said to Gemma. "That little brown spot! That is Bruce!"

"Who is Bruce!?!" Louis mumbled through his swollen lip. 'My Granddad's dog." Harry replied, rubbing his back apologetically.

"That's amazing!" Gemma said, gathering her nightgown and grabbing the glass which showed what was otherwise a tiny blob in a distant linear, to be a perfectly painted dog with high definition, even complete with the eye twinkle!

"If that's your Granddad then why didn't Grandma or even Mum tell me before!? Grandma talked about him sometimes but she never mentioned your granddad, so it is strange that she has a painting of him all these years."

"Our granddad never talked about yours either. It must've been hard. They were friends a long time before he died..." Gemma piped, now flashing the glass over her brother’s fingers and glaring at Louis. He totally missed it, attending to his lip instead.

"I wish I could see a picture of my granddad." he murmured, gazing at the portrait. "I only know a few things of what Grandma told me."

"Like what?" Harry asked Gemma cocked her ears to listen.

"-Here you go, my dear!!" Sophia bounced in interrupting. "Take a few sips of this and tell me how you feel!"

"Grandma, did you know this was Harry's Granddad?" Louis asked, extending his hand to the portrait.
"Oh, it must have slipped my mind! There was this girl who Emmett helped put through art school—she had a talent! Excellent Mini Sfumato painter! Emmett had stacks of these lying around the place. I ended up with this one while collecting his stuff after the funeral."

Yeah, but that doesn't make any sense, Harry thought, as Sophia left the room again to go wash up. Bruce was two years old when I was three and Emmett died when I was a only few weeks old. This portrait can't have been in existence yet when he died.

"Lou, I don't mean to be rude but are you sure she's not getting, you know—senile...? Gemma's eyes rolled all over the room. "Harry, did you take a look around this house?" - Harry shot her a look like 'duh, and Louis wanted to disappear- "People who have dementia lose interest in daily tasks such as cleaning. They don't follow storylines in TV shows and they certainly don't win at board games!"

Louis' face fell into a gloomy daze, and he wandered off to the single chair, breathing in his Grandma's smell left on it.

"Gemma, what is wrong with you!? I didn't say she was- I was only sugges-"

"He just lost his mother, you, dimwit!"

Harry shut up. He looked at Gemma with pure rage. And then- his hands were reaching for her throat, and Louis jumped out of his seat to part the scramble as Gemma clawed back at the tiger cat.

"Okay, time out!" Louis pulled him into the garage where he huffed and puffed, and Louis was scared he'd need the inhaler.

A mad dash overtook Harry when they heard a curse word echo from the living room as Gemma sought to get back at Harry, and Louis had to grab him. He spun him around for his back to face him and wrapped his arms across his biceps, stopping him.

His moist fingers massaged his shoulders as he whispered, "Breathe, Babe..."

His arms moved up and down with the inhaling and exhaling of his boyfriend; his very own existence respirating in the process. "I'm sorry, Louis," Harry murmured when his breathing was evened out. "This house is so peaceful and I'm here fighting,"

"Shhh, it happens here more often than you think. There was this time Daisy lost a few strands of hair and nearly beat Phoebe to-" Well, he tried. But the next word was not in his vocabulary these days so he did not bother saying it. Instead he cuddled his head with Harry's, ears mashed together as they swayed.

Knowing, Harry ruefully closed his eyes. "I'm really sorry, Lou."

"I know. It's not you. Grandma means everything to me. It's just that I can't think of losing her too, you know. She's almost eighty."

"Yeah, but Gem was right. She's articulate and can take care of herself. And her skin is gorgeous!" Harry stated, pressing his ear into Louis' shoulder, tickled by his breath.

Satisfied that he was calm now, Louis released his grip on the boy only for him to spin back around and pull him into another kiss.
That night, on his way up the stairs, Louis was blocked by a firm hand across his chest. This time it was Gemma who stalled him.

He waited, looking her up and down. She flashed a squint at him, then focused her gaze eye to eye.

"I thought you said you were going to give it to him?" Louis threw her his own squint at this, then he opened his eyes wider as he realized what she meant. He parted his lips to explain to her that he couldn't because Harry was still wearing the purity ring and he needed to respect that, but Gemma charged, “Don't make me regret helping you. I heard you telling him you're coming back, but I don’t see it! If you're not gonna give it to him tonight then you better damn well come back, city boy." And with that came a less than courteous slap on the shoulder before moseying to her room.

Trying to get comfortable after the rude encounter, Louis ended up throwing the pillow and the covers at the door, growling at nothing in particular.

"Come up, Louis. Please..." He heard from the bed, a voice that did not sound like it had been sleeping or sleepy at all.

He had stayed so long talking to his Grandma before getting in the room that he really thought Harry would be asleep this time.

"Harry, no. Boundaries, okay?" he said softly, eyes closed to sleep. The wind was gently whirring now, just as the weather lady predicted and would be sure to be over by the early morning.

"I'll put a pillow between us. Just, please."

He wasn't gonna do it. He blamed the cute whiny puppy voice. He just couldn't resist that voice. He was on the bed in a millisecond. But as soon as he landed on the bouncy mattress, a weight came crashing down on him playfully.

"Ow!" Harry's leg landed right on Louis' hurt foot. The opening was all fused together now but not fully meshed, and Louis was taken by quite a surprise.

"Oh shit! I'm sorry!" Harry said as he eased off to examine his folly. He reached out his fingers and ran them lightly over the broken, uneven skin. He bent his upper half down and pressed his lips into his scab, kissed it and lifted his head to the huge scar on his knee which was more advanced in the healing process. Louis thought back to the game and how he stole his attention away from one of the most important things to him. He had difficulty grasping that it was the same boy in front of him now, that he got the boy, and that he was now even more important to him than football.

Louis cupped his cheek. "It's not your fault all my scars are a result of me being distracted by you."

"In the kitchen, and this morning; I take responsibility for, but that time on the field, that's just a lack of concentration."

Louis laughed and felt something run down his lips. Harry bent and licked them, and Louis tasted fresh blood as they merged warm tongues. “Mmm, Harry." he tried to say, but was being overtaken by the gentleness of his tongue soothing over his lip.

"I couldn't stop looking at your face. I stopped being interested in the match the second we made eye contact." he said when they pulled apart.

Louis' breathe quickened as he felt his lips like a moist peach, warm and gentle brushing over his
skin. In the flicker of the lampshade in Harry's eyes, he saw them glance at his crotch for only a brief moment before meeting his own with uncertainty. The dim light bounced off his shiny hair and he looked so much on the edge of innocence; not quite a naive cub but not yet a treading lion. Louis only had three sexual encounters and only one of which led to actual sex (the one with Liam) and if he hadn't met Harry he would have never even fathomed- with what happened to his family- being in the position he was now with a guy's hands lightly tracing the hairs on his legs, which were all raised along with a certain other member of his body that would go into ignition if touched in the way Harry was touching him.

He tried to breathe unheard as he tethered towards taking his hand, pulling him semi-rough down face-to-face. The younger boy gasped a smile as he adjusted himself to lay next to him. Their legs wrapped together like noodles; they started kissing, and Louis suddenly lifted himself to hover over Harry as they found themselves meshed together. Harry held on to Louis' head, parts of his fingers seen in-between tufts of hair, as he grabbed on, moaning in time with Louis' tongue thrusts down his throat.

He made a sudden move to wrench himself from the boy as he began to feel hot waves steaming out from both their lower bodies, but the other boy's grip timely tightened to keep him there. He tucked his tongue into Louis' mouth and bucked himself upward. A moan escaped Louis as he yanked himself away to lie on his side of the bed, stuffing a pillow between them as he blew a sigh.

The bed gave a slight squeak and the sheets ruffled, and he felt a warm breath steady close to his head as he tried to relax. He closed his eyes and exhaled, but not for long, as moist fingertips came crawling over his tummy and around his navel. The hem of his boxers was dangerously close to where they pattered, and just under that laid the tip of his shaft.

Louis dared not breathe as he deciphered the boy's intentions.

Then, an indescribable ache of touch overcame him as the boy's hand landed in a smooth pat, directly on his member.

He eyeballed Harry with watery eyes. Harry wanted him? Harry wanted this with him? What exactly does this entail?

The awareness of Harry's fumbling fingers intensified as the boy explored several ways to land his hand on that spot. Satisfying a sudden urge, he propped himself up on his left elbow and leaned for a kiss, letting him feel the length as he collected his lips in his.

Then something grazed his inner thigh. "Owww!" he said hoarsely not to wake anyone.

"I'm sorry!" Looking down and realizing it was the purity ring on Harry's finger, Louis shifted on his side.

"I said I was sorry!" Harry bleated, catapulting over on his side of the bed.

Louis turned around and adjusted his pillow, glaring at the ring. "Harry, your wearing that still for whatever reason and I want to respect it. Let's just sleep, okay?"

"I put it back on because you're leaving and I didn't know if- you- If you want, I'll take it off." Harry begged. "Please don't think I don't want you. I want you so much..."

Louis shuffled on his back to face him. Harry dived over him again and started snogging. Louis gripped his butt involuntarily, pulling him closer.

Then a ghost of his lips was left when Harry crawled down to his boxers and started nibbling on...
the lump protruding there. Louis little cat noises as he grabbed his hair. "Harryyyyy."

His left hand -now ringless- slid up the right leg of Louis’ boxers, feeling around for him. Louis raised his right knee in pleasure as his hand reached his shaft.

"Harr-" he started but was unable to finish as the boy was now stroking him under his boxers. Their eyes met in what was pure desire and acceptance, and undertones of 'We're doing this!? We're really doing this!'

Louis sat up halfway and gestures for the younger boy to come up for a kiss. And as he did, his hand had to leave its position, making something of a whining puppy escape Louis' throat. He vigorously kissed him, pulling his head aside to connect his mouth with his neck, biting into it as Harry trembled in his arms.

Harry slithered away to find himself pulling Louis’ t-shirt up and mouthing his nipples straight back down to his hips and torso crease. Head tilting back up, Harry suggested in a low voice, "Close your eyes."

Harry did not ask, and Louis did not object, but his boxers were soon sliding down. Eyes closed, he twitched to the cotton smoothing down his legs until it reached his knees. A series of hitches escaped his breath and he opened his eyes as he tried to grasp the surreality of what was about to happen.

"You're making me nervous! Put a pillow over your eyes!" Harry giggled nervously.

Louis quickly obeyed. The pillow could remain on his face all night for all he cared; anything to stay in this moment.

He felt his mouth cover him with a slow movement, almost tentative, with occasional tongue.

"Fuck!" Louis found himself mumbling into the pillow, not that he was aware. He knew nothing except the feel of wet plush blanketing his shaft.

The pillow was a pancake by the time Louis came. He had applied a firm hand on Harry’s forehead to warn him, and got most of it the bed sheets but yet Harry still got a good bit in his mouth, looking to Louis for guidance as to what to do with it. Louis smirked, bring the bed sheets to his mouth where he spurted out the majority while Louis pulled back up his pants.

In the light of the lamp he saw his eyes water, and he rose up, burying his lips in his neck; Harry was in visible distress having not come as yet. And Louis, still wanting more, grind upward causing Harry to moan out loud.

Louis encouraged his hand on the boy’s inner thigh. “Do you want me to?”

“No…” he moaned weakly. “No!” he said again, firm as Louis’ fingers played at his protruding shaft. Louis took his sweating hand away, and drew it around his waist, pulling him down on top of him.

“Okay, you don’t want me to touch you, so I won’t touch you- Do you feel that, Harry?” Louis said, grinding upward into him. “Tell me you don’t want that.”

His mouth then fell open as a sharp nail dug into his arm, and his lip was bleeding again. Then, his body shook, and he drew his arms tighter around the younger boy as he realized he was sobbing into the pillow near his head.
Minutes passed before Harry shifted and made to get off him. When he did, Louis felt a wet dab on him that had gone cold while the boy was crying.

"No, stay. Let's sleep like this." Louis said. He wanted to linger in the sentiment of the moment. He wanted to feel the moist front of Harry's boxers on his bare tummy until it dried and their breaths and heartbeats fall in sync as they sleep together. He kissed his head and closed his eyes as Harry settled on him, pulling the thick covers over them.

Then, out of the blue, Harry asks, "Is that the way it's supposed to taste?"

"I don't know. I've never tasted anyone else's." Louis said, which was a total lie on the topic that didn't need to be brought up now. *Why does Harry ask these weird questions?* "Maybe you can compare it to yours and see?"

"Eww! I'm not gonna taste my own cum!" Harry squinted his eyes.

Louis smirked to himself. "You will."

~~~~

Aesthetic:- God of Wine- Third Eye Blind.

"...No, she's too upset right now. It's not the right time. I don't understand, she and Troy had been dating for quite a while..." Emmett said, checking the oven. Half an hour had passed before he finally persuaded his daughter to stop crying and go on up to bed.

William drummed his fingers on the hand crafted dining table. "I never liked him. I just didn't have a say in the matter since she doesn't know."

"I know..." Emmett whispered, drawing closer to the table. William's hands disappeared under the table. The kettle whistled and Emmett turned to cut off the stove, looking back at the other man, frowning.

"...There's time for all that after we tell her the truth..." William laughed.

"I know. We have to explain to her how she's your daughter and not mine. That'll be a wonderful conversation." The younger man said, timely cracking his knuckles.

"She is your daughter too, Em. You raised her into the lovely sixteen-year old she is today."

"But that doesn't change the fact that I've been lying to her all this time."

As he spoke, a creak in the floorboard of the ranch told him that they were not alone. Both men turned around to see the huge blue eyes of the young girl, still in her party dress, standing in the kitchen doorway staring at them with close eyebrows and a dropped jaw.

Emmett made a sudden move towards her.

"Get away! I will never look at you the same again, you, liar!"

"Johannah-" William started.

"You! You don't talk to me! You are not my father!" Johannah shouted before turning and running out the front door.
"What have we done!?” William exclaimed.

"What have I done!? I should have told her a long time ago!” Emmett said, crestfallen. "She'll never forgive me!”

***

It was a startling contrast to the night before. Not a sound was heard inside or out, as Sophia stood in the candle lit livingroom, eyes beading over the old portrait.

"You never did know how to keep yourself scarce, did you? If there’s one thing you were good at its keeping yourself relevant in everyone’s lives when you are not around.” she chided as she picked up a pair of scissors and large sheet of brown paper.

"Well, since you made sure Harry had seen you anyway, and it has taken this kind of turn, I believe it's high time you leave my house, William!”

~~~

"She showed up on my doorstep and won’t tell me what the matter is!!” Sophia sputtered to her half-brother, closing the front door and climbing down the frosted stairs to the yard, as she pulled her coat around her.

"She overheard me talking to William!” he answered frantically, mist blowing out his mouth as he adjusted his gloves.

"About what in God's name!?”

"She knows he's her father. I was going to tell her today but when I came back from the stables she was gone with all her clothes.”

"Emmett! I told you to tell her! All secrets come to light!” she charged. And what was he doing there at all!?"

"I forgave him, Sophia!"

"He slept with your wife! After everything you've done for him-he-"

"He was driven by love, Soph! It's crazy what love makes people do. You know how ripped apart I was about it. I gave up everything for the ranch. But because of his betrayal I have a daughter. I tried so hard to be angry. I was angry. But I can't anymore. So I forgave him.” he emoted. Then, glancing at the door, "Hopefully she will too. Please take of her, Sister.”

"You know I will!” she said. “I don’t see why you should forgive! Melanie can’t give account for her part. She isn’t walking around the farm and reaping benefits she did not contribute to! That man on the other hand-”

“Is my best friend!” Emmett replied, voice in high range. While Sophia was speaking-yelling he saw the livingroom curtain shuffle and knew Johannah was listening. He adjusted his brown scarf and pulled his long Burberry winter coat closer, his hair already covered in snowflakes. He was accustomed to the harsh weather in Doncaster, and very much would like to go inside for a cup of
his sister’s hot chocolate but knew Johannah needed the space right now.

“Look, surely you have a best friend?” he said, giving Sophia a look from her to the window. Glancing in the direction, she immediately got his silent meaning and blinked.

“No.” she said flatly, folding her arms with a turned up eyebrow. “But I did have a boyfriend who lied to me. You want to know what happened to him?”

Emmett’s bottom lip pushed up and he shrugged.

“I have no idea!” Sophia clipped. “That’s how you treat people who betray you! Not have them prancing around your ranch-that you built, mind you- and hurting the people you care about!” she pointed to the front door.

Glancing back at the window, Sophia toddled down the stairs as Emmett walked back to his car.

"Wait- Is that all she heard at the ranch?” she whispered.

He rubbed his forehead and mumbled. "Yes. And I'd like to keep it that way for now. This is too much for her to grasp as it is.”

Sophia gave a sharp nod. "Agreed. But if he's going to be staying at the farm-"

"He's not.” he replied sharply before turning and trampling through the snow to his car leaving Sophia taken aback with a raised eyebrow as she hurried back inside.

****

The sun was up, and birds chirped heralding the clear day ahead. Louis got up first, throwing a large black Burberry coat on the bed, waking the sleeping boy.

"Good morning." Harry yawned, stretching his arms out as Louis replied with a less than optimistic greeting. His hand brushed over the coat. "What's this?"

"I found it in the cupboard. Was my Granddad's. It's still cold outside- you should wear it."

"I can't accep-"

"Look, I don't have time to argue with you, okay? Just wear it!" Louis scowled, shoving all his things back into the trolley suitcase and duffel bag.

Harry sprang up in the bed, watching Louis angrily buzz around the room. He felt icky under the covers, and thoughts of last night came flooding back. Frowning, he jumped out of bed and missed his way Louis to grab his towel, stamping off to the bathroom.

Flump!!!

The duffel bag hit the wall as Louis sank to his knees, hands grabbing his hair. Swallowing back the giant lump in his throat, he pulled out his phone and typed, then dragged his trolley bag down the stairs.

A little while after, Harry trampled down the stairs primped and dapper in the Burberry coat. Gemma leaned on the staircase, astonished. "Wow! You look- really good, Harry."

Louis stood in the foyer looking at him like he was a pink unicorn with a lollipop horn and cotton candy for a tail, then when he noticed the duffel bag in Harry's hands, he frowned. "I was coming
up for that."

"I'll take it." Harry snapped, not really wanting to snap but in the habit of returning like for like.

Louis let him carry on to the porch without a word and turned his attention on Gemma. “How are you feeling today?”

“Sleep deprived!” she answered as if she waited especially for that question. “News flash- you two weren’t as quiet as you thought you were!”

"I can't accept this!" Harry gasped as Sophia handed him the huge magnifying glass. She had stopped him on the porch steps on his way with Louis' duffel bag to the car. He had rested the bag down to take the item, and Tamar came and sat on it, proud with her large pink bow.

"Don't be silly- Or do!" she cackled as she flung her kitchen towel over her shoulders. You kept me very much entertained the whole time you've been here, Dear!"

"Tamar! Get off!" Louis complained as he passed them on the stairs carrying another bundle of luggage.

"Grandma??" he whined. "Tell her to get off! I'm already late!"

"Tamar! - It seems she doesn't want you to leave, Louis-” Sophia said, noting Louis' tone. "Tamar! Back inside!"

The cat jumped up in irritation and shot Louis a menacing look before running inside and tumbling over a package in the foyer just as Gemma was coming out.

Oh!" the girl yelped as the large brown square blocked her path.

"Oh! Yes, Tamar, I almost forgot!" the spritely woman said as Gemma picked it up. Harry let out another gasp as he recognized it was the portrait. "Here, take that to your mother and give her my regards!"

"Love you, Grandma. Take care." Louis said, hugging her.

"Take the jolly bumble shoot dear! You never know!" she answered, eyes welling up. Looking at the now clear sky, Louis declined. He waited for Harry and Gemma to hug Sophia, then they were off.

"Anne had the good sense to come get Louis when she did, but after what I see happening; neck biting, lip busting, unslept duvet- Lord, she has to tell him the truth!" Sophia mumbled to Tamar as they went back inside. "Maybe seeing him again will give her the jolt she needs. God knows I have not the courage in my old age… "

***

Harry took his place in the back seat next to Louis and tossed his gaze out of the window. His heartbeat quickened as an assuring hand gripped his wrist over the large coat. He pulled away. *Who does he think he is? Rejecting me the morning after we shared something so intimate…*

He decided to check his phone for calls from his mother. He had been doing that more regular lately since Louis pulled on him for ignoring her. His brows drew together; a message from Louis?
‘I can’t talk right now. If I talk then I’ll cry. And I don’t under any circumstances want to cry today. I woke up this morning happy. I had the most incredible time with you last night and I was so happy. Then I read my messages and one was from my dad telling me that the flights were working again and that I was to come to Wales immediately. ‘IMMEDIATELY!’ he put it. And then I looked at you laying there in my clothes with your hair all fluffy and lips slightly opened. Those lips that touched me… loved me, last night. I can’t talk to you. Please don’t ask me to. Just know. That I love you.’

Harry couldn’t help but well up as he flung his head to face Louis. He found him staring back, eyes wide with baited breath, turning away at the sight of Harry’s first tear drop.

He dipped his head on Louis’ right shoulder and hooked his hand over the other. Louis took it off and pressed his lips into it and they both remained just like that for the entire ride to the airport.

Gemma waited in the car this time. Harry wanted to do the same. His heart was in pieces hidden inside his chest with only a brief flicker of a frown to show just a fraction of how fragile he was at the moment.

"So you’re leaving now..." he said, dragging on a smile as they heard Louis flight announcement.

Eyes dropping to his lips, Louis swallowed. Against every bone in his body, he fought back the need to grab the younger boy up in his arms and hold him forever. Instead, he leaned in to plant a little peck on his cheek that immediately caused so much color to appear on his entire face. He listened to his own sigh. A huge part of him wanted to go to Wales and see everyone again, but a larger part wanted to follow him back to Champton Valley.

‘Flight 204 to Wales Boarding!! Flight 204!!!’

One last gut wrenching look of tear brimmed eyes, Harry turned away, and Louis caught the rough red mark on his delicate neck that he had left there the night before. He had discovered his own marks while in the bath that morning; on his hip, on his chest, where Harry had left them. And all of a sudden he couldn't. He couldn't leave without nourishing his lips, parched from a lack of...Harry.

He reached out and grabbed his arm, pulling his coat, and ravishing into his lips in one long breath, then planting heavy consecutive smacks on his lips and all over his face as he held the sides of his head.

Gripping onto his waist, Harry took it all in with equal measure of emotion, then pulled away without looking at him, and turned to allow him to leave. The older boy desperately grabbed his hand, and he did not look back, but slowly slid his hand out of Louis’, disconnecting at their fingertips. Tears reaching the expensive sleeves of the Burberry coat as he wiped his eyes unable to look back, it was only the sound of rolling wheels getting smaller and smaller that told him Louis was gone.

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Chapter End Notes
Like I said, this chapter CAME OUT OF NOWHERE and kinda hijacked all my attention and made u guys wait! I love you for your patience! Please comment and tell me if it was worth it!

Ok, so I added some sleuthing because I basically took some writing advice and want to put them into practice in this story. I hope it helps my puzzle come together.

Can I have some new Kudos???

And yeah, the next chapter is around the corner!
I'd just like to say that I'm grateful for all your support on this and I will answer any questions you have on the story. Please forgive my late updating. I'm posting two chapters as an apology. I'm almost done writing chapter 36 as well. 😊 Please press the kudos icon below and comment on this for me. All your views will be taken into account. I'm new to this fanfic world:) I'd like to say a special thank you to everyone waiting for updates.

"Harry?"

"Louis?"

"I'm sitting here alone on the plane, and I can't do it. I can't go to Australia." said the boy on the phone. The plane had barely taken off before he was calling the boy he left in the airport, crying. "I'm just going to Wales and it hurts like hell. I can't go even further away from you! I need you, Harry. Let's just fuck it and tell everyone..."

Harry heard the sobs on the other end in between his own as he sat in the airport. He looked around and saw Gemma trying to get a soda out from the vending machine. She had come in after all, just in time to hold Harry when his own tears burst the minute Louis had boarded the aircraft. He was much calmer now- he had to be- and was now trying to sooth the boy on the other end.

"How do you know you won't feel the same way when you get there. You said you have an opportunity to spend more time with Fizzy and Lottie that you never got to before. What if you get to Wales and you can't say no to your Dad. What if Phoebe needs you." Harry laid the list of reasons Louis would forget him the minute he landed.

"I won't change my mind!"

"I'm trying to be realistic here."

"Don't start now! Listen to me, I'm making you a promise. I promise you I will come back as soon as I land!" Louis cried. Harry imagined him shaking his head as he said it, and he wanted to stretch his hand out and pull the plane down from the sky.

Instead, he laughed through his tears. "No, you can't do that, Babe. How bout you promise me this instead; Promise me you'll be the brother they need right now. Do what's in that big beautiful heart of yours."

Louis objected. "But you take up so much of it."

Louis sounded so despondent, and it made Harry crouch over in his seat. "You've only known me a few weeks. I don't want you to choose me when you all are going through this terrible ordeal. You need to be there."
"I'm telling my Dad I'm staying. I have to do it before I get cold feet!"

Louis was serious, and it scared him. He wanted it all. He wanted all the things Harry wanted. It seemed that Louis had grown so attached to Harry not only for love but in general. Thinking back to the previous day when he had found his granddad's picture and almost cleared Louis' front teeth, he pondered; What on earth was Louis doing that close to him in the first place!? He was only leaving his side for a minute to open a window. Come to think of it; Louis was acting with Harry how Phoebe was acting with him the whole time she was in Champton. Leaning on him for support, running back to him when she found she roamed far- like an anchor... Harry was Louis' anchor. And for the first time in weeks Louis was now all alone without him.

Knowing this made Harry's stomach churn for two reasons; Louis was without him now, but so was Phoebe without Louis for a whole week and a half since Louis took it to stay back with him. Deep down Harry hoped she had transferred her attachment to Fizzie and Lottie to make it easier on Louis and him, because even though Harry needed Louis too and was so afraid of him moving to Australia forever that his first instinct was to run the other way, he promised him he wouldn't pull away and give up on them. At his great-aunt's house, Harry had time enough to comfort him with gentle touches and warm embraces, but at this point all he could do is stand by and support whatever happens next.

Gemma made eye contact with Harry, her face pure nausea. "I have to go now, Lou. We have to get back home. I love you..."

***

"I'm so glad you guys are back!" Anne said, running up to the car in the midday heat. She grabbed Harry and squeezed him. "Come inside! We have a surprise for you!"

As soon as Harry took the brown package out, the engine started again.

"Gemma! You just got back! Where are you going!?!" Anne shouted.

Gemma waved as she pulled out of the yard. "I'll be back in an hour! I got some stuff to do!"

Anne walked Harry back to the house. "Oh! And where did you get this, mister!?" she asked, smiling eyes as she ran her palms down the exquisite material on his shoulders and arms.

"It's Louis' grandfather's. It was pretty cold this morning." he said, now blocking his eyes from the sun baring down on them.

"Aaahhh... I do recall uncle Em used to be quite fancy! Not like your granddad who always trampled around in old washed out denim."

Harry smiled. He remembered his granddad well, running around the ranch barking at the staff about properly training the horses and doing all the grunt work himself to demonstrate. Harry missed tagging along behind him and learning everything the man was willing to teach him.

"Harry!" a jolly voice said as his nose hit the familiar smells of fresh daisies, wet dog hair, and carpet cleaner in the living-room. When his mother said "We" he had thought it was Cord she meant, but instead he beheld Robin in a new pair of flip-flops, and orange-colored shorts reaching above his hairy knee. He looked like he was on a Caribbean vacation in their house, and Harry guessed he must have spent the last two days there 'waiting the storm' or...

"something.

He nodded to him dolefully, dropping the package and slumping down on the couch, the coat still clinging to his sweaty skin. In the car, Gemma had kept opening and shutting the windows at
intervals with the air conditioning on, complaining she was either too hot or too cold so he had kept the coat on the whole time.

He sat there in the couch now, dosing off in his thoughts while Robin and Anne murmured to each other.

"Uh, Harry? Sweetheart, Robin has something to tell you!"

Harry did not hear her; his chin propped on the arm of the chair, Louis' Vans sneakers under the length of the coat as he pulled his feet up on the cushions. Cliff hurried over and started sniffing the sneakers, chewing on it, and Harry did not even budge.

"Harry!?" she called again, and this time he looked up, sweat beading on his forehead.

Anne grinned. "Robin got you a booth at the Charity fair!"

Harry sat up straighter, deterring Cliff, his eyes questioning. He has a booth? At the fair? On Friday?

Anne explained, "Right next to the ring, so you can put on a show for the crowd!"

He looked at Robin with a bug-eyed and slack-jawed expression on his face. He has a booth! At the fair! On Friday! Those booths cost money to rent and Harry knew Robin probably did it to impress his Mum, but he has a booth! His insides leaped.

Rosy cheeks red with bashfulness, Robin added, "Well, I figured with the way the crowd reacted to you at the rodeo show, this would be a great opportunity for you to showcase your skill while helping others!"

"Cord can help you with the horses in the ring but I have no idea what you're gonna do with the booth!" Anne chipped.

Harry already knew exactly what he wanted to do with the booth. "Thank you so much!" he said excitedly, making an awkward move to embrace the man. Robin tumbled into him, engulfing him in a big belly bear hug that made Harry think about Santa Claus in the middle of the summer.

As Robin set him down, his foot nudged the side of the couch and the portrait got knocked over. "Mum, Louis' Great-aunt sent you this!" Harry said, picking it up. "Open it! I'm gonna go get my laptop! I have work to do!" he shouted as he ran up the stairs, two steps at a time.

"OH!" Anne exclaimed as she unveiled the portrait.

Robin's eyebrows shot up. "Well, I'll be damned! This is a one of a kind painting! It looks like one of-

"Yes, I'm sure it is. She's the only one who does this kind of technique."

"I bet these paintings go for a lot now! I'll get a hammer and put it up for you!"

"No, no! It's quite alright! I don't think-"

"Mum, yes! We're hanging it up!" Harry said as he dived back down the stairs with his laptop in hand, feeling cooler again as he had tossed off the coat on his bed.

Anne tried to object but was over-rulled by both males telling her how refreshing it was to see William again.
Harry opened laptop at the corner table. "Now we can see Granddad everyday!"

Robin disappeared to get the hammer, and the house phone rang. Anne answered it while Harry dived into work on the laptop. He would be doing horse tricks with Winnipeg and Salsa at the fair but that didn't mean he couldn't also squeeze in a few horse rights brochures to hand out.

"A Prom-!?" Anne interjected tight-lipped while on the call. "Are you sure!?"

She looked at her son from the kitchen doorway. He peered back; aloof.

"I'll handle it as soon as I can. My hands are rather full at the moment.- Okay, take care!"

"So, how was the stay at uncle Em's sister's?" she inquired conversationally after the call ended.

Harry raised his head back up, blushing, but answered in a casual tone. "It was cool. She's the sweetest lady."

She nodded decidedly and wandered her focus towards the portrait.

As Harry sank into his project, the front door opened and Gemma bounced in with Aiden and Grimmy on her heels.

Great. Perfect timing, Harry thought sarcastically, glancing at them before going back to what he was doing. The last thing he wanted was Grimmy in his business.

"What are you up to, Harry!?" a parrot-like voice blared in his ear.

"None of your business!" Harry glowered at up at a hovering Nick who had wasted no time in ambling over to him.

"Looks to me like you're trying to make brochures for your booth at the fair!"

"How did you know about that!" Harry side-eyed him.

"My uncle is part owner of the fair grounds, remember?"

Oh. Harry had forgotten that. Is there anything in town that Simon wasn't part- of, if not sole owner of?

"That's great, Harry!" Gemma quipped, leading Aiden into the kitchen, or more like him leading her; Anne sulked at the boy making himself so at home in her home.


Harry jerked back the laptop. "Toss off!"

Grimmy scoffed. "You are doing rubbish and I can help you!"

"Why on earth would you want to help!? And what's more, why should I believe you!" Harry said. Grimmy pulled a chair next to him and started typing.

"I just finished my shift at the diner, so I'm not busy."

"So...you work shifts there? When I saw you it was night-time." Harry said, falling into conversation as the boy typed away on the laptop, he was still suspicious as to his motive but
Grimmy was good at computers and had been more friendly to him lately, so he obliged.

"Yeah, we shuffle every week. I'm working mornings this week. I actually wanted to ask you-"

"Oh, hey Nick!" Robin greeted, passing them, hammer in hand. Grimmy jumped at the sight, shooting Harry a 'yikes' -which he couldn't help but show both dimples in return- and went back to typing/ blushing.

An apple crunched in Harry's ear. "What are you two up to?"

"Making flyers to give out in my booth!" Harry said happily craning his neck to look up at his sister. "Lots of people from neighboring towns are going to be there so it's perfect to get everyone aware!"

"Ah! My son; always the animal rights activist." Anne said, showing Robin where to hammer the nail.

Robin nodded. "I remember very well little Harry standing up for Rapid Mane after our fall."

Gemma gave a set smile and glanced at her mother now dusting the portrait a few feet away, and whispered to Harry, "I'm proud of you, Harry. But I miss Granddad and the old horse ranch. Whatever happens, you have to know that I support you in everything. And I expect no less from you."

As Gemma left for the kitchen again, Grimmy resumed his statement. "Um- I was thinking-if you weren't doing anything tomorrow night we could-"

The swishing of the duster suddenly stopped in a loud whip.

"Harry, you only have today and tomorrow to get the horses ready for the fair! Why don't you go out back and make sure they are in shape!" Anne interrupted, smiling rigidly as Grimmy threw her a semi-irritated look.

***

Harry nudged the reins on Salsa and started strolling around the pen with her. "You already know all of this, girl. I don't know why Mum doesn't give me a chance breathe. I should be making my flyers instead of Grimmy! You are so lucky, all you have to do is prance around tomorrow!"

Ring Ring!!

"... ...No!" Harry snapped at the boy on the other side of the call after hearing his rant.

"I have to tell them, Harry! They're my family and this is a major part of my life! I can't keep them in the dark about something so important!"

Harry let go of Salsa and gestured for her to stand on her hind legs, making clucking noises into the call. He was flushed that Louis considered him important. Even though he knew he was - with all the times he has been saying it- yet it still felt good to hear it over the phone when they were so far apart. But there was no chance in hell he'd risk Louis' dad telling Anne that they were a couple.

"No, Louis."

"Fine! Then at least let me tell your mum. I owe her the truth."

Irritated, Harry motioned for Salsa to drop back down before abandoning her to lean forward on
the fence. "NO!! Don't be ridiculous! Just enjoy your time over there and stop nagging me about it!"

"What? I'm not nagging-"

"Look, I have something exciting to tell you!" Harry swooned, in an attempt to change the subject. "You're now talking to the proud owner of a booth at the fair tomorrow! The one right next to the round pen on the fair grounds! I get to show off my skills, as Mr Cartwright put it."

The boy in the other end cheered loudly at this and Harry continued. "And guess what? I even get to make flyers promoting horse rights to hand out in my booth! I've never done this before - I'm so excited!"

Louis giggled. "I'm excited for you. Now I wish I was there even more!"

"And guess what else! Mr Cartwright just hung up the painting of my Granddad!"

"That's amazing! I'm sure he'd be so proud of you!"

Harry's nose stung with the onset of tears emerging in his eyes, and his throat closed up for a while until he was finally able to say, "I miss him so much more now."

~~~~~

Tim McGraw- Don't Take The Girl. (Because it's just teary)

"I'll never be as good as her. I'm just gonna disappoint you, Granddad." A now eight year-old Harry said on the verge of tears, as they watched his sister astride her horse, waiting on instructions from their trainer, Perrie, for the Children's trail competition coming up. He was all dressed in his cowboy apparel equipped with brown boots and iron studded belt for training, but his backside was covered in dirt. He couldn't count how many times he'd fallen off his horse before it even made the jumps.

William adjusted his Stetson and beat his hand twice on the wooden railing of his round pen. "You're gonna stand there and try to sell to me that you can ever be a disappointment to me? No sir, I'm not buying that. Harry, my boy, you are a legend! Gemma is good on the horse, but you are good beside it. You see them like no one else. They listen to you."

As he patted his back, a loud commotion coming from the direction of the stables made everyone in and around the round pen turn their heads.

"Will! Come quick!" Ashton, one of the stable hands shouted, running out of the stables. The thunder of a horse riling up, and loud shrills deafened the sunny morning air of the ranch.

William darted off toward it; young Harry close behind.

"CALUM!" They heard Luke, William's younger cousin and accountant scream, then the sound of breaking wood.

"There's a rattle in here! It bit me!" the cry of a trapped Calum came. He had apparently been stuck between a horse and a snake in one of the stalls, and Luke and Michael were now trying to move the frightened animal to get to him.
"Get out of way, you fuckin monster!" Luke shouted desperately, slapping the horse's rear.

There was a tiny opening between the raging animal's feet, and Harry saw an opportunity to help.

"HARRY!! GET BACK!!" William called, but he was too fast for him, quickly ducking between the men to reach inside the Stable. He fell with his back turned to Calum and the snake, and only heard Calum shout at him to get out, but as he got up he did not see when the snake made for the back of his head, or when Calum quickly jumped in the way, collecting another deadly bite. Who knows how many bites he had already gotten. Harry only saw the horse...

"Rapid Mane!!" Harry clipped aloud as he came to a halt in front of the beast. The horse immediately dropped its forelegs, allowing John, who was now on the scene, to grab hold of the reins and lead him out.

Then Calum fell in a thump as Luke ran to his side, the sound of the snake hissing in the corner of the stall.

"Get out of there and get him to the hospital! Now!" William shouted as his eyes fell on what was undoubtedly the largest rattlesnake he had ever seen. It sat on a stack of hay, ready to snap again.

He grabbed Harry and shoved him outside behind the others as he shut the stall door.

Marching up to the house as Calum's screams were heard leaving the ranch, William grabbed his shotgun from the living room mantle, boots stomping on the hard wood floor as he tramped out back out door to the stable, Harry in his shadow.

"Granddad! No! Don't kill it!" the boy shouted.

The man stopped dead in his tracks and he turned around to look at his grandson, confused. "What in God's graces are you getting at, Harry!?"

"The snake didn't mean to hurt him! It was just protecting itself! You said you use that gun to protect your family against real threats. Well that snake is just an animal! He was only protecting itself! It doesn't have to die for that!"

William's anger lashed out at him then. "And how do you suppose I get rid of it now, boy?"

Harry raised his eyebrows - more surprised that the man would actually ask his opinion than the fact that he was yelling- and wasted no time in speaking up. "You get a stick..." he said, holding out both hands but gesturing with only one towards the stables to emphasize his point. "...and guide it out!"

He stood motionless in tune with his grandfather's stance, waiting for a response. In his eyes shone a ridiculous innocence that William found himself both baffled and intrigued with.

A young John squeezed in. "With all due respect, Sir, guiding it out doesn't seem logical. What if it comes back and bites the horses?"

Ignoring the man, William thought for a second and then, lowering his gun he nodded to his grandson. "Okay, John, I don't suppose we have a stick lying around the ranch, do we?"

John's eyeballs shot out. "No sir we don-"

"Then find one!" he barked, and John went scampering off.
William glanced at Harry to see the boy looking back at him like 'Really, Granddad? Did you have to raise your in voice like that?' which changed to 'Thanks for listening to me' when William showed an 'Okay, I could have been a little bit milder' face.

With Harry following him like a shadow the whole time, William made sure the snake was escorted off the ranch and back into the wild. He then left Perrie in charge of Gemma before taking Harry with him to the hospital.

The bleached white hallways with that cough medicine smell made Harry grip on to his Granddad's hand as they walked the corridor to Calum's ward. They met Luke, Ashton, and Michael in the waiting room; Luke in tears.

"What happened?" William enquired from a traumatized Ashton who had been helping Calum in the stables all morning.

"He just went in there to feed Rapid Mane and- and then the horse started riling up and then I heard him yell 'Ow! It bit me it bit me!' And I tried to get in but Rapi- Rapid Mane just wouldn't move!" Ashton stuttered, "and, uh...then Luke threw the lasso around his neck and that's when you guys came."

"That was very stupid of you, Harry." Luke snarled through gritted teeth.

"Now look here, let's make certain Calum's in the clear before we go off on the boy's recklessness! Harry deserves a good whooping but I can't let Anne know he was in the middle of this!" William shot them all a blazing eye and they gave him nods and knowing looks.

A thirty year-old Luke shut his eyes tightly and bit down on his clenched his knuckles. He and Calum had been in an on-and-off relationship for twelve years and had just got back on again after three years on the outs. And Luke, who was the stubborn of the two, had sworn that this time they were going to make it last.

"He got it good!" Michael said to William as he stood in front of them. "That snake was huge! You got him though?"

"We threw him back in the wild!" William said, sullen.

Luke shot his face up from his hands, glowering at him. "You, WHAT?!"

"The snake didn't mean to. Uncle Calum is going to be okay," Harry said peeking his head out from behind his granddad's back.

Luke looked at him with bloodshot eyes glaring into his soul before turning on his cousin. "You let an eight year old tell you to let the snake GO!!!??"

A startling, hysterical voice interrupted them, "Harry!? Dad!? What happened!? I just saw Calum in Emergency!"

"Mum!" Harry ran to his mother and clung to her neat nurses' uniform. She knelt down and held him as giant sobs escaped the boy.

Harry stole a peek at Luke to see if he was still angry. Luke glared back. He was fuming. Incinerating. But he quickly held his tongue out of respect for William as the doctor came out with a sorrowful gait to inform them of Calum's fate.

***
Anne clapped her hands. "Oh! It looks marvelous! Louis and the girls would have loved to see this!"

John stood watching as Anne admired his handiwork while Harry and Cord were helping Murrey and Liam clean up the debris from building the gazebo.

It was almost suppertime and Harry had just showed Grimmy out the door after the boy promised to come back and show him his new brochures when he was done with the design. Harry told him it was fine but he insisted on producing them as well.

"It's nice for a party like the ones uncle Emmett used to hold." John quipped.

"You're quite right, John. Uncle Emmett's used to hold these huge dinners and parties back in the day.... The appetizer table used to be right here!" she said, pointing to a spot on the lawn." And the dance floor was always on this spot!" she waltzed over to another spot on the bland grass. I remember the last dinner he held. The one before Johannah's prom..." she trailed off.

"The one before everything went south?" John asked, more like he was making a point.

Anne nod-sighed, taking in the gazebo structure.

John went on, "We were all grateful. If it hadn't been for Emmet, we'd all be in the poor house! He taught me everything I know! I just wish my sister had seen it the same."

Anne agreed, taking a seat on the gazebo floor. "William may have been the one who adopted me but even I knew how dedicated uncle Em was to making sure we all turned out alright despite the Cowell's' and Grimshaw's take over of the town back then- What did they used to call him??"

"Emmett Hood!" they both said together as they laughed.

"He opened these ranch gates to everyone."

"Say, that gives me an idea, John! Why don't I hold a party!?- This Saturday!"

John tipped his hat. "Sounds like a plan. We got plenty of Jesse's and Calum's old rental chairs and tables at the hardware."

"Marvelous! Oh my gosh, I need to call people!- Harry!??"

"What, Mum?" he answered, over his shoulder.

"We're having a party on Saturday! A gazebo party! Everyone's invited!"

Liam clapped. "That's great! I can get Ma to make her sweet potato casserole!"

Anne and John exchanged surprised looks. "She does make a good casserole!" Anne admitted as she stood up.

"Harry, you and Liam can call all of Louis' friends! And don't tell him, I want it to be a surprise!"

She quickly made her way inside and dialed Louis' number.
"Oh, hi Honey! How is Wales?"

"I'm not quite settled in yet. My sisters have had me running around since I got here." A pleasantly surprised Louis replied before going off on a rant about how much he missed Champton Valley, and the truck, and the ranch, and the thing he dared not add to that list out loud...Harry.

But he tossed it out in the end. "I miss Harry."

The words were a lot sadder than the tone he used to say them. He made it sound like he just missed hanging out with his good buddy who occasionally got him into trouble drinking beer and swimming- He missed swimming...with Harry- but in reality he missed all those things and every other thing about the boy, like the way his hair curled upward in the ends, and the dark ridges inside the crystal of his big beautiful green iris, his delicate hands- way too delicate to be working on a farm- and the way they touched him. He missed them in his hair, on his skin...He missed his lips, with lip-stain, he missed them without...But hey, if they were pretending to be just friends why couldn't he at least say he missed the actual person even if it sounded casual and platonic; everything it wasn't.

"And Gemma." he added for security. Not that he did not miss her too. At this point he missed anybody who knew about his relationship with the ring wearing, guitar playing, horse whispering country boy.

"And Cliff," he stretched on. "Will you tell them for me?"

Anne chortled. "Of course! Not that Cliff ever listens to anything I have to say but alright," Anne turned to make sure no one was behind her. "Listen, Harry has a spot at the fundraising fair on Friday and -"

Louis drove into a frenzy and almost blew his cover. "He was so excited when he told me! I'm thrilled for him! Everyone's gonna see how amazing he is with Salsa and Winniepeg and Scotch and Phoebe the horse!" Louis could go on all evening.

"Oh, he told you!? Well, I was thinking you could all come support him, this is a big deal for him. So maybe if its possible to take the time, I don't want to impose on your time with your family-"

Louis snorted. "No way! The girls will love to come back!" We'll be there! I'll talk to dad!"- Anne rolled her eyes at that. Mark better had let them come without opposition- "Wait-" Louis decided. "The girls can get through to him. I'll talk to Dan!"

"Great! But you can't tell Harry, I want it to be a surprise! And, uh- one more thing, well it just so happens that I'm having a party the next day and I'd love for you an Dan and everyone to be there so maybe you can come equipped to spend the weekend? I want you to see how uncle Em used to do it when we were kids."

Louis' insides screamed in glee. "That's music to my ears! Thank you so much, Anne! I can't wait!!"

Louis was elated. As soon as he hung up the phone he started jumping on the bed.

Daisy bust open the door and flew in followed by Phoebe. "What's going on?" They didn't wait for an answer though, they just climbed onto the bed an started tramping with him.

"We're going back to Champton! Woooooohhhhhoooooo000!" Louis bellowed, holding their little hand
as they all jumped, laughing like squirrels.

"What in God's graces is going on here!" Mark said, pushing the door open. "Get down from that bed! Louis! Is this the example you're setting for your sisters?! You're guests in someone's home! Behave like it!" He then stormed off, grumbling.

Louis grew disgruntled as he dropped down on the bed, his sisters copying him, their big eyes still looking for his lead in mischief. He tussled Daisy's hair and wrapped Phoebe's around his fingers. What's his problem? We've spent holidays here before, and Dan's mum did tell us to make ourselves at home, Louis thought.

He propped his chin, and the girls followed. He smiled at them. He was still contemplating how to tell his father he wasn't moving to Australia after all. He needed to do it this weekend because they were due to leave first thing Monday morning but since Anne had now invited everyone back to Champton Louis felt scared to say anything while they were still in Wales. If he told him now then he'd argue and possibly drag him to Australia anyway without letting him go back to Champton for the party or even to say a proper goodbye to everyone- To Harry.

Louis needed badly to tell his father and everyone else the reasons why he needed Champton. He had no idea how his sisters would react to the news but he needed this. He just wished Harry would agree with him on telling them. He would never do so until Harry gave the green light but how long would that take? Louis was never good at being patient. He had called and texted Harry about it non-stop since he landed until Harry had to mute him (he texted him saying he muted him because needed to refresh the horses' memories for their show on Friday and Louis was distracting him immensely; he even put a grimace and a kissy face emoji with it) but he knew it was really because he just wasn't hearing him about the whole coming out thing.

Closing his eyes, he made up his mind to tell everyone at Anne's party. He'd have two and a half days to convince Harry that it is in everyone's best interest to know the truth.

"What were you saying about going back to Champton?" Phoebe asked.

He looked to his curious little sisters. "Phoebe? Daisy? I'm gonna need you guys to convince Dad to let us go back."

After quickly telling them about the fair and the party, the two eager girls 'high-fived' their brother and set off to find their father.

Feeling a bit more confident, Louis sank into thoughts of the look on Harry's face when he showed up. He thought about how it would be when he kisses him again and finally gets to give him the ring...

Leaping to his feet, he grabbed his still unpacked duffel bag in the corner of the room his dad was to now share with him, and stuck his hand in the pocket. What? Where's the ring?!

He raked his hands through his shoulder-length hair, retracing his steps that morning. Okay, he gave Harry the coat, then he - then he fought with Harry. Then he threw the duffel bag! The ring must've fallen out then.

***

"It's an inconvenience is what it is!" Marked lashed out, as plates clanked at dinner-time in Dan's mum's dining room. She lived in a substantially large flat with a pool in the back yard. The ant-covered Cheetos on the grass, the bookmarked teen romance novel on the sun chair, the thrown
toys, and the floating blow-up zebra told Louis on his arrival that it had been put to good use by his siblings in the week and a half they were there.

Though the rest of the house was classy enough; the dining room -with it's crystal chandelier, and white linen napkins -gave off an air that it required a certain etiquette; nothing Louis was foreign to, as his mother did teach him good manners.

Louis poked at his steak. He took one look at the roast potatoes and felt homesick.

"They've been nothing but kind to me the whole time I was there! The least we could do is be there to support them!"

"Well, I for one am on board. It's only for two days. The babies can use the time with you guys."

Dan said to Louis and his sisters but glowering at Mark.

"So what is this then? Are they not in Wales in the first place to do just that!?" Mark included, and Dorie- who was inconveniently (for her) placed next to him on her high chair- started mocking his flaring hand gestures.

On the other side of his sister, Ernie started arguing nonsense things at Mark, and Dan picked him up, nostrils flaring. Ernie, clearly caught off guard, having not anticipated being held at this time, quickly expressed his holding preferences by stretching out his tiny arms towards Louis across the table. Louis made to take him but Dan objected, setting him on his lap while stopping Dorie's flaring hands covered in gravy.

Ernie screamed out for Louis and Dan started bouncing his lap. "You know what, I think you need to sleep. You both do." he stated, denying Ernie his brother's embrace.

Phoebe grimaced from Louis' side. "I'm sorry, Louis. I give up. He's always yelling!" She then got up and ran down the corridor to her room.

Louis was just about ready to give up as well on his father ever doing an act of unselfishness.

"Dad, it's just for the weekend!" he lied. He very well planned on staying back in Champton and waving them all goodbye as they leave for the land down under. And he grew more determined with every deterring word coming out of his father's mouth.

"Last time I heard, the weekend starts from Friday, not Thursday!" the man continued, ignoring Phoebe and Dorie's individual opposition. Lottie couldn't help but snort at that comment. She quickly stifled it when Dan and Louis shot her deadly eyeballs. "Hey, I also wanna pass through Champton before we head home too." she chirpily saved. No doubt to say a proper farewell to Trey, Louis guessed, at the same time as Fizzie leaned and gossiped it in his ear.

He cracked a thin smile. He wanted her to know about him and Harry, and to ask her what she thought about him dating someone the same age as her. But for now he settled with pinching her elbow and secretly nodding her attention towards their father for her blind help in getting the man to reconsider.

"Look, Dad, going to Champton one last time isn't going to do any harm." she prompted after pinching Louis back. "I mean we're not gonna be back for a while, maybe years, so let's just go and have a party!"

Years!? Louis bulged his eyes at her. He wasn't exactly expecting it that. But he took it in stride, knowing it was precisely what his father liked to hear. He raked his gaze over him, hoping it worked.
After what seemed like a lifetime of clanking plates, a screaming Ernie, a peas throwing Dorie, and Louis holding his breath over his untouched potatoes that reminded him of two people he would give anything to see again- one of which he never will, and the other, the whole purpose of this mission- Mark finally spoke again.

"We can go for the party but not the fundraising thing." His voice was even and unbothered but Louis was not satisfied.

"But Dad, the fair is important!"

Mark refused to hear it. "Louis, you just got here!! You don't think it's rude you want to go back so soon!? You were supposed to be here since last week! You haven't even unpacked yet!!"

Louis shot to his feet, the back of his thighs batting the chair a foot behind him. "That's because I'm not staying!" He then marched straight to his room where everything came crumbling down on him.

He wept uninterrupted for a while then wiped his nose in his sleeve and slid his hand under the pillows for his phone. Harry had not called or messaged him all day since he muted him.

Am I that annoying? he thought, making his way outside to the pool for privacy. Desperate, he dialed Gemma's number hoping to speak to Harry, and after three rings it was indeed not Gemma who answered.

"Hello?" the voice breathed, sending much needed comfort to Louis.

"Harry?"

"Louis?"

"God I miss you!"

***

After a couple of hours of crying to Harry and talking about stuff like what happened last night and how good it felt to be sucked off by him, his father casually strolled out the house, forcing Louis to end the call.

"I have to go - My dad…" he informed, still teary eyed.

"Okay, I love you." Harry replied before the phone went dead.

"Fizzy, uh, Fizzy said this guy, Liam is in Champton?" the man awkwardly edging over to Louis as he sat on the sun chair.

Louis swung his eyes down along with his eyebrows. What does Liam have to do with anything?

"I know you two have-some history. Maybe you left things in a bad place…"

"What are you getting at!??" Louis snapped. He felt a sense of uneasiness at what his father was implying. It was close but yet so far.

"Is that why you're adamant on going back?" Mark replied calmly, hands in his pockets, one foot slumped in front the other. Louis studied his posture and rolled his eyes as he blinked. The man looked like he was trying to hard, like he was holding down an alligator in each of his pockets with the veins protruding like that. Louis was tempted to say yes just so he'd leave it alone and leave
"No." he told him instead. "He's dating Zayn, Dad."

Mark seemed to ease at his unbothered tone, and he nodded empathetically. "You know, I may not have been here but I've always known when things bothered you. You don't have to keep things to yourself all the time."

Louis shrunk his eyes at him. *Is this the same guy who made me come down from the bed didn't let me get a word in at dinner?*

"Dad, I don't follow what you-" Mark's hands finally released the alligators and did the 'I'm not arguing' gesture.

"I'm just saying, it's okay to be jealous- I mean Zayn did steal him from you!" A tiny rigid curve set between his eyebrows over a quizzical look that made Louis clench his belly and hang over, bursting out in a laugh.

"Dad, you are so bad at this, you should see the look on your face!" Louis giggled, slapping his lap.

Mark frowned and folded his arms. "Okay cut out that nonsense. I'm here trying to be a good Dad and talk about ...young people stuff and you're making fun of- Oh!" His sentence was cut by two dusty-blue colored sleeves flung around his neck.

Louis couldn't control the amount of tears that fell on his father's shirt as he tightened his grip. He had not realized how much he had missed him. Louis had always wondered what it would be like to talk about boys with his dad, and this was exactly the way it always played out in his head. He always spoke to Fizzy over the phone about things like that and she'd be the one to relay information to their father, along with their mother sometimes. He remembered the first few months of his father dealing with him being gay; he had told Louis' mother over the phone that his biggest concern was that he won't be able to get grandchildren from Louis and how on earth they (Johannah and company) expected him to get over something like that. The thought of disappointing his Dad in that way had Louis on edge for months until they had to sit down and Skype it out where Louis sobbed the whole time and Mark ended up breaking down and had to cut the camera, calling him back a while later and basically pretending he had not shed a tear before. They came to terms with it; Louis reminding him that he had four other kids to give him grandkids plus Louis might- say, in ten years when he finds the right person- adopt or do one of those surrogate things. And they laughed and talked about stuff like football to lighten the mood and restore some kind of normalcy. From there on out that was where most of their conversations dwelt but Louis knew under the 'tough guy' exterior his father was just a big soft teddy bear.

"Okay," Mark said, breathing deeply, "You and the girls can go to Champton from tomorrow evening and spend the weekend, but only after you drop me off at Sophia's. I'm going to immigration and make sure all of you are set to fly. I'll join you all for the party on Saturday."

Louis' eyes popped open. *What? I can go to Champton!?*

"You have three days to wrap up whatever loose ends you have with this Liam. He said the name with a wary tone like a protective father bear. Louis darted his eyes in a circle as he held on to the man. Okay, I'm crying in his arms because I'm vulnerable and need a hug from him right now but he thinks this is about Liam and he's letting me have this weekend... Okayyyyyy.

This is the part where he tells his Dad about Harry and how he wanted to stay in Champton, but Louis knew it'd be pushing his luck so he instead nodded like a mopey fool and accepted his
father's permission to take all his sisters and brother back to Champton Valley. As the robust man patted his back, he feeling he pinpointed as guilt set over him but there was no time to think about it because he looked up and saw Fizzy, Lottie, and the twins peeping threw the curtain in the glass window. He shot them a thumbs up, and behold they all rolled out, the two older girls reaching in for high fives and the twins capering around everyone, squealing as their father caught them for tickles.

Later as he settled in bed with contented sighs he decided to text Harry some more positive things to match his mood. As they exchanged heart emojis and lame jokes, he cracked mischievous smiles as he dared not hint to the boy that he would be there sooner than he anticipated.
Close Your Eyes

Chapter Notes

Okay guys this fic is going to be longer than I planned and I’m so excited! I noticed people like longer ones so I may go till about chpt 40 or so. I have so much to do I don’t even know where to begin! Step by step! That’s how! Thank you all so much for being patient I know I had you worried but I was literally looking for ways to make the chapters more appealing and stuff for you guys. Please stay with me through this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry’s POV

"Great! I’ll see you guys then!" Gemma said brightly, hanging up her cellphone call and flashing a smile at Harry and Cord at breakfast. It was Thursday morning and she was in her Cowell ranch equestrian uniform, all prepped up for some kind of training.

A yawny Harry cast droopy eyes on her, asking for the time as he threw out some cereal and mixed it up in his milk. Cord grumbled the time through an egg filled mouth.

Twenty-five past seven!? Harry shoved the bowl to his mouth and gulped. He was supposed to be up since two hours earlier but he had spent the night in Louis’ room and the aesthetics in there were perfect for a good night’s sleep if you were restless and happened to be missing the previous occupant so badly that your eyes watered for lack of blinking.

After dinner last night while he was sitting on the porch steps, Gemma had handed him her phone as Louis had called hers knowing he would not get through to his, and they spent a whole three hours whispering I love yous, I miss yous, and good nights, while Louis cried for reasons Harry guessed had to do with missing him. He fought back the lump in his own throat to whisper soothing things into the phone while he stared at his father’s old truck in the driveway the entire time. He reckoned he could drive all the way to Wales now because Louis was such a good teacher... After they finally got the will to hang up, they tried to do it together- on the count of about twenty sets of threes- but was interrupted by Louis’ dad, and after they hung up Harry had to stay outside for another hour until his muffled wails stopped and his tears dried up, and his mother went to bed before he went upstairs and tried to sleep. That sleep only came after another hour-and-a-half of blankly staring at the ceiling, and multiple text message exchanges between him and Louis before he dragged his blanket down the stairs and crawled into his bed, inhaling his scent on his pillow, and lining his blanket with his sailing fast asleep.

He wished he could crash back in the bed again and sleep for the rest of the day but he had to get to work on the farm doing daily chores plus extra preparations for the fair.

"Whoah! Good thing you don’t have to go through another night of that!" Gemma said, observing his puffy eyes as she leaned on the counter with her hand in her pocket, sipping her coffee. She gave a scanning look at his attire and he realized he was wearing one of Louis’ t-shirts; one with a samurai ninja on it. He figured he must have dragged it on in his pining when he entered his room.

"Looks like your man is coming back today!"
Cord choked on his coffee and started coughing it out all over his bread and butter.

"Gemma!" Harry snapped, looking back into the living room to make sure his mother wasn't in earshot of that description of what Louis was to him. He'd die if she ever found out. "Wait- What you mean, 'today'?'"

"Don't worry, she went to get some stuff in order for the party Saturday." she said matter-of-factly, knocking her cup on the table to hand Cord a napkin. "-Heard her telling Robin last night that Louis and everyone was coming today to spend the weekend?"

Wiping up his mess, Cord shot a curious eye on Gemma's cup and looked up. "When did you start drinking coffee? You were always a tea person!"

Gemma grabbed the cup and shot for the sink. "What? I have a long day today!"

Harry scratched his head. "Lou didn't say anything about coming today! Mum said she told him for tomorrow night because she wants to surprise him with a sleepover with all his friends. Liam texted and confirmed that everyone is coming.

"Well, be grateful he gets to see you perform at the fair as well as the party." Gemma said, washing the cup. "Oh! And I almost forgot- you and Niall have to share the stage with Louis and his friends at Mum's party! He made me listen to some of his band's stuff and they're pretty good! What's the name again?"

"Except Sweetness." Harry said, on beat. Cord smirked at him. He returned a blushy, google-eyed 'What?' face.

"Yeah, well... And, uh...head's up, I, uh - I can't say much but I invited a few friends myself." she said too quickly, with a 'too blank' expression as she set the cup in the drainer.

Cord squinted his eyes. "Why do I get the feeling you're up to something?"

Gemma briefly looked to the floor with a raised eyebrow and turned to the sink to now wash her plate, flashing him a sideways glance.

"Well, Aiden's your boyfriend, so of course him..." Harry said aloud, wondering which one of her friends could garner a heads up warning. Cord stopped eating and gave him a 'Thanks for ruining my breakfast' look.

Harry's eyes shot for the roof and landed on his sister.

"Gem, please don't tell me you invited Simon Cowell!!!?"

"Among others -but for the record, I did not invite him; Aiden did." she said wiping her hands.

Harry shook his head and his curls flopped down over his eyes. What is wrong with this girl? Is she determined to send Mum into a relapse!?"

"Don't tell Mum!" she yelled behind her as she sped out, leaving Cord and Harry in the dust.

A suspicious face grew on Cord as he got up, grabbing his Cowboy hat. "Is it me or is your sister acting strange?"

"Ever since she came home?" Harry replied rhetorically. He stood up to get going with his day, and Anne came bursting in the front door with a bag of groceries and Robin, who carried two bags of
"Uh oh! Better get to work!" Cord said, quickly sneaking out the back door.

Anne grinned as Robin gobbled away about race tracks.

"Oh, hey Sweetie! Nice t-shirt! I don't remember that?" she said, striding into the kitchen. Harry looked down at it, pulled at the neck, and folded his arms, all in one go.

"Uh? Mum, is Louis coming back today... or?"

She stopped and stared at him all 'dear-in-headlights'. Robin's expression resembled that of someone who just heard the most hilarious joke ever.

Tentative now, Harry shrugged slowly. "Gemma...told me?"

Anne slapped her leg and looked to a laughing Robin. "Gemma!? Oh! I swear one of these days I will strangle her!- How did she even know!? It was supposed to be a surprise!"

Harry shrugged again.

"So he's gonna be here in a while?" he asked, unpacking the groceries, trying not to sound as enthusiastic as he was.

Anne nodded distractedly with her neck and all as she sampled some prunes she bought. "Tonight actually! They'll be here around seven-ish."

Harry bit down on the smile that was forming on his face, and it made his facial muscles hurt - a lot!

***

Aesthetic song: Lost in your Eyes- Debbie Gibson

Dan's car door was thrown open by a excited eight year-old who clambered out followed by her equally thrilled twin sister. Anne, Gemma and Cord went out to greet the guests. Dan had brought all the children except Fizzy who would be arriving the next day with her father as they opted to spend a night at Sophia's so they could visit the passport office in Doncaster.

Harry had been nervous since morning and was now trying to gobble down a cookie he had wished he didn't start to eat a minute ago. After hearing the horn blow and the happy voices out on the porch, he smoothed his mocha sweater and made his way through the living room and spun back around, looking for Cliff to help eat the cookie. He almost stumbled over him as the dog came running behind him when he had heard the familiar giggle. A large flock of birds took flight in his chest, flapping their wings as he neared the porch, and the smell of his perfume hit his nose and all he wanted to do was dive into his arms. He stopped in the middle of the doorway and looked up and his mouth could have swallowed his face. There standing on the porch being all cute with his baby sister as Dan held her, was Louis all in white, and with a new haircut.

"Hey," Louis grinned while Dan and Anne chattered about 'thank yous' and 'no problems'.

The sun had gone down a half-hour ago but somehow it got caught in his eyes and remained trapped like a caged bird giving off its radiance from its blue prison. Harry showed a series
expressions that all basically boiled down to 'You look different' and 'It's so handsome and cute' but Louis still took notice of them all and giggled like a school boy, even poking him in the side and hiding his face behind his palms.

Gemma took Ernie in her arms and he stared her down like a hawk before stretching his arms out for Louis, who took him and held him up in the air like Simba, even singing the entry to the song—or his version version of it.

"Louis, cut that out!" Dan snapped at the same time that Harry let out a scandalous laugh, which made Anne jump and turn around, and Dan flash him a smile. It was honestly impossible to keep his mouth closed.

He slapped his mouth shut as everyone looked at him, Gemma rolling her eyes and Louis fonding so hard his face might crack.

Everyone made their way inside except Louis, who was now showing Ernie the view beyond the country road.

Harry lingered back as well and strolled over to them as Louis was saying; "Smell that, Ernie? That's fresh country air."

His eyes met his, and suddenly a unspoken affection for each other took over him. Why was Louis so gorgeous? Did his eyes have to be so large and piercing, nothing hidden from them?

Harry produced his dimples. "I knew you were coming today."

Ernie started making nonsense words at Harry as Louis said, "How on Earth did you know!?"

"Um, Gemma?" Harry answered, blinking bashfully with more dimples.

Louis raised two eyebrows in realization.

"Where's Fizzy?" Harry noticed.

"When we went to drop Dad back in Doncaster, she felt bad to leave her alone with Dad." Louis snorted. Harry yacked out a laugh and Ernie scowled at him.

"Da! Achoo, Daaaa!!!" Ernie said pulling out his pacifier and pushing Louis' chin away.

"Okay, okay!! You want your dad, let's go find him!"

Louis took his brother inside and Harry stood in the doorway as Louis grabbed the truck keys quickly asking if he could go see Niall.

"Sure, Honey? Is Harry going with you!?" Anne enquired.

"Yeah!" Harry heard Louis clip in reply.

"Tell Harry to remind Mrs Horan about Saturday!" Anne called before resuming her chit-chat.

"Okay!" Louis answered, raising an eyebrow to Harry as they darted down the porch and ran to the truck in their own little understanding.

***
Harry's POV

Louis jumped in the lake and splashed around.

"I missed you, my Sweet!" he spoke softly to the water.

Harry watched him, wondering if his inner clocks were working. "You've only been gone since yesterday!"

"Yeah, for you! But I haven't seen the lake in four days!" Louis answered, making large waves as he backstroked. "Come in!"

Harry really didn't want to get wet this hour with the fair tomorrow but-

"Oh, come on, Love. I missed you too."

Hypnotized by his voice, Harry slid his skinny jeans off and joined him.

The water was cold but in the second that they touched, he felt heat. Heat steaming through his veins and shooting up through his eyes. Closer. He wanted to get closer than just brushing up on him like what was happening now. Louis must have known and felt the same because then he slid his hands under his arms below the water and pulled him closer, a sly smile crossing his face.

"See? I told you I'd come back." he said in a whisper. "Now I know for sure we belong together."

His lips reached his neck, leaving intense, breathy kisses all around his shoulders. Harry laid his forearms on his shoulders and closed his eyes, bending his head backwards as Louis ran his tongue up his Adam's apple.

"I missed you. I love you." Louis continued in his ear, not wanting the water to hear, and he lowered his palms to the curve at the back of his boxers, squeezing it.

A gasp flew out of Harry's lungs. He didn't anticipate how good it would feel to be touched like that. Neither did he anticipate what happened next. As his boxers were kind of floating on him under the water his privates were very easy to access, and Louis' hands wasted no time in sliding up the underside and feeling his bare arse cheeks for real. His fingers covered them, gripping into his soft flesh, and he kissed him, slow as he pushed up on him, and Harry liked it. He felt himself about to go over the edge but he did not stop him...that is until his fingers tethered down below his crease, almost touching him there.

"Harry, wait!" Louis called but he was already halfway to dry land.

"I'm sorry! I know I was out of line." Louis muttered as he got out and pulled his trousers back on.

"No, don't be!" Harry quickly dismissed, slumping down on the dewy grass, crickets jumping out the way; same as his heart. It was dark under the trees and he could only see the wet glistening of the older boy's skin yet he still kept his eyes low with embarrassment.

"I missed you a lot." Louis said in a pain stricken voice. "If Anne hadn't called I'm sure we'd be on the phone right now... still missing each other. Maybe when we tell her how we feel about each other this will all get easier."

"I told you- I don't want to tell her. I just want to enjoy this time with you alone."
"Yeah, but for how long? Do you want her to walk in on us one day?"

"That's not going to happen!" Harry told him.

Louis pressed his fingertips on his temples. "Oh, yeah you're right because you won't let me touch you in the first place!"

Harry fumed, arms around his shins. "Why are you complaining after what happened between us at!?"

"Oh! I'm glad you brought that up because I remember you sucking me off like a pro and then not letting me anywhere near your privates!" Louis justified.

"Have you zero restraint!? Your great aunt was right across the hall!!" Harry shouted, jumping to his feet, grabbing his clothes and marching to the truck at a dizzy pace.

"I didn't hear your mouth complaining on my dick!!" he heard Louis yell after him as he slid his jeans over his wet boxers.

He got in the backseat and slammed the door dismissively. "Just drive home!"

Louis, who was two steps behind him, laughed dryly as he opened the door in a huff and climbed in, scrambling on top of him in the process.

"AAAAHHH!!" Harry yelled as Louis grabbed both his wrists. "What's your problem!?!"

"This! This is my problem!" He gripped his left wrist, shaking it in front of Harry's face."Why are you still wearing it!?!"

Harry's eyes met the purity ring, and he made to pull away but he was too strong for him. He decided to yell the answer at him in substitute. "Because I didn't think you were coming back!"

"What? I told you I was coming back! I called you every chance I got! You fucking muted me!" Louis thundered, voice booming in his face.

Harry roared back up at him, trapped under all his weight. "Why are you still mad for that!!!???? I told you I had work to do!!! You asshole, we talked for hours last night and I apologized and you said it was fine!!"

"That's the point I'm trying to make! You know how much I wanted to be here! Even if I never ever came back, you sucked my dick! That should immediately cancel out a fucking purity ring!" Louis shoved his hands back at him and leaned off of him. "Tell me how your brain works, Harry! Tell me how it's okay for your sister to know about us, and mine to not! Tell me how it's okay for you to blow me and not let me do the same to you!"

Harry started crying. He felt so stupid and angry, and scared and sick, that he got an instant headache. Shakily taking out a mint from his jeans pocket, he unwrapped it, hoping he'd feel better without his stupid inhaler.

"I did it because-I wanted you to-have something-to come back for." he croaked through tears. "If we had gone-all the way and you-didn't like it, there'd be no reason for you-to come back!"

Facial features laced with regret, Louis gently pulled him up by his shoulders. "For God's sakes, Harry, nobody's talking about sex. You're such a baby about everything!"
"Well, I don't know! I thought that's what you wanted at the time." Harry cried, wiping his stream of tears.

Louis started wiping them for him. "Of course I wanted tha- want that! But only when you're ready. I was only offering to suck you back!"

As the words stung the air, they both looked away in opposite directions. Harry's wrist was in slight pain from trying to resist the older boy's grip; it wasn't the first time they had argued but it was the loudest they had ever yelled at each other, and it made Harry feel a strange sense of dread. Wanting the feeling to go away, he pulled the purity ring off his finger and opened the other door, climbing out. He dipped his head back in the window, showing Louis the ring between his thumb and index. "See?" He stood upright and threw the ring as far as he could in the bushes, no sound to indicate where it fell, and climbed back in next to him.

"I'm not a baby." he said, shooting Louis a pointed glance and looking down. A smile spread halfway across Louis' face, and he softly turned Harry's chin to face him.

"You have no idea how deeply engraved you are here, do you." Louis said, taking his hand and holding it to his heart as large green eyes looked up at him for assurance.

"Close your eyes." he commanded in a crooning tone.

A quizzical look came over the Harry's eyes as his dimples emerged. "Louis...?" he started as his heart beat faster.

"Just trust me." the older boy reassured, drawing closer.

He closed his eyes and broadened his smile, holding on to Louis' somewhat hairy forearms to make sure he didn't try anything funny, and growing curious as the warm body parts nervously shifted around in his grip. He heard a low chuckle and; "Okay, open them now."

It was extremely dark and he couldn't see a damn thing, but he did feel Louis' hand place something on his lap. He traced his fingers down his arm until he felt a hard velvet cube snuggled in his palm. He swiped it up and looked up at the twinkle in the older boy's eyes with surprise in his own.

"I know it's early but - I don't want this for just a summer." Louis stressed as he brushed the back of his hand over Harry's cheek. "I want you for the rest of my life. I'm not ever going to love anyone else."

The box trembled in his grip, his eyebrows curved downwards.

"This...I wanted to give you this since Sunday but I sent Gemma to pick it up for me; bad idea!" Louis gibbered as he pressed the flashlight icon in his phone and focusing it on his lap. "Then I forgot it at Grandma's and had to sneak it out when we dropped off Dad and Fizzie." The fingers on his left hand gently compressed his over the box and Harry felt something he had no name or explanation for; energy leaving the hot moist of Louis' palm, an energy he was fast getting addicted to and wanted to drain him dry of.

As he opened the box, he tried to speak but nothing got past his tonsils. He could not even think.

"Relax, Harry," Louis giggled. It's only a promise ring, as in 'I promise to love only you and stay committed to you always.'"
"Harry? If it's too much for you, I won't push you. I just wanted you to know."

"Sunday?" Harry finally said- asked. "You were planning this since Sunday?" his eyes started running again and he looked at Louis, unable to express exactly what he was feeling.

"You- I didn't think you'd feel that way- about me. I thought; my mum invited you for the holidays and you'd go back to your life when it was over. I never in a million years thought we would end up." Harry couldn't finish the words. He choked up.

Louis took the ring out of the box and rubbed Harry's newly bare left ring finger. "Can I put it on for you?"

Harry nodded, and because their heads were so close together, he butted Louis' forehead.

"Ow." Louis stated painlessly, as he slid the ring on.

The phone light reflected on the chiseled edges of the side older boy's face, which was brought out by the new haircut, and Harry found himself pressing his lips on the sharp corner of his jawline. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Babe." Louis beamed. He started fiddling with his wet curls, kissing his head. Harry gawked at the ring on his finger. "I love you."

Louis chuckled in glee. "I love you more- It has an inscription on the inside. Looks like your magnifying glass is gonna come in handy."

Harry felt completely different compared to a minutes earlier. Before, he had wanted to wring his neck but now he just wanted to stay in the dark with him for endless amounts of time placing wet kisses on it. "This is the sweetest thing that's ever happened to me. I can't accept-"

"Accept it. It comes with all my love." Louis bent in and planted a strong, wanting kiss on the his mouth, and in the hype of the moment, Harry allowed him access to his jeans.

Sinking backwards to lie on the seat, Harry felt an enormous desire to be touched in his groin as Louis eased on top of him again. Wrapping his arms around him, caressing the neat stubs at the back of his hairline, Harry gazed into the dusky-blue ocean of his eyes and wondered what surreptitious fate lay beyond the dilated dark hole in the middle of it.

Louis, feeling an intense high off of Harry, did not know if the control he tried to wear was in his mind or really exuberating as he pulled down Harry's jeans, but they were both lying on the seat before he knew it and so were the boy's jeans. Harry's broken panting rasped in his ear, tickled his bones, and left a hot rush of mint into Louis' mouth as both boys knew not where to settle their busy kisses. Louis ran his tongue down his neck and past his sweater, rolling it up in a rush to remove it. A firm grip on his wrists told him it was forbidden, and he inwardly screamed in dissatisfaction.

"Harry, it's thirty-five degrees out here! Pleassee.."

"Louis, what if we can't stop...?" Harry breathed as his eyes shut with the wet fire slithering on his neck, and the heat of Louis' trousers pressing on his front.

"Fuck your boundaries right now, Harry!" Louis opposed, now sinking his face into his crotch.

He licked on his semi-soft dick, instantly making it hard. Harry shivered with the touch, and felt so
exposed.

Louis licked on his pre-cum, and felt fingers jerking his hair back but he ignored it, choosing to continue tasting him.

"Stop," Harry said, grabbing a handful of his hair again.

Lifting himself up, Louis studied his love's face in the phone light. "Harry, I'm not gonna hurt you! I can't pull myself away from you right now."

He cupped his balls in his hand and lay himself on top of him, kissing his neck.

Harry pushed him off and sat up, pulling his sweater down over his crotch. "This isn't the right place. What if someone drives down here and sees-"

"No one else comes here. It's quiet. It's not the best but we can make it work." a dazed Louis replied now fiddling with his own trouser zip.

"You just got back! And your stepdad is here. Everyone must be wondering where we are." Harry said, grabbing his jeans.

Louis grabbed the jeans away. "We can tell them we're at Niall's."

"Tomorrow is the fair and I have to get up super early. Mum will be angry -" Harry said grabbing it back, "-if we don't get back now!" He started pulling his jeans back up, and shifting for Louis to jump in the drivers' seat.

Louis sighed sharply as he settled himself behind the wheel. "You're right. We better get back before I go crazy and do something that isn't totally normal for two boys in love with each other."

Harry frowned at his rude tone as he climbed in the front passenger. "Are you mad at me!?"

"No. I'm just mad at this whole situation." Louis shrugged. Harry gave him the 'What?' eyebrows.

"See, if we tell everyone we're together, we'll get more time to actually be together." Louis informed, scratching his elbow.

"For the last time, we're not telling her!" Harry said in frustration.

"You expect me to lie to her forever!?" Louis said, raising his voice again. Harry winced, and he lowered it back, sighing. "Harry this is an impossible situation. We have to tell her."

"No! Why can't you just be with me!!?" Harry burst out crying. "She doesn't have to know everything about us! I bet if you weren't staying with us- if you were just a guy who lived down the road, you wouldn't care if she didn't know!"

Louis snorted dryly and put his hands on his hips. "Actually, YES! Yes, I would still care, believe it or not-"

"I don't! I believe you just feel like you need to say something because you're staying in the same house!"

Louis' head shook and he shrugged. "Why are you arguing with me!? I'm not gonna change my mind! We have to say something to her soon! I'm in love with her son and that's not going to change. So, Harry, please, let's just do the right thing."
Harry's eyes went red and tear covered. "Louis, it's not the right thing! She'll make me stop seeing you!"

"The hell she will!" Louis shouted back. He despised the thought of ever being forced to stop seeing him.

Harry wiped his tears, looked out the window and they came falling down his cheeks again.

"Harry, you're not giving your mother enough credit! She asked me to come back to support you tomorrow!"

"How am I not giving her credit? She hates this part of me! I don't how you can't see that!"

"What is your deal!? You won't let me touch you! You won't let me tell my family! You won't talk to your mum! I don't know what you really want from me!" Louis shouted.

With a rough shove, Harry got in the backseat again and sat directly behind Louis so he wouldn't see him in the rear-view mirror.

"Harry, you're being a baby, now!" Louis taunted.

"Then don't talk to me!" he snapped back.

Shaking his head, Louis started the engine. "I don't wanna be with you anymore...." he heard the whining voice of his boyfriend in the backseat say as he drove away. And he sighed. At least he's still wearing the ring...

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LOUIS' POV

Harry ran upstairs to get out of his wet clothes and Louis sat down on the rug with his sisters and brother.

Anne yawned from the single chair. "Dan is taking Harry's room so he'll have to bunk out with you for the weekend, Louis."

Louis nod-smiled at her and thought about his argument with Harry. She knew that they were both gay and still didn't have a problem with them sleeping in the same bed so she can't be as bad as he made her out to be.

He made airplane noises as he picked up Ernie.


Louis blinked. "It's okay. He can sleep with me. Right Ernie?"

"Yayyyyyyyyy!!" the child shouted, throwing his arms out like a plane.

"No. That's not happening. He doesn't sleep when you're around."

"That's not true." Louis countered.
Dan sighed again, heavy this time and took Ernie out of his arms gesturing his head for Lottie to help him with Doris.

He frowned at Dan and got up to get ready for bed. As he closed his door he heard muffled crying coming from the girls room upstairs, and he opened it back, darting to the stairs. Lottie came trudging down the stairs with a screaming Ernie in her arms.

"He only wants you!" she said, handing Louis the child who was calling him by the nickname he had given him, "Achoo!"

"It's okay, I'm here. You can sleep in my room, okay?" he kissed his head as he rested it on his shoulder, and Dan came out of the kitchen with a deep frown.

"He won't sleep with us. Everything is 'Achoo... Achoo...' It's annoying!" Lottie mumbled before disappearing back in the room. Dan looked on concerned as Louis stood waiting for the 'Go ahead.'

"Just make sure he sleeps!" the man ordered, and Louis nodded shortly before taking to his room.

He hadn't been in the room since he got back, and he noticed something pink peaking out from under his own blanket that he knew he had neatly folded before he left. Squatting halfway with the heavy child in his arms, he pulled the blanket, tidying the bed enough for Ernie to sleep and saw that it was Harry's blanket that lined his. He didn't know if to laugh or cry at the fact that he had slept in his room last night and covered up with both their blankets. At least he had something to sleep with that reminded him of Louis, he had totally forgotten to take something of Harry's with him to Wales so he had to re-imagine the way he smelled.

He laid his baby brother down and sang him a few songs, and got changed for bed when he had fallen asleep.

On his way to brush his teeth he heard Anne and his stepdad muttering in the kitchen over tea, and stopped to listen.

"...pulling them every which way... wasn't supposed to be like this. And he doesn't get it. Louis worked so hard to get into that college. Mark just doesn't see what he's doing wrong."

Louis pushed his brows together. Says the man who didn't wait a day before dragging away half our family to Wales. I want my Mum! The rage flared in him and his eyes burned with no outlet. He was so angry at his father and stepdad. His father had skipped out on coming with them so he could go to Doncaster and make sure all their passports were in order. This fact made Louis even angrier. How was he to let his father down at the very last minute when the man was all set to take everyone back with him? What excuse would be deemed good enough for Louis to remove himself from his family when they needed him most? This would all be so much easier if he just sit everyone down and explain that he and Harry need each other.

But would that even make sense to anybody? What if Harry was right and Anne wouldn't approve? And will they all be angry with them for being so selfish? Will they chastise him for choosing to be there for someone who was not suffering like they were? Louis was the oldest so why would he need somebody? Why would he be so weak that he had to fall apart without someone else's help. Doesn't he know that he's the one who needs to hold up everyone else from falling? How dare he fall!?

Louis clawed at his hair. His mind raced so fast he began to feel dizzy. Nothing made sense anymore and he started to doubt everything.
Creeping back in the room to sleep, he took the edge of the bed and opened the messages in the
group chat...

Calvin: 321202 views and fuckin growing !!!!!!!
Liam: its madness!
Harry: No way!!!
Niall: why wasn't I there!?
Stan: U hear that Louis?
Louis: what r u guys talkin abt??
Harry: LOUIS!!!!
Zayn: hey Louis! Guess where I am?
Louis: um??
Niall: He's at Liam's
Louis: :)
Liam: the video with you guys singin in the airport is blowing up on YouTube!!!!
Louis: what?
Harry: Gemma put it on youtube and everyone likes it! lots of comments below!
Louis: Seriously? I didn't get to watch it back! Is my hair okay!?
Harry: I'm famous!
Harry: your hair was great. It's great now 2. {Blush emoji}
Louis: thanks. :)
Zayn: I'll see u guys at the fair 2moro! I cant wait to see you louis!

Just then there was a soft knock on the door. Louis crept over and opened it, careful not to wake
Ernie.

Harry flooded in and shut the door. Louis' index stopped him from making an excited outburst, and
a large grin appeared instead, followed by a worried frown.

Harry focused his gaze on the three tiny buttons at the top of his white shirt.

"Are you still mad at me? I didn't mean it-"

He hit the door in a thud as desiring lips came crashing into him. He opened his mouth and
welcomed the overwhelming kiss that lasted for a long time as they ran their hands through
eachothers' hair.
When they finally released each other, gazing with glossy eyes and bloodshot lips, Louis was crashing into him again, forcing his forehead into his, gripping the back of his thighs and hoisting him up.

Harry let out a startled noise as he swung him around to the study half of the room and rested him on the old desk. Louis cupped his cheeks and looked into his eyes. Harry pulled his shirt and kissed him. Tears ran down Louis' cheeks, and his insides were burning with emotions of every kind. He didn't want to feel them. He blocked them all out and lost himself in the warmth of Harry's mouth. He didn't know how intense he was being until Harry pulled away with a worried frown.

"You're crying," Harry whispered, wiping them away. Louis grabbed him and clung to him, inhaling the sleeve on his shoulder.

Harry then wrapped his legs around him. "I didn't mean what I said. I love you."

"Are you sure, Harry?" Louis said, voice low and pleading as he combed through the shiny brown curls. "Because I don't know if we're making any sense." He pulled away and took three steps backwards. "Maybe we were meant to be a summer thing. Maybe we weren't supposed to happen at all."

Harry's head frantically shook, and Louis thought the boy would make himself dizzy.

"We were! Before I met you I was alone. I never had anyone who saw me with all my quirks and wanted me. I never want to be so alone again." Harry said.

"That's why I gave you this ring. To remind you that you're always going to have me, no matter what!" Louis insisted. "I'm sorry for pushing you. You shouldn't have to feel pressured to say anything about us before you're ready. And I shouldn't have thrown myself on you like that." Louis said the words but his heart hurt. He felt like a selfish hypocrite because all he wanted was to throw himself at Harry and have everyone know how he felt.

They hugged just then, tight and loving. Then they heard Ernie behind the partition shuffling in the bed.

"Achhoooooo!!!!" the little boy cried, and Louis ran to his side on the edge of the bed.

"It's okay! I'm here. Come on, go back to sleep." And he started singing to him again.

Harry crawled to the other side of the bed, and settled in the corner, and Ernie stopped crying to stare him down.

"Why does he call you that?" Harry asked, play-tugging at the pacifier, Ernie batting his hand away.

Louis broadened his smile. "When he was smaller I'd pretend to sneeze and he'd stop crying and stare at me just like that. I did it all the time to give Mum a break."

Harry cackled, and Ernie froze, eyeballing him.

"Ernie, you've met Harry before. He's my boyfriend!" Louis said, the corner of his eyes creasing with a proud smile.

"Louis!!????" Harry whispered hoarsely.

"Relax! He'd rather go a week without his pacifier than sell out his big brother. Ain't that right,
Ernie?" Louis giggled, tickling the child. "Besides, he is the only one in my family I can actually talk to about you." he added, giving Harry a pointed look, to which he pursed his lips in reply.

Ernie just looked at him and gave a sly smile as though he understood everything Louis just said, and then stuck the pacifier back in his own mouth, aggravated.

"I love my sisters but I feel it's always been me and Ernie. The only two boys out of a big batch of girls. It's my responsibility now to teach him everything I know about Mum and what it was like for her taking care of a son so he'd know exactly how much she loved him." -Harry blinked sadly at that- "I can't do that from Australia, can I?" he rhetoricized.

Ernie turned into Louis' shoulder and kicked him in the chest.

"Harry, quick! Sing him a song!" Louis whispered, rubbing his little back as he tried to sleep.

Harry started whisper-singing.

A smile stretched across Louis' face. It was the song Louis wrote for the concert. Ernie laid between them blinking his eyes droopily.

"I can't believe your video is blowing up on YouTube!!?" Louis whispered through the song. "Must be the Harry Styles effect!"

Harry snorted in the middle of the chorus and Louis jiggled with glee.

"I'm glad I'm here to support you tomorrow." one boy whispered.

"Me too." the other boy answered.

Soon little Ernie was asleep, and so was Louis. Harry covered them both, and with a smile at his new ring he closed his eyes and fell asleep as well.

**

Chapter End Notes

Kudos and comments help my story a lot so if you are a new reader and like it please touch the kudos icon below!! Comments please please please! I answer all!!
Hey. I know I haven’t updated in a while. The holidays snatched me away. I hope you all had an enjoyable stress free Christmas and New Years and I wish you a great year ahead full of joy and prosperity. You all are really amazing.

I'm so grateful for the help you guys give me. Okay here it is, chapter 36!

Louis' POV

The next morning was chaotic; everyone scrambling to get ready half an hour before they were due to arrive at the fairgrounds. The boys had to wait for the girls to finish using the bathroom (Gemma especially,) and Harry had to get ready in Louis' room because Dan took ages combing back his strawberry blonde mousy mane in his bedroom the mirror.

Louis wasn't any help at all, cupping Harry’s bare nipples from behind after politely facing the other way for him to get into his jeans.

"Ayeee!!" Ernie called to them, pointing a stern finger at Louis.

Harry jabbed him with his elbow to stop just before Lottie knocked twice and flew in without warning, scooping Ernie up to give him a quick bath and resting Dory down in his stead.

The little girl all ready to go in her jumper and magenta sun hat stared at the boys open-mouthed as she sat obediently holding her socked toes. Harry buttoned up a shirt he borrowed from Louis and looked to him for feedback.

"Ap! You're almost ready!" Louis clued, plumping down by his baby sister.

"I know, I have to comb my hair," Harry informed.

"And?"

"No need to be rude!" Harry countered sharply.

Louis laughed. "Noooo! I mean 'And' as in 'And what else are you forgetting!?'"

"What am I forgetting?" Harry asked, then blinked when Louis started moving his eyebrows up and down.

"No way! There are going to be a lot of people there!" Harry stressed. "Not today, Love." he mocked.

Louis sprung up and enclosed his arms around him, looking at their faces in the mirror.
gripped on to his arms, jerking his ear away from his kisses.

"Today!" Louis demanded.

"No, Lou."

"Today, Harry," Louis said again. "I want you to do exactly what you want to do today. It's all about you, princess."

"Prin-cesss!" Dory pronounced, clapping her hands idly. Both boys giggled.

Louis adjusted her hat. "Don't worry, Dory. Nobody's taking your crown."

He carried her out to Dan's van and buckled her up in the car seat. He then dove to the back of the van and pulled out a large bag with a box inside from the trunk. Hiding it behind his back, he sneaked up behind Harry who was now outside, lip-stain and all.

"Look what I got you!"

"LOUIS!" Harry gasped, opening the bag. "I can't! We can't- I don't know what to say!"

A curious Anne strode over to them. "Oh, my goodness!" She pulled out the box and saw that it was a new music system.

"Thank you! You say 'Thank you', Harry!" she said, grinning wildly.

"This is my way of saying thank you for letting me drive it around all this time. It was an honor."

"Aren't you the sweetest!" Anne stretched her arm to hug him.

"Thanks," Harry blinked at him secretly behind his mother’s back, blushing.

"I was thinking after the fair we could take a trip to the auto shop to install it." Louis asked.

"Oh, Murrey can do that!" Anne assured, examining the label.

Dan and Lottie eventually strutted out with the others, Ernie running across the yard wanting to walk by himself. Lottie had to break a sweat diving for him lest he fall and go rolling down the hill.

"ACHOOO!!" called the little boy as he was strapped into the car seat by Lottie while Dan buckled up. Phoebe and Daisy sat quietly in the back with their pouches of little needs, and change for purchasing items at the fair.

"We'll meet back up at the fair, Bud!" Louis called back sadly, as he got behind the driver’s wheel off the truck.

Anne got in the front passenger side of the truck while Harry took his place in the backseat. Louis started the engine, fixing his hair in the rearview mirror and focussing it on Harry who on seeing Louis in it, shot hot flushes and a blink-eyed smile back at the beaming boy.

"You look like a little gentleman now, Louis," Anne said. "Harry, you ought to cut your hair as well a few inches."

"I like it like that!" Louis commented. "I always wanted soft, shiny, curly hair."

Harry's eyes almost jumped out of his head, bulging them at Louis and his mother to which Louis
looked straight ahead, smirking as they drove away. Anne shot her head in the back and Harry slapped a smile on his face for her.

"Wipe your mouth, Dear. You have a little something..." Anne said, digging in her purse and handing her son a tissue. And it was Louis' turn to be bulge-eyed; as his eyes glued to the mirror he caught on the younger boy's expression what was unmistakably the fight of a century not to cry while wiping off his lip-stain and ultimately letting sulk take its place as he gazed out the window.

***

They soon pulled up to the fairgrounds, and Anne scampered off to look for Robin. Louis got out and started walking as well, looking back for Harry. He swung back around and saw that he was still sitting in the truck, just about ready to combust.

"Hey! Okay, I got you. I got you." he said, climbing in the back and holding him as tears came flooding out.

"She hates me! She's always has!" the boy cried, his head hanging over Louis’ shoulder.

"Come on, now. She probably thought it was Kool-Aid or something."

"Stop it, you're making things worse!" Harry tried to laugh, wiping his nose and punching him on the chest.

Louis tucked his index and thumb into Harry's pocket and uncapped the lip-stain. Gently pushing Harry off of him, he made to apply some for him. "Here. Put it back on, Babe."

Glancing out of the rear window to make sure no one saw, Harry diverted his lips to Louis' mouth and started kissing him hard. "I don't want it. I just want you!"

"Awe, Babe." Louis said, hands caressing the back of his denim jacket. He wished nothing more than to step out hand in hand and enjoy a day together at the fair. He hated what Harry was going through. He wanted him in his life for more than just a summer hiding and sneaking around. He wanted to love him in the open for everyone including Anne to see what Harry did to his heart, and for that to happen Harry and his mother's relationship needed to mend. The barrier that was between Harry and his mother had to be broken and it was Louis' mission to break it.

He rubbed his palms on Harry’s tears, and connected their lips again.

A tap on the window jolted them out of their little moment, and they looked up to see Niall; navy blue plaid shirt fitting handsomely, bleach-blonde hair revealing darker roots. He was flanked by Shawna; half-moon smile with braces like a hunter's trap, in a light pink top and high-waist dark blue jeans that cut at her long calves, waving at them.

"Harry, if I'm not mistaken, you said your booth was the one next to the round pen?" Niall asked as they climbed out of the truck.

A half-excited "yep" came out of Harry as Louis' hand found the small of his back.

"Well, I do remember you telling me Nick was helping you with some flyers but it looks to me like a hostile take-over at your booth!" Niall explained. “He’s acting all bossy!”
They took off through the grounds, Harry making a point of leaving Louis’ side to walk on the other side of Niall.

“While you guys catch up I’ll go help your parents a little bit, Hon. You’ll come meet me there later.” Shawna said, planting a mushy kiss on Niall’s lips before walking away. “Bye guys!” she waved at them.

The sun blazing down on them, they lapped to Harry’s booth. Louis scowled at the sight of Nick inside the booth in a taupe sweat shirt with khaki trousers and a purple French scarf around his neck, obviously his idea of dressing it up, which ironically made him look even more bland. He was chatting to customers and giving out brochures like it was his job.

Nick's teeth widened as they approached. "Hey, Harry!" he said, ignoring the other three. "I wanted to come by yesterday and show you these but I ended up working a double shift at the diner." He handed him a brochure. "You like it?"

Harry examined the booklet. It was pretty high-end for a simple brochure, only it wasn't simple. Nick used attractive fonts and colored pictures to the point, and added more in-depth information about the wellbeing of show horses, that Harry thought about but knew would never fit in his originally intended Z folded brochure. There was even a section on essentials for Equine first-aid kits.

"Nick! This is- Thanks!" Harry said, speechless as he turned the pages, Louis glaring at it from over his shoulders.

"I wanted to surprise you. I even put your name on," a proud Nick smiled brighter.

Louis rolled his eyes and exchanged looks with Niall, who was putting a small stack of bible study pamphlets on the counter.

"Sorry, Niall, but you can't do that!" Nick outburst. "Don't your parents have their own booth!?

Niall staggered backwards as Nick's nails dug into the stack, handing them back to him.

"Yeah, but it's not a big deal!" Niall implored, taking up some horse brochures. "I'm gonna give out some of Harry's there too!"

"No way! You'll confuse everyone!" He grabbed them back. “The crowd won't know what booth is for what!"

Niall looked at Harry with dejected eyes, and he responded with a sympathetic 'Yikes' look.

One glance at Niall's downtrodden face, and Louis was done.

"Are you for real!? It's his booth, he can do whatever he wants with it!" he snapped at Nick. "Who are you to say how he runs it!?"

"His friend for years, unlike you!" Nick shot back.

"Oh, really!?" Louis goaded, as Nick neatly organized the brochures. “I’ve met Harry’s friends, and you are not one of them! You’re nothing but a bloody tyrant!”

“Cut it out!” Harry gripped his elbow to stop him from flaying his hand in Nick’s face. Louis let himself be restrained by Harry but he was far from calm.
Nick’s forehead shot for the sky. "I'm the tyrant!? You're just like your grandfather! Think you can strut around because you got a piece of land- which was wrongfully attained, by the way!"

"Excuse me!?” Harry interrupted, fixing him with a burning look. "That land your talking about is my mother's!"

"Guys! Jeez! It's fine! I'll just go back to my parents' booth!” Niall appeased. "I'm still taking some of these to give out to the youth group in church.” He scooped up a few of Harry's brochures again and sauntered away, dismayed.

"Harry, I didn't mean to-" Nick started, eyes a crinkle of regret.

"You didn't have to be rude!” Harry lashed out.

"Harry! Come on! You have a crowd already!” Called Cord from the round pen.

Harry threw the brochure angrily at the counter then stomped off, leaving a fuming Louis alone with a seething Nick.

"What exactly do you mean by 'wrongfully attained'?” Louis snarled.

"Like you don't know! Your grandfather thought he could just take whatever he wanted too. Land maybe, but you can't own people. You don't get to say who anyone’s friends are and aren't." he chided before going back to arranging Harry's booth.

Louis shook with rage on the spot, glancing from Niall's booth to Nick. The nerve of Nick to say those words so assuredly after he just literally shooed Harry's best friend away.

A small group of fair-goers dallied up to the booth, sweeping Nick's attention. Still riled up, Louis hoofed over to where Harry and Cord were discussing horse care with a group of teens from a summer camp (Louis guessed from their logoed lime-green t-shirts.)

Blending himself in the crowd, he stood listening to them. He admired the comradery between the two as Harry was willing to stop and allow Cord to share his insight while he let Harry take full charge of demonstrations.

As the boys spoke, Louis heard in his peripheral another familiarly pert voice interwoven with one that was adenoidal but equally driven if not more so, and his eyes zeroed in on Gemma and Aiden who were scudding through the crowd, adamantly initiating their own little lectures and giving out flyers for something.

As the two neared him, he caught eyes with a crease-browed Harry as he too slinked through the crowd toward them.

Gemma hopped in front of Louis and whipped out a flyer, eyes bright and lips pursed, bursting to say something.

Harry came and read the flyer silently along with Louis, and flashed his eyes up to her. "Gem, this is next Friday in London!"

"Yeah, isn't it cool?” she replied with metered enthusiasm, snatching back the flyer before he could see anything else on it.

Louis ventured his gaze towards the round pen and witnessed the menacing stare pouring out from Aiden's eyes paired with a devious smile as the boy exclusively held out a flyer for Cord who was
still chatting to the campers a few metres away.

As he took the flyer, the broad-shouldered Cord’s slowly narrowing eyes were all that could be seen over the edge of the yellow page as he read; and in a flash, his large shadow blanketed the sun on Louis’ face as he stomped up to the brown-haired siblings.

"I knew you were up to something!" he said, the epitome of vindication before garnering a deeper tone, "You mind explaining why your name is down for this high jump trail competition set for next week!?" He held the flyer up with his big fist, brushing her in the nose with it.

Gemma inhaled, eyelids shut. "I didn’t want to say anything until it was official! I’ve been training for this, and Hind Fire is in top condition for it!"

Harry’s brows knitted as he removed the paper from Cord’s tensed grip, taking another look.

"Have you made it anywhere near the mark with that horse before?" he asked, concerned.

"It's an attempt to break a record, Harry. Key word; ‘attempt’. And like I said; I’ve been training -" Cord rolled his eyes, facing Harry. "I guess the answer is NO!"

"I could use the prize money!"

"You're not seriously thinking of jumping that high!" Cord boomed in.

"It's only three inches higher than the jump I made at the rodeo!" she retorted, eyes mindlessly fixed to the lime green chatter to her side.

"Only? That's a big difference!" Cord riled up. "You!” he turned to Aiden. “You know she could fall on her ass, and you’re encouraging this!?"

Aiden chuckled to himself, holding the flyers like a proud high school student. “I’m glad you finally acknowledged my authority here, James. Not that it’s any of your business, I actually offered to take her place, but we all know how perfectly capable she is to do this on her own. In other words; she jumps, and I let her. See? That’s why she and I work.”

Cord huffed a laugh. “Gemma, what do you see in this guy? Seriously?”

“Balls.” Aiden countered dryly, chin up and veins appearing in his forearms. His fist clenched on his left hand, and flyers in the other as they now clung to his side. Cord gave another laugh while tilting his head, toying with the shorter boy, bringing his chest to brush up on Aiden.

"Wait- She has to clear that height to win the prize?" Louis asked, pointing to the flyer.

Harry shook his head. "She doesn't. She just has to have the highest attempt. If no one jumps higher than her, she wins."

“That sounds a bit dangerous doesn’t it?” Louis frowned to Harry. His lips parted to reply but then Gemma gabbed his arm.

"This is what I meant when I asked for your support- your loyalty,” she stressed. “Mum and Dad took part in lots of competitions younger than me. This is what I wanna do! You know that! I need your support! Are you with me or not!?"

Sighing, Harry looked over to the trailer where Winnipeg was stationed, casually poking her head out the iron window until she was needed. The pretty Skewbald pony threw her blonde tail in the
air as she noticed Harry's eyes on her.

Louis saw the conflict brewing inside him. Surely he couldn’t be thinking to condone this jump?

"I believe in you," the boy breathed. He turned to his sister.

"Granddad would want this for you. He used to help you train for this sort of thing. I'm supporting you because he would."

Gemma latched on to her brother, the white of her teeth almost swallowing her face. “Thank you, Harry. I promise I’ll make the jump and make everything right.”

Louis twitched his forehead. *Make everything right? How is she gonna do that if she falls off that horse on Friday?*

Cord huffed a dry laugh and shook his head at Harry. "You lot are so stubborn!"

"MUM! Ten o'clock!" Gemma squeezed Harry's arm. They all looked to see Anne happily strolling back to the round pen holding hands with Robin.

"I'm not ready to tell her yet so I need your help distracting her while we go around the fair with the flyers!" Gemma said, pulling Aiden away from a brooding Cord.

"Whoa, hold on," Louis said. "She is bound to end up with a flyer before the fair is over!"

Gemma shrugged, "That's why you are here, to make sure she doesn't!"

"You are crazy if you think you can duck her while handing out a million flyers with your name on it!" Cord blasted. "Harry, can’t believe you are agreeing to this ridiculous jump!"

"Ahem!!" Someone’s throat cleared from behind the large young man. Everyone went quiet, and before Cord even turned around his face was white.

"A mighty fine day, Miss Anne," Aiden honeyed as he casually hid the flyers behind his back. Harry crumpled the one in his hand and passed it to Louis who shoved it in his pocket.

Gemma pulled Aiden along, shooting Harry a look. "We'll see you guys later," she said, and the two waddled away as Anne threw Aiden a cold smile.

“Wait! Where do you think you’re going!? One day to support your brother and this is what you do? Run away? Not having it!” Anne said, making Gemma turn back, flabbergasted.

She looked at Harry with a guilty expression, and thinking quick, she marched over to the booth and grabbed a few brochures, earning an irritated jaw drop from Nick.

“See? Look, I am supporting my baby brother! Making sure everyone has these!” she pinched his cheeks before scurrying away with Aiden.

Louis shook his head, hands on his hips.

Anne redirected her anger at Cord. "There are lots of strange hands touching my horse over there!"

The young man turned to where Salsa was irritatedly stomping her feet and flinging her head away from the group of petting teenagers.

"You'd like to get right on that." She ordered, throwing him a sharp eye.
“Harry, how is everything here so far!?” Robin grinned from ear to ear.

Harry opened his mouth to reply but was cut off.

“It’s fantastic!” Nick bellowed over the noisy crowds. He had come up behind Robin, making the man jump. He shoved a brochure in his hand and grinned at Harry. “As you can see the people love the brochures!”

Louis and Harry exchanged bothered looks.

“Well it is early but we can get started on presentations.” Anne quipped, strutting over to the horses.

Louis, looking at all the yellow pages contrasting with the green clothing of the crowd in front of them, nudged her. "Actually, I was thinking we’d go for a walk first. We won’t have time later. You can introduce me to some town folk, check Liam's family's booth. You’ll finally get to meet his boyfriend- and one of my best friends- Zayn."

"We have the same mind, Louis!" Anne agreed as Louis placed his hands on her shoulders redirecting her to the line of booths. He shot Harry a panicked expression as they walked away.

Louis caught Grimmy gawking and gesturing for Harry to come over, and turned back. "You know what, Harry you should come too. Zayn will be glad to see you!” He grabbed his hand and pulled him along.

Grimmy jumped up and shoved some brochures in Harry's hand. "Here, hand out some of these. And take too long!” he glared at Louis.

"These are rather spectacular," Anne admitted reluctantly as they strolled away, her head in one of the brochures.

***

They stopped at Niall's booth to say hi to his parents, and someone poked Louis in the lower back. He swindled around to see Phoebe looking up at him distressed, and an angry Daisy pulling her in the opposite direction.

"What's up with you two?” Louis asked them, as Harry started chatting with Nial while Anne read the church pamphlets.

“There's a booth over there that sells stuffed animals!” Daisy growled. Phoebe yanked her hand away.

"Don't you have enough at home!?” Louis said.

"How bout we check it out later!?” Harry cut across, eyes directing Louis to Gemma and Aiden who were now speedily handing out flyers dangerously close to the booth. His gaze shifted to another booth to his left, and he took Daisy's hand, setting off toward it. Louis walked close behind them alongside Anne.

"OH!” Daisy shouted, buzzing around the booth. There were lots of fishes and birds on display, and
Louis and Phoebe had to grab her before she knocked something over.

"Oh, Hello," a young girl said from behind the counter. She looked about twelve with long dusty brown hair up in a pony and piercing blue eyes that seemed to take up most of the space in her head. Louis reckoned he might have recognized her as one of the Willow animals from the fundraising concert.

"Georgia, get out there and see to the customers!" said the crisp voice of a woman busy feeding a pair of parrots in the back. From the color of her hair, Louis figured she must be the girl's mother.

"This one looks just like Honey!" Daisy said, pointing to one of the goldfishes.

Louis rolled his eyes. *Of course, they all look like Honey.*

"They do look like little fluttering clumps honey, don't they?" the girl laughed striding up to them. Gasping, Phoebe reached out to hug the girl who smiled hugging her back.

"Phoebe and Daisy, right?" the girl chirped. "Great to see you again!"

"So, this is your pet shop!?" Daisy said, looking around in wonder.

"Yep. We actually run it from home. We live on the edge of town but sales aren't bad. The fundraising fair is a good opportunity to give back."

"We're glad to help with that, Georgia," Harry said. "Daisy here would like to get a fish," - Daisy gasped and he looked at her - "Would you like a gold one again or a different one this time?"

"A gold!!!" she implored. Louis cracked a fond smile. Anne turned her back to the others and nudged Louis' attention to a large Blue &Gold Macaw perched on its branch in the biggest cage in the booth. It let out a piercing screech as they neared.

"Alrighty! I'll get the net!" the girl said. She disappeared behind the counter and darted back with a net and plastic bag.

"I'll help you with that," Louis stepped over to take the bag, Anne's eyes hawking the scene.

Georgia handed him the bag and dipped the net in the tank. "I don't believe we've met, but I had the time of my life singing along to you guys at the concert!"

Louis grinned, eyes creasing.

Harry jumped in. "Oh, this is their brother, Louis!"

- a loud clash interrupted them as something fell off a shelf behind the counter. As they turned in the direction, a pair of squinted eyes looked back at them from below the counter, particularly on Louis and Anne. "This is their last weekend with us for the holidays." Harry went on, waving tentatively at the pair of eyes.

"Mrs Austin." Anne stated.

"Good day," she answered rigidly, ducking back under the counter. They heard clanking and sweeping as she cleaned up the mess.
“Hurry up, Georgia! Here are other customers!” she barked at the girl who quickly waved at them before moving on.

Anne rolled her eyes.

They bade farewell and paraded away. Daisy stuck her eyes on the fish bag.

***

They were strolling through the noisy grounds eating ice-cream when Harry spotted Gemma on the far end of the fairgrounds still handing out flyers.

*How many do they have!?* he thought, throwing an eye on his mother.

Looking around, almost everyone at the fair had a yellow paper in hand, and Harry quickly became nervous again. A tiny warm caress on the back of his hand forced a deep breath out of his stifled throat and he swung his head to his left and kept it there, caught in the cerulean hypnosis that was Louis’ eyes as he smiled from the other side of Anne.

Harry turned away just as Anne turned to face him. “I hope Cord is alright all alone there?”

“Grimmy’s helping him, so…” Harry assured.

“Grimmy? You have a nickname for him!?” Louis said, voice at higher-than-usual range. Harry fired a look at him, and his jaw shut.

“Ha! Grim-y is more like it. That family; I swear!” Anne laughed, oblivious of the little argument between the two boys at her side.

“Louis!” a cheery voice called out to them. Hustling over to Lottie they met her at a booth with none other than Trey Cowell, laughing away.

“Hey, Louis,” the boy greeted timidly. Louis smiled, looking around the booth. This one was a table full of cds and movies.

Smooth-faced in a mustard colored blazer over a white shirt and black fitted trousers, topped off with pointed-tip shoes, Trey seemed excited to see Lottie again. He almost tripped backwards into the pile of cds on seeing her tuck a few strands of hair behind her large loop earring.

Harry picked up a cd.

Louis pulled out his wallet. “Take whatever you like, Harry. It’s on me.”

Harry gasped. “Really?”

Louis giggled. If only Harry could see how much of his forehead his eyes took up right now.

“How much music I don’t use I figured I’d help with the charity fair and get them off my hands,” Trey explained. “They are all practically new but you get it at half the price I paid!”
“That’s nice of you, Trey!” Anne smiled. “And you are here alone?”

“Oh, no! My Mum is helping me out.” Eyes finding the ground, the boy seemed embarrassed to say that.

“Look what Trey gave me!” Lottie skipped up to Louis and showed him her cd. Daisy grabbed it from her.

“Daisy! Let go!” Lottie shouted grabbing it back.

“Britney Spears? Sappy!” Daisy rolled her eyes.

Harry’s ears went up. “Britney Spears!? Did you say Britney Spears!?”

Phoebe started guffawing at him, and Louis grinned proudly.

Just then, Trey’s mother waltzed up to them in her red tights, t-shirt and heels. She cheerily greeted them and shared a courteous nod with Anne. She happily pulled out a bag to hold Harry’s cds while Trey collected the payment.

“Let’s go to the stuffed animal booth, Louis!” Phoebe pleaded.

“Mum, can I go with them!?” Trey begged.

Mrs Cowell looked conflicted. “Sure, Sweetie. Be careful!” she finally said reluctantly.

As they took off again with the twins in the lead, Louis caught the Trey’s eye roll as the boy breathed a sigh of obvious relief. And at once Louis felt a sting of sadness, remembering his own mother.

***

By the time they left the toy booth, Lottie’s, Harry’s, and the twin’s faces were barely seen as their arms were full of teddy bears and other stuffed animals. Harry made his mother hold the biggest one in a bid to block her from seeing Gemma and her accomplice slither through the fair.

Diverting every few minutes to avoid Gemma's and Aiden's crusade, they circled around and ended up right back at Harry's/Grimmy's booth where Grimmy was diligently still holding the fort sharing brochures, and Dan was relaxing under the tent feeding the twins.

The crabby boy leaped up, eyes digging at Harry’s full hands. "Harry, where have you been!?”

Daisy flew in his face. "Look! I got a new one! Want to see!?” She held up the fish in front of Nick, who lifted his hand to take it.

"Aye-duh-duh!!" Louis shouted, shoving his palm in the way. "Remember last time, Daise? New rules, nobody handles Honey the second!"

"That works out well for everyone!" Lottie laughed. Daisy stuck her tongue out.

Harry was just about to go check on Cord and the horses when Louis let out a gasp, grabbing him back by the shoulders.
"Gemma! Four o'clock!" he rasped in his ear.

“I can’t believe we forgot all about Liam!” Louis saved, taking Anne’s hand. Harry took hold of the other, and they took off again without the others.

***

Swerving through the fast growing crowds, the three marched up to a booth on the other side of the grounds. It was rather crammed with all kinds of eccentric items like pottery and gingham pattered cushion covers, and the silent ambiance seemed to immediately drown out the noise from the bustling crowd outside.

They spotted a familiar bushy brown head of hair inside almost hidden among hand-crafted vases, sculpted wooden ornaments, paintings, fresh flowers, and other household decorations surrounding the counter.

"Hey guys!” Liam said, arms wide. "I wanted to come see your opening, Harry, but Mum has me swamped here!"

"OW!" A rosy lady emerged from behind a potted tulip and smacked him upside the head with a folded pocket fan.

She was giant of a woman with well laid strands of blond hair, smelling like perfumed oil in her Indian-patterned magenta themed blouse.

Snorting, Anne took a hearty look around the booth. "Quite an array you have here, Larissa!"

Liam's mother's eyes widened as they fell on the boys, particularly Louis. "You look well, Anne. So good to see you again!” she said in all excitement, eyes moving from Louis to Harry as Liam hugged Louis.

Anne grinned. "Well, my two boys are with me so I am elated!"

"Oh, nice to see you, Harry- And who are you?” she said, eyes once again raking Louis. "I'm always glad to meet Liam's friends."

"Oh, you never met Louis through Liam before?” Anne said with a quizzical expression.

"Mum, you know Louis! You've seen all my band videos!” Liam pitched.

Harry wandered around the booth and came to a large picture of a house, Liam's grandparent's house, if Harry could recall from a few times he and his family were invited to gatherings. Liam's mother was seldom at these lately since she lived in Doncaster with Liam's dad. He tilted his view and his eyebrows moved together. The style of the painting looked familiar...

Larissa blabbed on. "Oh! Must have slipped my mind. He looks different. Have you done something to your hair?” she quizzed.

"Louis is Emmett's grandson!” Anne said watching to see her reaction. Larissa slowly nodded with a detecting stare at the word 'Emmett's'.

"I have my nephew back home." Anne said. "It's like I have two boys, now." Her ear smashed into
Louis' with a hand on his other cheek. "You should see these two at home. They're inseparable, like brothers!"

*Brothers?* Louis thought, surprised that 'Harry' and 'brothers' were used in the same sentence about the way he felt about him.

Louis smiled bashfully as his eyes sought Harry, who was visibly nauseous.

Liam threw Louis a comically look like 'What have you gotten yourself into?'

"I'm sorry, Louis. I only know Zayn because he took my art class two summers ago when we had just moved to Doncaster..." Larissa said, head down and adjusting her portraits.

Louis' eyebrows shot together. *Art class? Two summers-* His eyes widened as he remembered.

Louis knew his mother was an artist but Liam never mentioned that his mother taught art as well. And taught it to Zayn the summer before Liam started school in Doncaster high with them. That would mean that Liam met Zayn before he met Louis. Which makes them both liars. *All this time...*

Liam's face went bloodless. He peeked at Louis with large eyes. Louis grind his teeth with a look of pure despise.

Anne's eyes needled into Larissa. She knew about the attempts to bring back Johannah to Champton after she ran to her aunt Sophia's house back then -but she didn't care then. She cared now.

She placed an urgent hand on her shoulder. "Larissa, can I talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Sure!" the woman chirped.

Anne lead the way to potted palm tree and turned to face her, all friendliness vacant. "I want to know why there's a painting of my dad hanging in my house!?"

"Oh? I don't know why on earth I would know the answer to that but you've been living on that ranch for years now. You only just now noticed?"

"Oh, this one I just got as a gift, and I recognized the style right away. It's one of yours, no doubt, from after uncle Em died." Anne said in hushed tones with bulging eyes.

Larissa gulped like she had swallowed a duck. "What? Where would you get that? I never painted-" she fanned herself.

"Oh, don't play dumb with me! It came courtesy uncle Em's sister, Sophia! Apparently she had it hanging in her house for years until she gave it to Harry of all people! Have you the slightest idea what you could have caused?"

Larissa pursed her lips. "That was done for Jay years ago when Luke convinced me we could get her to come back home after uncle Em died. He had a whole plan, if you had only cared to wrench yourself from that god awful cottage to take part in it!"

Anne's eyes grew large and she stumbled back. "I haven't seen or spoken to him in years! And I'm not about to start now! Seeing as Louis is back home, I want you to be very careful what you say in front him, and Liam. It's very good that you pretend you didn't know him all along. Keep it up! If one word gets out I will hold you personally responsible..." she promised, eyes tanning her as she moved away.
Larissa clasped her arm urgently. "It's a small town, Anne. Louis is here now already butting heads with the Grimshaws? How long do you think before he's going to find out on his own? Tell him the truth. Give him the opportunity his mother kept from him."

Anne shot her a look, darting her eyes to the boys for a second. She leaned in. "That is for me to decide now isn't it!" She jerked her arm back and turned on her heels. "Boys! We have a show to put on! Let's get going now!"

“I’ll see you tomorrow at the party!” Larissa sweetly called after her.

With one last painful glare at a sorrow faced Liam, Louis sauntered backward away from the booth.

“Oh-Louis!” He bumped into someone. Turning around, he met Zayn's large beaming eyes. Dressed in a dark leather jacket with a white t-shirt underneath, his short hair meticulously done, the boy threw his arms around him but Louis remained stiff with hands to his side. And when he had released him, Louis made a sideways turn without looking at him and walked off with an aloof Harry in his wake.

***

With the fair over, and the sun set, the boys drove to the hardware to catch Murrey. They all hung out in the back while he and John installed the radio and speakers.

Harry frowned, noticing the tension in Louis’ jaw. "What's wrong?"

"Stuff's been bothering me all day," he said, scratching his chin. "What Nick said; he mentioned something about the land not being my grandfather's? I don't understand. He sounded so sure of himself..."

John lifted his head from the truck door. "It's kind of true..." - he slowly directed at Louis as he fixed him with a confused glare- "I was just a kid when it happened but the story of how Emmett stole the farm from under Dean Cowell’s nose was told across town. He was a hero in these parts. Since the Cowells and Grimshaws came to town, like, forty-five years ago, they took over everything. The businesses, the land, even managed to get the governor of the time on their payroll. The ranch was actually the first property Dean Cowell bought when he came to town. It was just a field then and he was planning to build his first horse ranch there. It's the perfect spot with the water pump and all. What your grandfather did was a retribution of sorts. I don't know the whole story of how he did it but he managed to make enemies out of the Cowell/ Grimshaw clan."

Louis turned to Harry. “Did you know about all this?”

Harry gave a half-nod. “A little here and there.”

Louis grew quiet, and Harry studied him. He knew it was overwhelming for him having to now hear that news. He caressed his chin, internally promising to find out more about Emmet for him.

"It's kind of weird that he came here and did that because he wasn't even from Champton originally," Murrey included, kneeling with spanner in hand. "Your grandfather grew up in the city.”
Harry nodded. “All I really know is that he was a pretty outgoing guy who helped people and made friends with my Granddad.”

Louis hunched over, propping his chin up on his hands. "No wonder my Mum left Champton. My grandfather was a thief, plain and simple. Doesn't matter why he did it. It was wrong!"

"It was a long time ago, Lou. We don't know the ins and outs of it. Don't be so quick to write your Grandfather off." Harry concluded.

John pasted his eyes on Harry as he spoke.

“True. Uncle Em was a good one! Helped out my family a lot when I was a kid.”

The words hung in the dark dewy air as the men sorted wires and connected the radio, Louis quietly pondering his thoughts. He seemed to be internally struggling to understand, and Harry related; he was just as much confused as to why that portrait of William was in Sophia’s house, and why the same kind of portraits were hanging in Liam’s mum’s booth.

“Tell your Mum we’ll be by with the chairs first thing tomorrow!” John called behind the boys after the two hours of installation was complete.

***

Aesthetic song: Animal- The Dunwells

Generally HARRY'S POV

The boys took to the road, blaring the music they bought from Trey loudly through the town. Louis had managed to previously stash a bottle of wine under the seat, and he opened it when they reached the lake. They sat with their backs leaning on the side of the truck, taking turns swigging, and making out in between. Harry set the teddy bear down beside him propped up against the front wheel. It was the only time besides when he had to attend to the horses that day, that he had released the stuffed bear from his arms.

“That was spectacular, wasn’t it?” Louis took a swig and handed the bottle to Harry.

“Yeah! I can’t believe how many people gathered to see Salsa and Winniepeg. They loved the attention.” Harry drank.

“And you,” Louis quickly added. “The crowd liked you too! They all had their eyes on you the whole time. Even Nick. I mean, what the fuck was he even doing in your booth? You failed to tell me- “

Harry’s mouth fell open. Louis was drunk. And sweat found its way between the cracks now forming on his forehead.

“Seriously, Louis? What does it matter?”

“It matters!” Louis said loud but steady, shaking his head.
“We raised a good bit of funds today to help a lot of people and those brochures helped! People are going to come to ranch more now!” Harry spat. “He’s an ass and I have no idea why he helped me at all, but he did!”

“Are you insinuating that I didn’t help you in any way!?” Louis shouted, voice slightly unsteady now.

Harry folded his arms with an accusatory eyebrow.

Louis bowed his head, sullen. “You could have told me. I would have made you the damn brochures in Wales and brought them for you.”

“Look at me! I didn’t even know you were coming back!” Harry reasoned. “Look, I needed you and you came! You were there for me. I’d never ask you for anything more than that! Except for this-” He rammed his face into Louis’, covering his lower face with wet drunken licks of desire, or anger, or both.

“And this.” He cuddled the large teddy bear. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you he was going to be there. I didn’t even know he was planning to stay at the booth. It was so creepy!”

Louis let out a giggle then held it back.

“I don’t like him and Aiden weaselling their way around at all. Just promise to be careful when I’m not around.”

Harry laughed harder, tilting his head backward to take another swig, the bottom of the bottle facing the dark sky void of stars tonight. “I promise.”

“I didn’t like what happened with Gemma either. I agree with Cord. That jump seems pretty high. And I still don’t get why she fancies Aiden.” Louis added. “Not to mention she made us lose all our body fat running around with your Mum!”

Harry laughed out loud.

“My sister is a subject that requires a thousand scientists, and mathematicians to decode.” He explained. “She has always done whatever she wants. Louis, Hind Fire is the Cowell ranch’s best horse. If Simon can put that horse at risk for her then why can’t I support her too?”

His voice faded into thought as he remembered what happened at Liam’s booth. He grabbed the nearly empty bottle from Harry and drank again. Liam and Zayn knew each other—and possibly hooked up—before Louis even came in the picture. The whole scenario kept playing in his mind and stabbing him in the chest since he found out.

“What’s wrong Lou?” Harry placed his hand on his knee, causing his heart to beat faster than a cake mixer.

“I’m still trying to recover from what was said in Liam’s Mum’s booth today too…”

Thinking Louis was referring to something entirely different, Harry rolled his eyes. “Finally, you see how Mum thinks. Did you see the look on her face!?” Harry said, taking his last mouthful and handing Louis the bottle before standing up. "She really believes we have a brotherly connection! She doesn’t see- that-"

Louis snorted, staggering to his feet as well. He brushed up against Harry, dropping the bottle without taking his eyes off of him, and Harry felt his hardness.
"-That what we have is far from brotherly…” Louis finished for him. “I can’t accept that that's how she sees us.” He lightly cupped Harry's jaw, caressing it with his thumbs, and Harry sighed, the comforting fingers now gliding to his hair. "I want to show you how I see us…”

The boy's hot front grind into his own as he held on to him. The hair at the back of his neck tickled, and his breathing grew heavy as he melted under his touch.

With the alcohol, Louis was being extra frisky tonight, grabbing his arse and all, and a giddy Harry didn’t know if he could hold himself back either.

"I'm not gonna do anything that makes you uncomfortable. I want it to be mutual." the blue-eyed boy whispered in his ear, the smell of the wine on his lips dizzying him. "I just want to touch you. Please?"

Harry responded by pushing himself forward and resting his lips on Louis' as he opened his mouth, inviting the kiss further.

Then as suddenly as it started, Louis removed his tongue and threw himself down on his knees. Looking up at him with a pleading gaze, he tethered his fingers over the zipper of his jeans causing him to wriggle in ornate pleasure.

"I want to. Do you want me to?"

Harry's breathing was now so deep and heavy, even the city of Doncaster could hear it. The kneeling boy wrapped his arms around his bare arse making him feel so nervous. He looked down at the eager boy; his chin brushed his wet tip as he peered back up at him, and Harry closed his eyes, exhaling in surrender. His dick was already hard and bursting of pre-cum just being in his embrace. He was so scared he felt his heart was escaping his chest cavity. A warmth covered him as the kneeling boy took his entire dick in his mouth at once.

Strange, new sensations heightening in his body, sending him up in flames, Harry tried to pull away, and his back hit the truck door a few inches behind him.

It felt so good. Louis sucked passionately as he leaned forward to make up for the sudden movement, giving and releasing pressure at quick intervals like a beating heart, never releasing his grip on Harry nor removing his mouth from its position, deep enough to touch the base of his dick.

Harry had no control over his loud, drawn out groans, and felt himself growing nearer to climax. Grabbing on to the edge of the back window for support, he began to see a few inches of his dick come and go as Louis started pumping it with his mouth, looking up at him with a glazed mixture of bliss and mischievousness. Harry could only stare back with watery, burning eyes as the lines of his palm dug into the sharp shedding rust of the corroded window.

Louis had no mercy even on his own self, slamming the back of his throat on his throbbing tip as he groaned, an all Harry wanted was to for him to go deeper. He bucked against his strong face as he pushed him back into the truck, the back of his hand suffering the full brunt between Harry’s arse cheeks and the old metal.

"Louis-I'm cl-ose!” Harry begged. "I need-to-commee- pleasssee ...

Louis answered with the deepest, most sympathetic moan to indicate that he heard him, but he didn't stop. This disregard made Harry so angry and so hot at the same time, he clawed his fingernails over Louis' hairy skull and groaned out loud, ultimately and involuntarily coming down Louis' throat. He panted, belly frantically inflating and deflating, hands still gripping his hair, while
the older boy swallowed, sucking him dry.

Then Louis stood up, bringing with him Harry's briefs and jeans, and looking at Harry's glassy eyes, he zipped it back up for him. He then placed wet kisses on Harry's neck and forehead as he clutched the neck of his shirt, breathing heavily.

Harry scanned Louis' face for any sense of dislike of his cum, feeling somewhat embarrassed.

"What, Harry?" Louis smiled, noticing his gaze.

"How does it taste?" Harry said, looking at his lips, placing his hands on Louis' shoulders. The older boy leaned in, stopped and looked into his eyes, then moved in closer, taking his lips into his mouth.

They kissed slow and passionate, Harry tasting himself on Louis' dominant tongue.

As soon as they let go, Harry started crying. "I love you. I love you ..."

Louis tried to wipe his tears in shock at the sudden outburst but they just kept coming.

"Do you love me?" Louis desperately asked.

"Yes!" Harry cried out at once, appalled by the question.

"And do you trust me!?" he asked again, cupping his cheeks.

"I do," Harry nuzzled their noses together.

Louis let out a low giggle. "Then let's just tell her, at the party! I'll do all the talking if you're major scared. You just have to be there with me when I do."

Harry nodded, head low, too weak still coming down from his bliss to argue with him. He grabbed on to his jacket and inhaled, Louis going silent for a while as his thoughts sunk in.

His cell phone rang. He leaned to retrieve it from his jeans, as Louis eased off of him. Showing up on the screen was his mother's smiling face.

"We should probably get back." Louis yawned

Answering the call, as Louis climbed in front, Harry heard a bunch of giggling on the other end, and a fresh wave of excitement fluttered up in his chest.

"Where are you guys!? Come on home now! "Anne said. "They're all here! - Oh, and don't spoil the surprise!"

Harry threw an eye to make certain Louis didn't hear any of that. He was now bopping his head to the song on the new radio. "We just finished at the Hardware. We're on our way."

Climbing over to the front, cradling his teddy bear as they rode back, Harry slightly reclined the seat and turned to face Louis, staring quietly at the guy who secretly stole his heart and now his innocence.

**

Chapter End Notes
Please tell me how you all felt about this chapter. Feel free to drag me for late update as well. lol, it will motivate me to work faster. Love you guys! Posting next chapter now!
The Sleepover

Chapter Notes

I am so relieved to be updating this chapter right now! Updates may take long but I'm seeing this baby till the end! This fic is so dear to me and I am happy you are all interested and are on this journey with me!

I'm dedicating this chapter to a very special friend Oderra @lxrrycentric over on twitter for her dms and being so enthusiastic about my fic updates! She is a darling, please give her a follow!

As I mentioned before, I'm working on a new older Louis fic that I'm super proud of and absolutely cannot wait to share with you guys!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Aesthetic song:- The Reason- Hoobastank.

Louis' POV

The boys detached their hands as the truck engine cut off in front of the house. A green truck parked next to Dan's van told him that Liam or Murrey or both was there, but there was also a vehicle Louis knew well although was not expecting to see again so soon; a Range Rover. They climbed out and Louis examined the vehicle. A quick check of the license plate told him he was right. A stifled smile on Harry's face gave him a hint at what was to be expected and he fought back his own excitement as he didn't want to spoil his own surprise.

"Surprise!" The front door flew open and an indefinite number of voices shouted as Louis stepped the door mat.

Taking a moment to adjust to the living room light, Louis recognized Stan in the doorway with his mouth wide open in a silent cackle which Louis copied with gleaming eyes.

As they hugged his eyes then fell on Liam and he looked away to see Calvin standing on his left.

"Cal!" he said, darting toward the blond haired boy. They grabbed on to each other and stepped around in a circle on the spot. Niall, who had been waiting there as well, rested down a huge parcel of burgers and spread his arms out for a group hug that Louis quickly pulled out of once Liam and Zayn had joined.

"Cord said he'd spent the night at Murrey's, so we have the cabin for the weekend." Harry explained when Louis threw his happy eyes at him.

Clutching two cold six-packs of soda, Zayn's eyebrows danced. "Sweet!"

"You have no idea how happy you made us while you stayed here, Louis." Anne came up behind
them. "I wanted to find a way to thank you for coming back to support Harry, and for the party."

Louis reached for the woman and lapped his head over her shoulder. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

With a thankful embrace, a lumpy throated and watery eyed Louis took Ernie, who saw all the boys and wanted to be part of the entourage, and his baby bag from Lottie's hands, and all the boys shot down the hill.

When they arrived, Harry scooped up Ernie (who was now crying to be held by him) and showed them all around the cabin.

The treen interior of the cabin was warm and earthy; Low handcrafted chair sitting in the corner by empty fireplace on one side, wooden Queen sized bed and cupboard taking up the other side of the room, and a doorway that led to a small kitchen; dusty pots and spoons hung serenely on the walls, with only empty snack papers overlapping the garbage can as proof that it was ever used.

They waddled and pitter-pattered around the cabin, getting comfortable and chatting away while they ate the burgers and drank orange soda.

"So, I like a lot of Jessie Cook and Kenny G..." Calvin was droning to Niall with his mouth full.

The whites of Harry's eyes dominated the front of his sockets as he stared at them. Zayn looked to Louis, puzzled. Louis harshly turned his gaze in the opposite direction.

Stan made a hacking noise. "Get a room, you two!"

Louis snickered. You can always count on Stan.

Niall plainly replied. "What? We both play guitar! We're trying to find common ground for our performance tomorrow."

Harry nodded, enlightened. Louis pulled out a cigarette, shooting daggers through his eyes at the cozy embrace of Liam to Zayn. He sighed, waiting patiently for Calvin to finish eating.

They ate away chatting as Harry fed Ernie his bottle with no objections from the child.

"I wonder where Louis and Harry are at right now?" Zayn pulled out his phone. Louis' eyelids squinted. Zayn flashed him some eyebrows and opened up his YouTube.

Liam stuck his head in it. "WHA!? five hundred thousand!"

Niall choked. Harry almost dropped Ernie on the bed.

"That's crazy! I'm surprised the press haven't hunted you down yet!" Calvin gobbled some chips.

"Don't they pay you for that many views on YouTube?" Stan asked. Louis shrugged.

"You can buy a pack of cigarettes with that money, Louis." Liam tried, only collecting a torpedo glare in return.

"Well, you guys are famous. That's for sure." Niall said. "I already have Shawna recording us tomorrow. That'll be part two with all of us this time."

"Yeah, it'll be fun sharing a stage with you guys again." Louis said, avoiding eye-contact with Zayn and Liam.
Calvin rounded off his burger and Louis gestured for him to step outside for a smoke on the narrow porch that faced the road, same as the main house's.

"So, how was Brazil? You meet anyone?" Louis fired up his lighter.

Calvin blinked and looked away. "I met this girl. She was exotic, wild red hair, fat lips, nice personality; the works."

Louis twisted his eyebrows, a smirk forming. "And?"

And then she introduced me to her rich, preppy boyfriend. Rock solid abs, nice personality."

Calvin said sighed.

"Oh, my!" Louis mock-swooned. "So that's who you cropped out the picture you shared on Facebook!"

Calvin laughed. Louis hiccupped a chuckle.

"Hey, it's totally fine. It's not like I was gonna move there or anything. And you know I don't do long distance."

Louis nodded every five seconds, gazing out to the lonely street.

"Okay, talk to me," a decisive Calvin asked. "How are you and Harry?" He took in the night view, The old wood railing rough under his forearms.

"Harry's scared of his Mum knowing about us. It's understandable but he doesn't even want me to tell Fizzy and Lottie which is unfair because Gemma knows. I'm hoping we can tell Anne at the party. I need her to be the first to know anyway."

Calvin blew an agreeing whiff of smoke. "Harry is younger than you and inexperienced. He's just now beginning to see for himself what it's like to be with someone. All that stuff that happened with you and Liam; I'm not saying you're Harry's Liam but you get where I'm coming from."

Louis swanned his neck, a fresh rage rising up in him as he remembered what happened at the fair. He took the cigarette out his mouth, blowing smoke everywhere. "I would never do that to Harry what Liam did to me!" he snapped.

Calvin frowned. "I thought that was all water under the bridge."

"You're not going to believe what happened! After today I swear I want nothing to do with him and Zayn!"

Calvin hummed intently, looking down and picking at his sweater. "I thought I saw that tension. What's the deal?"

Louis outlined the entire story from when they hit the booth to the aftermath with Harry's show. When he was done, Calvin was genuinely blown away.

He mashed his cigarette. "Shit ain't right, Louis, but you gotta at least give them credit for everything else, I mean they've been there for you all this time and with your mum and all..."

Calvin made sense. He always had his back, but he was always the one to act impartially in conflicts, making sure the group as a whole was still intact.

"Look, they've been lying to me all this time! Liam and I had something, no matter how brief it
was I didn't deserve that. It was bad enough the way I thought it went down with them hooking up after we broke up but now it's just- How could they do that to me? I feel like shit and I can't even look at them. All I care about right now is Harry and this whole coming out thing!

"Yeah, that's why you need to talk it out with them." Calvin stated simply, holding the cup intently in one hand while pointed his connected thumb and index to Louis' chest. Louis hit him with a look and he explained. "Harry needs all the support he can get right now to find the courage to face his mother. He has all of us, but you, Liam, and Zayn are the ones who know exactly what he's going through. And if you three are on the outs then that punches a hole in his support system."

"You're right. I hate when you're right!" Louis decided, dragging his hands down his face. "I just want Harry to see what it's like to be out and not have to worry about who knows and their reactions. I just want him to have fun for once. I'm hoping hanging out with us tonight will help him see it's not so catastrophic as he thinks. I'm willing to try to get along with them to that purpose."

Calvin brought his hand to Louis' back and patted it twice doing a 'peace bro' sign to boot.

They were interrupted by the sound of thudding feet and looked to their right. Through the dark, Fizzy and Gemma were pelting down the hill.

"Hey Louis. Dad and I just got here!" Fizzy panted as they drew up to the porch, wavy hair cascading around the shoulders of her cardigan. "He sent me to let you know that we are all booked for Monday."

Louis sighed and exchanged looks with Calvin.

"And Dan says it's Ernie's bedtime," she added with a finger up on her right as she braced her left on her hip.

Gemma rubbed her knuckles together. "And I- uh- need to talk to you and Harry alone."

Blowing out the last of his smoke, Louis outed his cigarette and diverted inside with Gemma, leaving his friend alone on the dewy porch with his out of breath sister.

Pushing the two boys by their shoulders into the kitchen, Gemma clapped her hands, eyes unblinking to emphasize the urgency of the conversation.

"So, I didn't want to say anything in front of Cord earlier but there's more to the Jump next week." she began, biting her lips. Harry twirled his neck in a 'go on' fashion. "I made a deal with Simon."

Louis' eyelids clenched.

"He says he trusts me to make the jump and if I do he'll get us our ranch back, Harry. Just the way Granddad had it. He'll put the money in and you and I could run it together, with Mum of course-"

Louis shook his head frantically. "No, that doesn't sound right. What are you leaving out?"

Harry agreed. "Yeah, this sounds bizarre - Why would Simon help the ranch? What's the catch?"

Gemma let out a long breath. "He wants to be a silent partner"- Harry turned white -"IN NAME
"Are you barking mad!?" Louis shouted, the chattering in the other room coming to a halt. "Why in the fuck would Anne ever allow that!?"

"Okay, calm down city boy. You kinda have no say in this -"

"Yes he does! He, and Cord have a right to tell you when you're being stupid!" Harry fired. "Simon's been after our farm for years! I hope you told him to shove it!"

Louis gasped. It all made sense now; Simon enrolling Gemma in his training program, Simon slapping his card in Anne's face with a proposal to buy the ranch, Aiden buttering up to Anne and hanging around the farm, Grimmy going all out with the brochures to help Harry bring in business for the horses. Heck those snakes had it all planned out!

"No babe. She's already booked to jump, remember? That has to mean that she took the deal." Louis said, his palm taking its usual place on Harry's lower back. Harry pulled at his hair, elbows facing his sister like daggers waiting to stab at her.

Gemma slouched over the counter. "Granddad left the ranch to us, Harry. It is ours. We get to run the farm with no intervention from Cowell. He just wants a percentage of the profits, that's all-"

"And ownership!" Louis added hotly. "Anyway there's no point getting worked up about this because there's no variable in the universe where Anne agrees to this!"

"Actually, that's where you come in, city boy." Gemma pierced her gaze on him like a winning lottery ticket. "For some weird reason Mum takes what you say as gospel."

"You're reading this all wrong. Your mother isn't stupid, Gemma -" Louis began.

"Harry and I need this! You are either on our side or not!" Gemma's voice was a knocked egg, and her eyes were red and smudged with saline escaping the brim.

Harry folded his arms. "Gem -"

"You promised me!" she lashed out at him too. "You said you had my back no matter what! You're just gonna wimp out on me? I'm out there every day fighting for the ranch while you and Mum make next to nothing selling pony rides!"

Harry turned his back to them. Louis reached for his shoulders but he threw his hands off. Blaming Gemma for this, Louis' eyes burned a rampant fire at her.

"You know, for someone who keeps demanding support, you sure do know how to give some don't you?" Harry said in a venomous murmur, his shoulders heaving with great effort to stay calm.

"Look, just sit your Mum down and explain things to her. I'm sure we can all work something out as a family without having to do dangerous jumps and making ludicrous deals." Louis' voice was low and soft now. No need to make things worse. "We can go up and talk to her now if -"

"NO!" Both siblings said unanimously.

"Okay, okay!" Louis said. "Well, how long do we have before we can tell her?"

"I want to tell her on Sunday when all the partying is over and her mind is more at ease."

Harry looked up at the ceiling in exasperation. As he turned around to face them again Louis could
see the resistance fading in his eyes. He made a weak step toward her and gave her some kind of look that Louis didn't get but Gemma apparently did as she threw her arms out to encircle Harry and they both swayed together as she stifled her sobs.

Louis had sisters. A whole bunch of them, and they all had a network of communication with each other, so he understood the dynamics of sibling bond. He guessed these two only had each other so formed their own non-verbal language that no one else could read. He also noticed how Gemma had the ultimate final say here. Louis was the eldest of his siblings therefore that part he knew well; Harry never stood a chance opposing his sister's ideas, even if they were preposterous and detrimental to everyone.

They slowly pulled apart and Louis glanced fresh tears stranding down Harry's face as he found his arm and nestled under it.

"Until then you two act like nothing's changed and for God's sakes don't tell Cord!" Gemma wiped her face, smoothed her hair and turned walking out the kitchen door.

"Say it." Harry went.

Louis' eyes settled on him.

"Cord was right; we're crazy. We all are!" Harry twisted his face into ransacked puzzle pieces and Louis saw his queue to hold him. He dipped an arm around his waist and one cradling the back of his head, gently pulling him closer.

Mind crossing back to the things Harry said earlier about his grandfather, Louis glared at the floor so hard he might have burned a hole in it. Simon was definitely out to get revenge for what Emmett did taking the ranch, and he's using Gemma to do it. He tightened his arms around the sobbing boy. Louis made a determined list in his head; find out exactly what happened with his grandfather and the ranch, and make sure Simon doesn't succeed in his vengeful power play. The people he cared about depended on it. Because if Gemma was too headstrong to see the underlying deception, and Harry was powerless to step up to her then it was up to Louis to get the fox that was Simon out of the henhouse.

"Come on. Let's get Ernie up to bed." Louis sleeved Harry's wet face and tugged his hand along.

"So, you guys ready for tomorrow!?!" they heard Gemma clip to the others as they re-entered the main room.

The other boys chattered and mumbled all over each other in response.

"Yeah, we said we'd do a jam session tomorrow because it's late and we don't want to wake up the kiddos!" Niall said.

"The party starts at six but we still have to get up early to help prepare and stuff." Harry informed from behind his sister.

Louis nodded. "We'll have time for a rehearsal before the party starts!"

Out on the porch…

"You don't take your time, do you?" Calvin licked his lips and smiled dreamily at an initially impervious Fizzy who on seeing it started blushing all over the yard. She turned almost completely
"You have a pretty back." he said truthfully, taking in the highlights on the ends of her brunette hair falling over her Olive green, Cable-knit hooded sweater which itself stopped just below the arse of her fitted Levi jeans. She turned around acutely, loiring at him.

Calvin raised his eyebrows at her demeanour. "Wow. You could put Meryl Streep out of business!"

He earned a half smile. It's that easy, huh?

The rattling of a shack-shack broke the spell between the two and Louis was on the porch again with a pacified Ernie followed by Harry, Niall, and Stan, each holding a toy of Ernie's.

As the child settled in Fizzy's arms, Calvin neared and tickled him causing him to poke him back. Fizzy giggled, briefly meeting his eyes. Niall tried to give Ernie his toy truck but he refused it, and he took the rattle from Harry and proceeded to whack him in the arm and chest with it making him dive behind Louis for cover.

Throwing an eye to Harry behind him, Louis moved his arms backward around the boy's waist, and he flinched, moving sideways. A rejected Louis waited for Gemma, Fizzy, and Ernie to start back up the hill before grabbing his waist again- forward this time- and planting a rough kiss on his lips, propelling him into the east side railing.

Tossing an eye on the two, Calvin nudged Niall to go inside and give them some privacy.

Harry took hold of the flesh under Louis' armpits and embraced the kiss. Louis' fingers found his hair and he ran them throughout. Then his hands lost the hold as Harry suddenly dipped to his neck, startling him. Slipping his hands under his shirt and sliding his fingers up his bare skin, the boy started running his peppered tongue down the opening of his shirt to meet his hands in the middle. Louis kissed his hair, senses under a hypnosis. He wanted Harry's mind off Gemma. At least for the rest of the night.

"Thank you," he said finally. Harry bore him with deep stare, hands still pressed to his chest. "For helping put this together and making this a memorable weekend for me with my friends. I didn't realize how much I missed all of them until I saw them." He cupped his hands and dragged them from under his shirt, kissing them as he felt the hard palladium of the promise ring among the ones on his other fingers.

"I was so close to telling you on the way here," Harry pressed his forehead into Louis' and twisted it playfully, big half cookie smile on. "We both had so much on our minds," he finished, sharing a tiny knowing smile with Louis.

Grinning sheepishly, Harry buried his head in his palms.

Louis let out a small giggle. "What is it?" He pried open his hands.

Harry's dimples were now ever so prominent as he looked up at him.

"I can't believe we did those things together, it's so surreal."

"I know. I think it's you in my clothes that triggered me." Louis teased, dipping his fingers under the edge of his shirt.

He sank his puckered lips into his left dimple, closing his eyes as the boy laughed. When he opened them it was still jet dark. The light that had been pouring out from the cabin illuminating
the porch was now gone.

Then they heard a ghostly roar followed by a sharp scream coming from inside. Louis clenched Harry tighter and he breathed a laugh in response.

"What do think you're doing, you bub!?" they heard Zayn's voice inside between the cackles of Stan and the gibbering of Liam.

"That would be Niall." Harry grinned, pulling Louis inside. They entered to see an upset Zayn sitting on the chair with a book held to his neck, shielding it from a... vampire? Niall was standing over Zayn with a flashlight tucked in his collar that focussed on his face, with the bowl of a plastic spoon up his gums, and a red jelly-like substance leaking down his chin and onto his navy blue, long-sleeved plaid shirt.

Laughing, Harry put the light back on while Louis covered his eyes and peeked at Niall.

"I was going to do it but you beat me, Niall!" Harry confessed.

"This jam tastes old!" Niall took the spoon out and wiped his mouth.

Louis hummed. "Cord does eat meals with us at the house every day. I can't imagine him cooking."

Harry agreed. "Surprised he has groceries here at all!"

"A jokes and riddles book?" Calvin said, removing the book from Zayn's grip and running his thumb through the width. I haven't seen these since I was nine!" He flung the book at the bed.

"Hey, there's popcorn in here! Anyone have a light!?" Niall called from the kitchen.

"Yep!" Calvin answered, getting up.

"Cord is so weird. He must have waited the storm all alone in here and had to keep entertained somehow." Harry said, bellying down on the bed and opening the book. His shoulders fluttered and he smiled. Louis furrowed his eyebrows at him.

"Share it Harry!" Niall asked, coming out of the kitchen from washing off, with a pack of Hershey's chocolates in his hand. Hands digging into the pack, the boys all looked for spots on the huge bed; Zayn and Liam sitting beside Harry, Louis making himself comfortable on the other side of him, Stan slumping down at Louis' side, and Niall sat facing all of them.

Propping himself sideways, a smug Harry read, "While a cat was outside, it started to downpour. The cat couldn't find any shelter and got completely soaked by the rain, yet not a single hair was wet. How could this be?" He chuckled to himself as the other boys looked at eachother, baffled.

"Wait! I know this, I know this!" Zayn pressed his chocolatey fingers on Liam's bicep.

"It didn't have any hair!" Harry shouted, so excited to share the answer he did not wait for the others to figure it out first. Louis felt a rush of relief that he was enjoying himself. Harry's laugh was so contagious, Louis' shoulders bubbled with giggles.

"Moving along- John was going to a party and, as he approached, he could see in the windows that it was completely packed with people. He went inside only to discover that there wasn't a single person in there. How could this be?"

Harry looked eagerly to Louis, face bursting to tell the answer.
Seeing the torture on his face, Niall shouted; "Harry, no don't tell him, don't tell him!"

"Oh, that's easy! The freezer and the people were shrimp and he ate them so-"

Everyone looked at Stan.

A pillow hit him in the face.

"You are such an ass! I can't even-" Louis blasted.

"Okay, I think maybe since it was packed then of course there wouldn't be a single person there," Zayn contributed, holding up a finger for emphasis. "More like a bunch- of - people?"

"You're hot!" Harry pointed at Zayn diplomatically. Louis frowned and tilted his head but Harry was too busy looking to the other boys for the answer to see it.

Laughing an eager Harry told them, "Because everyone was married."

Laughter erupted in the room. Eyes automatically plastered toward Liam, who caught it for the one second it stayed in place, Louis threw himself back on the bed, peddling his feet in the air as he laughed.

Calvin walked in with the popcorn and slumped down next to Niall making the whole bed shake.

"Hm. Bouncy," he said looking at Niall with no particular expression causing the boy to yack out a laugh.

"AHAHA!"

"Okay, okay next- The manufacturer doesn't need it, the buyer doesn't want it, and the user doesn't know that-" Harry started to read the riddle but then suddenly stopped. He looked at Niall and quickly turned the page.

Sitting up, Louis slowly turned his head to face him.

"What do teens say when they have trou-

"Wait- why did you stop the other one?" Stan asked, sticking his finger at the book.

Dipping into the popcorn, Zayn furrowed his already thick eyebrows, then caught eyes with Harry; face shaping into understanding.

Thinking, Liam drummed his fingers on his chin. "Say it again, I might know that one. A manufact-
well it can't be money? Everyone needs money-" an elbow jab in the side by Zayn stopped Liam's sentence. Harry and Niall shot him secret warning glares, confusing him even more.

"It's a coffin."

Everyone turned to Louis; his head down. A dark cloud creeping in the room in the wake of his seemingly nonchalant statement.

"I know that one," he added, tone low and smooth. Harry's hand slid onto his lap and he squeezed it, pasting on a weak smile.

"Harry, what's the next one?" Niall softly moved along.
"What do teens say when they have trouble with even numbers in their math class?" Harry answered with a squishy, chocolate-filled mouth.

Liam scratched his head. Zayn copied it. Niall chewed on. Stan propped his chin up and looked to Louis.

"Answer is- I can't even." Harry said, mocking Louis' earlier remark with a big smile on his face.

"Hey!" The blue-eyed boy returned the gesture with vengeful tickles on his neck, under his armpits, and his stomach.

Harry released a series of high-pitched squeals, and Louis ended up chasing him all over the room, jumping over the bed and hopping about the place like they were at a children's play park. Niall bathed the room with cackles when Harry came crashing down on Stan, getting sandwiched between him and Louis on the edge of the bed. Head bending at an awkward angle to look for a way out, Harry grabbed a pillow and started beating Louis with it, laughing uncontrollably from the tickles.

"Y'all are nuts! Let's get to sleep now!" Stan growled, yanking away the pillow and fluffing it.

Liam grinned. "No more chocolate for you guys!"

Zayn sat up on his knees and stuck his hand in his back pocket. "Nah, it's too early! Let's play go-fish!" He pulled out a deck of playing cards and started shuffling high-speed.

The boys played a few games well past midnight finishing the popcorn. Harry and Louis snogged the entire time, ignoring their turn to play, falling backwards onto the bed in their own little world.

And when it was time to sleep, they all pulled out the mattresses and tossed the pillows.

Louis found himself waiting behind Liam at the cupboard as he searched for blankets, and then when he thought he was taking too long he shuffled past him and grabbed a huge blanket- or what at first looked like a huge blanket- bumping into Liam as it unraveled and was shown to be two extremely dusty navy blue sleeping bags; a single and a double. There was dust in his hair and on his clothes now.

Liam picked the clumps of dust out of his hair for him. "If you had just waited you wouldn't be in this mess."

Louis shot him the coldest iceberg. Now, was Liam still talking about the sleeping bags or something else? It didn't really matter. Louis was livid either way.

"You really have some nerve -" Louis muttered hoarsely, getting in Liam's face. The muffin-haired boy stayed quiet, only showing beady eyes and clenched jaw, only Niall seeming to notice what was happening as he had been waiting behind Louis.

"Great! We can camp outside!" Niall said, pointedly shoving himself between them and pulling out a red sleeping bag from the cupboard. In the impact, the ones Louis held fell to the floor.

Both Liam and Louis reached to pick them up with Liam tugging on the double with a sly smile.

*Oh, no! You two don't get to cuddle like you did nothing wrong!* Louis thought raffing it from him, throwing dust everywhere.

Harry let out a gigantic sneeze and Louis froze as though the sound cut off on a game of musical
cheers.

"We're gonna have no choice but to sleep outside now that you raised the Sahara Desert in here.” Calvin grabbed two pillows stomping out.

The others marched out to the side of the cabin with the bags and started flapping them in the air. Nose now red, Harry tailed out behind the dusty bags nevertheless.

"Stand over there, Love!” Louis purred, pointing his cigarette to the porch before sticking it in between his lips. Harry retreated at once, rubbing his cold arms bashfully.

"Dust them out proper! I don't want to get him sick!” Louis said to nobody in particular, as Liam, Zayn, Niall, and Stan beat the bags on the exterior wall of the cabin.

Niall handed Calvin one of the sleeping bags he had been dusting and everyone took to the ground. Louis and Harry shuffled/giggled into their double, tickling eachother, then loud smacking noises were heard from them.

"Get a room!” Stan yelled, zipping his bag up all the way.

Zayn propped up to face Louis. "I wish I had a summer job like Stan so I didn't have to go to Dubai in the first place." Liam snuggled into his side.

"Right, because Dubai is so horrible!” Stan said, sarcastically. "Louis, if you want me to leave the car with you, I will. I got fired so I won't be needing it really.”

Louis propped up this time. "What did you do?"

"No, you cannot get it back just yet, Louis. I'm the next to borrow it! You don't mind, do you?” Calvin jumped in.

"Of course not!” Louis said.

"Wait- What car? That Range Rover is yours!?” Harry said scuffling out of the double.

"Harry!” Harry was now scrambling out of the double. Louis pulled his calves back in and Harry turned and sat to face him, seething.

"I should have known! All the stuff you bought me at the fair! The ring, the radio!” Harry shouted in hysteria. "Mum let you drive my Dad's truck! You could have just said no if you didn't want to drive it around, I mean, look at what you're accustomed to!” He shoved his left index in the direction of the gravel patch in front the main house that hosting all the vehicles at the moment, but Louis knew he making the point of the Range Rover. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Louis bit his fingernails. "I'm not rich! If I was, I would buy Stan his own car instead of lending him mine."

"No, no! Me! You can't forget me!” Calvin threw in with all the yelling.

"Yeah, his dad just has a really good job.” Zayn added, trying to help.

Louis shot back, "Shut the fuck up, Zayn! Nobody's even talking to you!”

Harry jumped at the outburst. "Louis!?"

Zayn shot up in his sleeping bag. "What the fuck is your problem!?"
"Babe, come on let's sleep," Liam appeased, voice low and smooth.

Louis shifted roughly at that, rolling his eyes and almost jabbing Harry's temple with his elbow.

Harry reached out and placed a worried hand on his chest, sinking back down to lay beside him.

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything about the car." Louis tugged at a loose fold of fabric at the waist of Harry's t-shirt. "My dad got it for my birthday last year. It was at the body shop since last month and I told Stan he could borrow it to get to his summer job every day. My mum- she- she borrowed it all the time," -Louis' voice was a mess of crumpled whispers now -"I just don't want anything to do with it right now."

Harry was frozen, staring at him with an ever changing expression. His hand fell slowly until it hung limp to his sides, his chest fighting not to heave. He then lunged forward throwing himself onto Louis, sobs escaping him.

"I'm so sorry that happened to your Mum, Lou." Harry said, face planted in the crook of his neck, gripping the nylon of the sleeping bag on the other side of him.

Stan whispered, "I'm sorry too, Louis."

Zayn, who was now small-spooning Liam, squeezed his boyfriend's hand tight as they listened to the conversation. Calvin lay on his back with his hands behind his head, looking up at the night sky and sighing.

"Besides, I love your Dad's truck better." Louis concluded, burying his nose in Harry's sternum, taking in the smell of his fresh perfume.

"Great! So it's settled. The Rover is mine!" Calvin announced before zipping up halfway and going quiet.

Niall snorted from beside Calvin. "Not before me and Harry get a ride around town in it!"

Soon all the boys grew quiet. Louis kissed Harry's forehead and the younger boy whispered little nonsense things in his ear to make him laugh.

Then, suddenly the rain started falling in fine droplets gradually getting heavier by the second, and it took a while to get over the panicking to get out of the bags and into the house. Louis and Harry got stuck and started screaming like they were on fire and ironically Zayn was on hand to pull Louis out of the bag in order to make enough room for Harry to scramble out himself.

As Harry dashed for the cabin, a hand pulled him back, spinning him around, and he was startled by a hot pair of lips followed by an exploring tongue as Louis kissed him in the rain. Slow and slow. They held each other close as the rain danced in the dim light from the street lamps down the road, drenching their bodies in the night.

The other boys scrambled for dry clothing, and Calvin looked back to see the two in the rain. He nudged Zayn who grabbed Liam's arm to call his attention, followed by Stan in the doorway and finally Niall who held up his phone camera as they all looked on in wonderment.

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Flashback-

"Uncle didn't leave me in charge of the business to just handle everything alone!" A young Luke gibbered, pacing around the room looking rather out of place in his brand new Stetson, his spit-shined shoes tramp Emmett's new rug.

William sat on the love seat, massaging his chin while a kettle whistled in the kitchen.

"He always hoped for you to come back to the fold! He made arrangements before he died!"

"He died a lackey to Dean Cowell!" William exclaimed.


"And he left you to continue the tradition! I didn't want a part of it then and I don't want it now! Your efforts will go futile!"

"Dean can't bother anyone from his deathbed, Cousin. Simon and his brother-in-law made it perfectly clear that after he's gone things are going to be run different around here."

William let out a contemptuous half-laugh. "What does that spoiled brat know about business other than the fact that he's been living off my father's hard work while Dean grew fat all these years?"

Giggling of crockery was heard as Emmett came out with the tea. He set it down on the coffee table and started pouring, throwing Will an overwhelmed look.

"I can't say I'm grieved he is bedridden. Or surprised! The overweight bastard!" William munched on a slice of toast.

"Yes. And soon he will be dead so you can come home finally!" Luke stressed. "The fairgrounds, the town square, the old factory on Tarp street? All of it will be back in our family's hands where they belong!"

"Ha! If Dean knew you were here trying to get Will to reclaim what he stole from his father, he'd surely make a deal with the devil to buy more time!" Emmet took a seat on the couch. "And worse if he knows we're planning it all in this ranch. Straight shot to the heart!"

William stifled his laugh with the back of his hand.

"You two can go ahead and joke! This is millions of dollars I'm talking about here! Uncle Wyatt specifically told me to make sure you were back on board!"

"As I said, Luke, I walked away the day he decided to partner up with Dean Cowell and Maxwell Grimshaw! They stained our family legacy and I want nothing to do with that dirty money!"

Luke took a final sigh and folded his arms. "What about Anne." He tossed his head to the back door where she and the staff were busy with the horses out back. "What about Jay! You willing to cut them from their rights!?"

Emmett's eyes fell and he clunked the cup down. "Jay's inheritance lies here with this ranch. That's why I called you here. Because you are her family, I trust you to fix the ranch papers to include William and Anne. That dirty money paid for your law school and now you're on our side so I'm not complaining."

Luke fixed him with a suspicious look. "Why are you fixing your will so soon anyway? You're
only forty-five!"

Emmett nodded, little finger sticking out as he drank. "Well, William is the reason I have this ranch in the first place so he deserves legal ownership, and also let's just say Dean's condition gave me a little perspective."

William smiled, taking another bite of the toast. "He's old and fat! Saw his demise coming from a mile away! You, Em are not as evil and manipulative as he is."

Luke hastily shook his head as he took a quick drink of tea. "Nah! You have to be even more evil and manipulative to buy a man's ranch from under him- with the bastard's own money, by the way- and burn the evidence!" He started sorting his papers and packing them back in his suitcase.

"William shot his head toward Emmett. "You told him all of that!?"

Mouth full of toast, Emmett shrugged. "He's my lawyer! I had to."

"See, cousin? Emmett is making sure you have a place on a mere horse farm! You, on the other hand, have the power to run an empire! One that could benefit both girls beyond their lifetimes! Don't you care what's best for-"

William leaped to his feet, towering over an already tall Luke, causing him to flinch. "Boy! Don't you tell me about those girls! I know what is best for them!"

"Oh, you do, now!?!" Luke painted on a smile. "From what I heard, Jay was so mad when she 'accidentally' found out,"- he held up index quotes- "that she ran to her aunt promising she'd never come back!"

Emmett stood up, his soft facial features –too delicate for a man doing wood crafting- and dark neatly brushed hair shining in the reflection of the overhead bulb. "Now, look here, she's only been gone a month. You just got here, so you don't know the whole story."

A sly grin shaping in the corners of his lips, Luke flew around, pacing again. "Oh! I already know the whole complex history! Anne told me everything"- Emmett and William exchanged looks- "My cousin here decided he wanted- after years of exiling himself from his own father's home, and this town- to finally accept his best friend's generosity in stealing this ranch for him and somehow told himself that the ranch and everything in it-particularly, said best friend's wife- was his!"

Emmett folded his arms, jaw clenched. William did not move.

Eyes plastering them, Luke expanded his grin, face shaping into pure amusement. "Tell me how does that work exactly?"

Stopping with his hands behind his back to look at them, Luke smiled. "Well, you know what they say, Cousin; all is fair in love and war."

"Your job is to fix the damn papers for the ranch. Keep your damn opinions to yourself." William's eyes dug into Luke's soul, his voice, though steady, was deep and held the weight of a thousand horses.

The front door flew open, breaking apart the tension, and a blonde teenager in a short pleated skirt and extra-sized sweater burst in with a Pyrex dish in her hand.

"Uncle Em, I helped Ma make the casserole this time!"
Emmett inspected it. "It looks okay."

"Thank goodness!" Larissa clapped. "I'll go join the others! I hope they didn't start the bonfire without me!"

She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and went straight for the kitchen.

Luke turned to Emmett. "What about her? You including her anywhere in this?"

Emmett drew in a large breath. "My god-daughter will be very well taken care of, like she always has been. As for the house, it's going to split between Jay, and Anne."

Luke jerked his head sideways, pursing his lips. "Whatever you say, boss."

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"You've been avoiding me for the past few days since you've been back. I look at you and you haven't changed." A young Calum bore a hopeful smile in his cowboy outfit, complete with clinking boots in the dim light of dusk as he leaned forward on the round pen. A pretty chestnut horse galloped inside.

Luke stood beside him, head of blond waves blowing in the light breeze; face unreadable. "I'm only here to help my cousin with paperwork. After that, I'm leaving."

Calum sneered, propping his elbow on the fence and pressing his hat down over his forehead. Luke gave him a stone-faced look. "What?"

Irritated and amused at the same time, Calum re-adjusted his charcoal Stetson. "I haven't seen you since you left for college!"

"So?" came the answer from a disgruntled Luke.

"That was four years ago!"

"Again, I ask what your point is?" His stern features softening at the look on the dark-haired man's face as he stared back like he had discovered a hidden Atlantis.

The boy hit his palm on the railing. "So, kiss me already!"

Meanwhile…

"Sophia didn't even let me inside. I once again had to spend twenty minutes listening to her bark about how wrong we were to not say anything before. But she's right. I failed as a father." Emmett said as he gazed out at the bonfire a few yards beyond the round pen.

"You were only trying to protect her. Like you said, she'll come back when she's ready. We'll explain everything when she does." William said, slapping a mosquito on his shin.

Loud clapping and laughter coming from the round pen cut through the conversation, and Emmett looked down at group the sitting around the bonfire.
"Finally!" he said, for only William to hear.

"You knew about that!?" William asked as he beheld a very invested kiss between Luke and Calum.

Emmett glanced at him briefly before going back to ogling the couple. "Since the last time Luke was here they were sneaking around the ranch like a pair of mice. And since Luke came back he's been ignoring Calum. You Selleys are all the same, stubborn as darn mules!"

"He and I are the only ones left! I'll try to get along with my little cousin but as for his claims that I should return to my father's business, he can have it all. I'm good here." His eyes searched the group and came to rest on Anne as she nestled by the fireside in a young Gavin's arms. Unaware that the two men were watching, he was raking his fingers through her long dark hair while Larissa stood in front of everyone yapping away excitedly about some art internship she applied for.

"This Gavin fellow…"

"Mhm?"

"You sure he's okay for my Anne? He seems quiet sometimes. Like he's hiding something!"

"He grew up in foster care, Will. Of course he has a past he doesn't want to talk about. He and Anne have that in common; they both been abandoned by their biological parents. Lucky for Anne you adopted her but Gavin had to go through the system his whole life. Give the kid a fair shot!"

William's eyebrows shot up. "Whoa! I was just asking!"

As soon as the rain had stopped, the two wet boys went back to the main house and quickly changed into dry clothes, then Louis took to the porch again to blow off some steam in the form of a cigarette while Harry went to sleep.

Blowing and mashing it on the partially sprinkled porch floor, he raised his head, eyes coming to meet Stan. He stood looking back at Louis with an expression that only summed up as criticism. Great. Not you too, Stan.

"Look, Stan, what Liam and Zayn did -"

"You bought him a ring?" Stan overrode.


Stan's eyes fell into a haematic abyss. "Don't you think it's a little too soon for that? You've been dating for like, what? Two weeks?" He came and leaned forward on the railing a few inches away from Louis.

"Yeah, but it doesn't feel like that." Louis frowned, leaning backwards and looking at Stan's profile. "He accepted it though. He feels the same way I do."

"I'm just saying that going through some stuff that requires time to adjust and you may be moving too fast here. Do you even know that much about these people?" Stan's tone demanded attention without going over a range that only the two of them could hear up close. "I heard what his sister said in the kitchen. It sounded to me like she was in some kind of trouble?"- Louis took in some air, moving his head backward so his annoyed eyes saw Stan at an acute angle - "Well if she is, it shouldn't have to be your problem. You're already going through so much!"
"You don't get it, Stan. These people, this place is saving me. Helping them, getting involved in their problems is helping me. Harry makes me happy.

"I just don't want them throwing baggage on you that's all. Maybe if you and him met under different circumstances but now isn't a good time to play dollhouse."

Louis stared at Stan. I can't believe this. "Listen, I hear you but you're not hearing me. I love Harry. We want to be together. We're planning to break the news to Anne tomorrow at the party. You are my longest friend and I know I don't have to ask for your support?" Louis hooked his gaze, taking a page out of Gemma's book from earlier.

Stan nodded, giving a piteous sigh.

Louis took note. "I know I can trust you to stay quiet around her until then."

"Just be careful, Louis. I don't like the way that Gemma spoke to you."

Louis smiled. "Nah, she's cool. She actually helped me a lot. She snuck away one of Harry's rings so I could get the right fit for the one I bought."

Stan shook his head as they slouched back inside. "Why do I feel like you're fucking engaged!??"

Louis let out a high pitched laugh. "I'm not moving that fast, Stan! At least let us finish school!"

As they waltzed in and beheld the row of mattresses spread across the floor, Louis halted, balling his knuckles. Some genius thought it was a good idea to leave a space for him between Harry and Zayn.

"Louis!?" Zayn sat up in the mattress while Louis sank down on it. "Liam just told me. Give us a chance to explain-"

Louis shot him a death don't-you-dare-mention-anything-in-front-of-Harry glare and shifted for his back to face him, pressing his puckered lips into a sleeping Harry's curls.

"Zayn, I'm tired, leave him be." Liam whispered, sighing himself to sleep.

***

Meanwhile in the main house when Dan had put all the kids to bed and gone to sleep himself, Anne sat on the back porch in her baggy garden denim jumper conversing with Mark over tea.

"You are welcome to sleep in Louis' room as he's in the cabin with all his friends. I believe they have reunited just in time before your departure on Monday. He was so delighted to see them again. I fear he missed them terribly over the summer." She said, throwing him an under-toned side-eye, raising her tea cup to her lips.

"Whose fault is that, now?" Mark smirked, eyelids drooping, taking a sip of the fine tea.

"I suppose the real question is; whose fault will it be come Monday morning provided he boards that flight." Anne countered, crossing her legs at the knees.

All inkling of a smile faded, Mark wiped his tongue across his front teeth. "I will protect my son
whatever the cost, Anne. He's going to go to Australia and live a full, productive life. That is all you and anybody else in Champton Valley can hope for."

"We'll see about that." she replied, resting her cup down on the saucer and getting up to turn in for bed.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave kudos if you like this fic and comment your thoughts on it! I want to hear from you all for the new year!
Hey guys! I literally took a whole month to bring this chapter to a place I was comfortable posting. This is one of the very first chapters I drafted when I started writing this fic last year so I hope it falls in line.

I'm especially proud to share this so please give kudos! At this point, I have no idea who is still reading so if you can please comment and let me know that would be greatly appreciated. I'm currently working on three other larry fics that I refuse to post until I can successfully update once a week and not have you waiting as long as this one.

{PS- I'm using the present tense in certain sections because I've never used it before and wanna try my hand. It seems easy but it's very strange to me so Please comment and tell me how I did! Also, this chapter has other characters' perspectives, not just Louis and Harry.}

"We can't tell her today!" Harry came skating down the back stairs in his apron with a lilac tablecloth in hand.

Louis was holding a crying Ernie who ran over to him while he and Niall were positioning the tables in the side yard for the party. A boulder dropped in his belly on hearing the words come out of his boyfriend's mouth.

"We already agreed-" he said through the screaming and coughing in his ear. It was after three and he had already made a few trips with the SUV; to the lake for an early morning dip with all the boys, to the grocery store with Anne to get a few final things to cook, and to get Ernie and Dory some cough medicine.

Ernie started screaming even louder as he spotted his father coming up to them with the medicine and a spoon in hand. The boy's had to hold all thought as Louis tried to calm his brother for Dan to get the liquid past his tongue. But all ended up on his bib and on Louis' shirt as the child ducked the attempts. A frustrated Dan grabbed him away, mumbling nonsense words.

"Gemma has this news about the jump and if we add to it, it'll be a disaster!" Harry muttered as the man paraded away with the child.
Louis pressed his hands through his own hair and hooked them behind his strained neck. The jump...of course. He should have seen this coming. Should have known Harry would use this as an excuse not to follow through with their plan.

"Harry, what Gemma is doing has nothing to do with our relationship. We can't tell her about us just because your sister wants to jump over an obstacle course!" Louis stressed.

Niall, who was placing two dozen homemade paper lanterns on a table to decorate the yard with, nodded in agreement. The four other boys were a small distance away setting the punch bowl and trays of appetizers on the self-serve table, while Murrey and Cord were busy sticking rods in the ground to attach the lanterns.

Harry leaned forward and slapped the back of his right hand on his left palm. "Louis, for that exact reason, this is the worst time to tell her!" he said, imagining his mother's smile fade on Louis' announcement.

Niall disagreed. "I think it's the perfect time to tell her. No use dragging it out. Let her see how happy you are together. She's your mum, Harry. She's not going to stop loving you just because you're in love with Louis."

"That's what I've been trying to tell him this whole time!" Louis added in a low voice as Liam's uncle Jessie and Robin passed by with a stack of chairs.

"Niall, why are you taking his side!?” Harry said with force. Louis and Niall exchanged knowing laughs and Louis touched Harry's arm and looked implored, "Harry, take a look around. Look at your mother. She's ecstatic. It's going to be fine, I promise."

"Well, I'm here for all of you," Niall attached a lantern to a long rod and stuck it in the earth. "I already told my parents I'm going to spend every last minute of the summer with my friends. I have a lot of time to make up for!"

The girls passed by with large bunches of gold and lilac balloons to match the theme of the decor, and Louis stepped back an arm's length from Harry. "Just take a minute and think about how light you're gonna feel after we've told her. I'm not gonna let you do this alone, Harry. If you want me to say the words to her, I will. I'm going to be here every step of the way."

"HARRY!" -Harry jumped away from Louis at the sound of his mother calling through the kitchen window to his left.

Louis quickly added, "We do this today, okay?" He eyed him without blinking, hoping for an agreement.

"Yes, Mum!?” Harry quickly nodded just to shut Louis up for a while until whenever; hopefully not tonight.

"Harry, are you sure those tablecloths won't get dirty by the time the party starts?" she yelled as he unfolded the fabric.

He flapped it in the air like a sail and let it float down onto the table. "Mum, the party is already about to start!"

"I want everything exactly the way uncle Emmett used to have it at his parties!" she shouted over the noise of the speaker as Stan and Calvin did a soundcheck for the boys' performances. They had all gotten in a practice before the hustle of party preparations took over.
"Well, Uncle Emmett didn't have a Gazebo, now did he?" a strange yet so familiar voice tartly remarked.

"LUKE!" Anne's voice exploded.

Before Harry even had time to set his eyes on her, "Cousin," came the courteous reply, and he froze with the sheet in his hand, breath caught up in his throat as he stared at Louis with big unblinking eyes. Dreading the sight waiting behind him, he slowly turned around to see Luke's squinted eyes already fixed on him.


Louis looked at the man. He was tall and extremely gorgeous in a with his shoulder-length curly-blonde hair and the pinkest lips...but something about him seemed familiar to Louis. Like he knew him from somewhere. He noticed the strain in Luke's greeting and in Harry's acceptance of that greeting.

Harry never mentioned he had a cousin. And why does he look so familiar...?

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Flashback-

"What on earth is the purpose of keeping that thing alive!? It has been a liability long before it was lame!" Luke stomped, gliding up from the table, hollow in his cheek. "You and I both know what that horse is capable of, Anne! That thing threw Gavin to his-

"Hold your tongue, Luke! I'd be very careful with my next words if I were you!" Anne's eyes did all the emphasis she needed on the threat. She sat at the desk in her father's office next to the stairs, going over all the farm papers with Luke.

The man closed his mouth and exhaled in a rush. "I'm merely saying that the horse needs to be put down for the benefit of the ranch. We've been behind on finances since Will passed. And if you check for the last three years since the fall you'll see the drastic decline of income on the lame horse's part."

Anne yanked the statistics away and peered at them. "Well, he was the main source of income for years...The other bucks aren't even bringing in half the amount all together! How are we even going to upkeep this place!?" she flipped the page again."Rapid Mane's joint medicine alone is three thousand dollars a year!"

"Exactly!" Luke asserted. "He eats, he has to be groomed-that takes time as well as money- All his funds can be used elsewhere!"

"Yes, but don't you think he deserves it after bringing in all that cash over the years?"

"That brings me to my initial point that the animal did damage that can never be undone! Answer me this; Would you continue to let a horse, in its short lame years, finish the havoc it started in its able-bodied years?"

KNOCK! KNOCK!

The door swung open. "I'm sorry," an eleven-year-old Harry said, sticking his head in. "The Vet is
here. She said you called her? I didn't know one of the horses was sick?" His little cowboy hat propped ruggedly on his top of his fiery curls, he sounded ashy and full of worry.

Luke and Anne exchanged looks.

"Harry, come here let me talk to you for a second," Anne voiced, as Luke treaded heavily out the door.

"You don't have to do this!" Harry bellowed, bursting out the office a few minutes later. He didn't even let his mother finish her speech. "You're not being FAIR!" he yelled after Luke as he bolted to the stables. The thirty-four year' old curly-blond-haired man kept walking with the Veterinarian to Rapid Mane's stall, unwilling to hear a thing the boy was shouting at him.

"Now, Harry, do you think it was fair to have a crazy horse riding around arenas, throwing off the best competitors this town has to offer!? Cartwright near lost his leg because of Rapid Mane! You may think this is about revenge for the snake, but it's much more complicated than that." Luke rambled as the Vet slapped on her gloves to prepare for injecting the euthanasia. "That horse blocked Calum from getting out, leaving just enough time for the snake to bite him."

Harry cringed as Luke spoke. Will had passed away only a week, leaving Luke in charge of the farm. Anne and the children had moved into the farmhouse to take care of him a few months earlier when they got the news of his cancer. Harry would help Ashton and Michael with the horses but generally stayed out of Luke's way as he dealt with all the financial aspects. Luke always had a cold shoulder for the boy and Harry usually found dinnertime to be quite a daunting affair as Luke would make subtle jabs at him, asking Anne what the purpose of sending him to school for if his only goal in life is to run around the farm like a wild-ling.

He was overall an unpleasant and grumpy man, so Harry had just known that Luke would do this. Rapid Mane had been lame for two years since he fell and broke his left foreleg but the horse was enjoying a decent quality of life. And here Luke was, barely a week after William had been placed in the earth, grabbing the opportunity to get rid of the horse he always felt was responsible for Calum's death by carrying out the unjust execution of the poor beast.

"Whenever you're ready, Mrs. Austin," Luke approved, folding his arms as the Vet attached the needle to the syringe then pushed the air out of it.

"Is there any way you can rethink this!?!" Harry blasted out to Luke, but too late as the needle disappeared inside the horse's side.

"It's done, Harry."

"Rapid Mane..." Harry gasped in horror as the syringe contents slowly emptied.

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Harry stood, still frozen despite an irritating prickling all over his body like tiny ants biting at his skin. He was almost certain that if he was not administered his inhaler within the next minute he'd collapse.

Rapid Mane... Anne had not thought twice about agreeing to put the horse down, which as a result hurt Harry so much it set him off to be an animal rights campaigner. But Anne, Harry lived with. Anne, Harry eventually forgave. Luke, on the other hand? The needle had barely had time to shoot out the euthanasia in the horse before he had taken off, leaving Anne to run the ranch all by herself.
for the past three years. What was he doing here now?

Just as Harry thought it, his mother asked. "What a surprise! To what do I owe this long overdue visit?" She said it in a tone that expressed the opposite of 'overdue.' And Louis, who was doing everything but duck from every shard of ice darting around the air around them, was super confused.

Luke widened his lips a small fraction of a smile, eyes ripping away from Harry to Anne. "Well, it so happens I got an invitation by email to the party, and Steve didn't want to miss an opportunity to meet my family."

It was only then that Harry noticed the man standing next to Luke; A Japanese looking man with long, smooth tresses draped over his medium height shoulders.

Anne folded her arms, raking in the two men with her stare. "I don't remember send."

"Holy shit!"

Louis tilted his head to see behind Luke, and the two guests spun around as Calvin dropped a food platter arranged with stuffed egg halves.

"Oh. My. God," the tall boy enunciated, as his eyes met Steve in his white turtleneck. "Louis, do you know who this is!?" he pointed to the man open-mouthed.

Zayn came up behind Calvin and almost swallowed his own throat. "Steve Aoki!?- Liam! Liam where are you!? Steve Aoki is here! In the flesh!"

Steve then shared a laugh with Luke, and that made Harry the most shocked. Even though he had not seen Luke in five years, he knew for a fact that Luke never laughed... not since Calum died.

Cord and Murrey came over, and Liam appeared as well, all gawking at the men.

Pulling Liam with him- their canary and crimson shirts clashing- Zayn scrambled across to Louis and positioned himself behind him, pushing him forward. "Louis, say something! You're the one who's good at talking!"

"I don't think that's Steve Aoki" Louis began to tartly correct, still mad at the two. But then Luke turned to him on hearing the reply. His eyes glazed over Louis, something settling in them. "In the flesh!" he confirmed with an eerie bow of the head that reminded Louis of Jasper from the Twilight saga.

Steve gave a humble smile and it was now Louis' turn to freak out. He lifted his hands, fanning them frantically on the sides of his face. "You're Steve Aoki? Music executive, DJ, record producer Aoki!?” Louis squealed.

Stan and Calvin had to grab him to stabilize him from hyperventilating.

Harry scratched his head.

Blushing like hell, Luke tried to explain. "This is my- We're- uh-"

Steve giggled. "Husbands, I guess? It's always weird saying that!"

"Still trying to get the hang of it," Luke finished, looking at him with dilated eyes.

"Dude, why didn't you tell us you knew Steve Aoki!?" Harry heard Zayn in his ear.
"It's a pleasure to meet you, Steve," Anne reached out and hugged the man just then. Harry hit Zayn a case-in-point look referring to Anne's statement, and whispered back, "We didn't even know he was married."

Releasing Steve, Anne turned her gaze on Luke- "Um, you said an email?"

"Oh, yes! I received it on Thursday!" he answered, getting enthusiastic. Anne's eyebrows grew close as Luke embraced her. Harry had a clear view of his face a few inches away but Luke wasn't looking at him now; the pastel pink of his skin grew even lighter, and his eyes grew sullen as he focused on something on Harry's left.

That's the Luke he remembered. The dark eyes, void of anything jolly.

Unconsciously, Harry followed the middle-aged man's gaze. It led to a stack of iron chairs behind the self-serve table. A breath rushed into his lungs as he observed the logo on the chairs' back; C & J rentals. Harry wrapped his arms around himself, sinking back a bit.

"Forgive me for sounding rude but I don't have the slightest idea who emailed you!" Anne said, rubbing Luke's back in a manner to still make him feel welcomed even under the awkward circumstance.

"Oh!" Gemma piped up, smoothing the sides of her midnight green fitted illusion-neckline dress. "That would be me, Mum. I invited Luke and Steve to the party!"

All pairs of eyes were on her, Cord in particular, as he gazed awestruck. "I figured Steve'd be thrilled to hear the boys sing."

Steve's eyes lit up as he scanned Louis and Harry. "Well, when I saw your video on YouTube and Gemma sent me the band's music, I had to come see for myself! I can't wait to hear you guys live!"

Anne cut across Steve, shooting her daughter a flabbergasted look. "-Gemma, how on earth did you find Luke!"

Luke snorted. "Anne, dear, Gemma never really lost touch..."

Anne's head made a robotic turn to her daughter, as her eyes looked like they'd just seen another planet with living creatures.

"Well, we reconnected at college when he came to lecture about the legalities of horseback riding to us trainees," Gemma saved.

Luke took a few steps forward, still glaring at the chairs and ignoring the half-decorated gazebo which was left abandoned by Niall as he gawked at Steve.

"The place looks...different," Luke said, visibly rethinking taking off his gloves. Harry gave a small eye-roll.

"Oh, we opened a Dairy farm after you left, though we still have some horses; Cord here is our stable-hand and Harry takes care of all the other animals," Anne briefed. "You leaving made it harder to upkeep the horse business but we're reintroducing horse tricks."

Louis, Zayn and the other boys were still stupefied with Steve but Luke seemed fixated on Louis.

"I know this face. You couldn't hide if you tried. You must be Jay's kid."
"Yeah, this is Louis- Louis this is Luke- uh- I forgot exactly -what -relation," Harry stuttered and laughed stupidly. "He's my granddad's cousin, so-

"First cousin, twice removed!" Both Louis and Luke answered at once. Harry figured Louis was only putting what he learned at school into use, and Luke was definitely saying it in a condescending tone to tick him off.

"You knew my Mum?" Louis rapped in, shaking his hand.

"Of course, though not as well as I know Anne. I scarcely visited the ranch as a child- was never allowed to- When I moved in here after college your mother had already relocated to the city. I can say, you look exactly like her," Luke observed as Louis shoved his in his pockets, "though nothing like uncle Emmett..."

Anne opened her mouth to reply but her daughter was quicker. "Luke, why don't I show you the animals while Steve has a chat with the boys!?" Gemma timely said. Harry let out a sigh of relief as Gemma led the man to the barn. He caught eyes with his mother and she released a raspberry, wiping the back of her hand on her brow.

"I'm gonna go change," Harry said, pulling off his dirty apron and heading for the house.

***

The lanterns adorned the lawn at sunset in a straight path toward the gazebo and ending in a ring around the decorated structure, lighting up the whole yard in a romantic way as the rest of guests piled in. Shawna and Fizzie took pictures of everyone as they admired Niall's work.

"This is precisely what I imagined when I thought about this party!" Anne stood, hair all done up in her asymmetrical dark-colored thigh-high dress. She smiled at Louis who stood beside her looking dapper in his slim-fit indigo blue long-sleeve, paired with pointed-tip shoes.

Louis gazed dreamily at Harry in his white and blue checked half-sleeve, with all his matching nail polish and rings on his delicate fingers, standing a few meters away, and the boy slowly blinked letting Louis know he shared the same sentiment of the moment.

Then Louis, feeling like there was no time like the present, stretched his hand toward Harry, behind Anne's back, and mouthed for him to come over.

He silently beckoned as he saw Harry suddenly tense up at the sight of his outstretched arm, a scared look on his face. Louis' heart fell as Harry glanced at his mother, shook his head and mouthed "I'm sorry!" before quickly taking off to the front of the house. Louis turned his whole body around following Harry's movement, feeling abandoned.

Redirecting his gaze after Harry disappeared, Louis' eyes met Liam's, and he gave Louis a knowing look. He strode over to the stage and Liam followed him.

"I can't talk right now, Liam. Steve Aoki is going to watch us perform. If I talk to you now I'll get angry and that's not good for Steve to see!" Louis punched the keyboard. He had settled himself with practicing his notes to get over how Harry was acting.

Of course, Liam continued talking anyway and Louis had to get off the stage and walk off on him,
but Liam, being Liam, followed him as he trudged across the yard.

"The summer before I started school at Doncaster we had just moved there and my mom volunteered to teach a summer art class!" Liam yelled trying to keep up with the fast boy, "My dad and I came to pick her up the first day and that's how I met Zayn."- Louis jerk-squinted his eye at that but continued walking- "There was something there straight away but since neither of us was out yet, we didn't act on it." Liam stopped walking. "We hung out for that entire week that she taught that class. I was never artistic but I was there for every step of him making that T-shirt."

Louis stopped and turned all the way around to face him.

"And then I started school and you were the first friend I made," Liam said, looking deep into his eyes. "You pulled me into this new, exciting world. You have this way if seeing people and, and I did fall for you. The time I spent with you meant something. But you ended it- understandably- and me and Zayn just... fell into place."

Louis didn't know what to say. He just let his eyebrows do all the talking.

You never wondered what it would've been like? I think sometimes, you know, it could've been us together." Liam looked down at his feet.

Louis contoured his face. "What? No! Liam, I don't have time for this. You're going to do this now after what you did?"

"Relax! I'm just saying that it's ironic, you know, Zayn isn't out to his family yet and Harry is struggling ... It's just sometimes I think it would've been easier if you and I were still... If you had just waited a little longer."

"It's too late to have that conversation. I waited for that conversation for a while after you and Zayn hooked up, but after everything you just said, I realize that you aren't the one who was holding me back; I'm the one who was in your way. So even though we weren't nothing, we would never have had a chance because you loved him all along."

"Louis, I know you felt like crap about what happened but you did dump me. It's unfair to say that I wouldn't have stayed anyway."

Louis let out a small laugh as he sunk in Liam's words. In a cruel, annoying way, he was right. Louis was so afraid of falling back into that deep hole of despair that he had chosen to dump Liam first. But in all honesty, he now felt cheap. Like he was the secret lover who Liam's family never knew about while Zayn was the one who got his Mum's approval and invitations to family dinners in the long run.

His belly burned with something akin to jealousy. He wanted that with Harry. He almost had it, so to say. He was very good friends with Anne and found her to be as charming and understanding as a person should be. He and Gemma got along well. Niall, Cord, and all Louis' friends knew they were a thing and supported it. If only Harry could see what Louis was seeing; the bigger picture.

While Liam spoke, Louis tried to think up all the reasons why he and Harry had to stay a secret. Surely this was not the same situation as the one he was in with Liam but he somewhat did feel like a dirty secret. Even with all the arguments, Harry had previously put forth, Louis' biased- or maybe naive-mind couldn't come up with one.

"I'm sorry, Liam. It's not just you and Zayn. I have a lot going on. It's Harry, It's my dad..."

"I know- Friends?"
"Of course we're still friends, Liam."

"I know it's hard with Harry but you have to be patient. We both do. I love what Zayn and I have but as time went by I realized what it was like for you having to hide with me after you already freed yourself," Liam's lips stretched across his face, "When I came out it was so wild- do u remember?" -Louis moved his head up and down- "And then on the other hand, with Zayn, I understand the pressure he feels now to come out to his family because I was there in that same situation. We both been through it at the same time, just that he's taking a bit longer to catch up.

"It's extra hard for him, being Muslim." Louis empathized.

"Yeah, Point is, I understand both of you. I got where you, Louis, were coming from when you broke up with me. It's not easy. But Zayn's coming out slowly with baby steps, and it's endearing actually. I guess my real point is that maybe you just need to give Harry the time he needs. You and I both know coming out isn't something you just wake up one day and be ready to do. You need those baby steps."

"I know Liam, but it's not just me involved, it's Anne. I don't want to deceive her. She's been like a mum to me and I would feel awful too..."

Liam narrowed his eyebrows and held the sides of Louis' head to get his focus and Louis held his wrists. "Hey, it'll all unravel on its own. Just give it some time. Besides, Anne adores you, she's gonna respect you more for putting Harry's needs before your own. Come on, let's hug it out."

Easy for Liam to say that; he can keep a secret for years. I feel like I'm suffocating every time I have to lie, Louis' thoughts flowed as he embraced the boy.

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Aesthetic song- Familiar, Liam Payne and J Balvin.

From different angles in the yard, three people noticed the two friends embracing each other; Harry-who had felt stupid for walking out earlier- made his way back to apologize and saw Liam cup Louis' jaw then hug him like there was no tomorrow, which caused him to take off in a huff toward the kitchen to get his mind off it and on serving sausage rolls; Anne, who had been chatting with guests near the back porch, peeled her eyes away for a moment just in time to see the close encounter between the two; And Zayn who was in the gazebo with Stan and some guy-named Baldwin or Palvin or something- whom no one knew who invited, listening as the guy went off into a tirade about having given head to the guy in the red shirt.

Zayn scanned the crowd for the guy Balvin was chirping about, certainly bypassing his own boyfriend in his crimson short-sleeved button-up still chatting with Louis, and searching for another guy in a red shirt. Any other guy in a red shirt.

"That guy in the red shirt?" Stan stuttered, his finger shaking in Liam's and Louis' direction.

"Yep!" Balvin confirmed.

Zayn took a sip of his punch. "Can't be that guy!"

"Excuse me, who else do you see in red with bushy brown hair to die for in this party?" Balvin
rudely replied.

Burning eyes descending over Liam like a hawk, Zayn looked on as Liam and Louis hugged liked koala bears.

"That guy in the red shirt..." he said to himself, coming to realization.

Balvin must've heard him, because he then replied, "Yeah, Lenard or Leo, I think his name was. He was so drunk at the Cowell party I didn't get anything he was saying. Not that he did much of that anyway. Only hardcore groaning while I sucked him clean. He even gave me his watch- that is until his boyfriend over there showed up and leveled me for it." He nudged his chin toward Louis.

Colorless... that was Zayn's face as Liam's eyes caught him, then the Balvin guy. Eyes bursting wider, Liam dashed away from Louis and shot for his boyfriend.

Balvin stumbled backward as Zayn dived for the front yard making a zebra line away from a chasing Liam until he caught up and demanded they go somewhere and talk.

"Guys! This is us!" Niall stopped them, shouting from over Liam's shoulder. Zayn pushed Liam out of his way and marched over to the stage where Stan and Calvin were now turning up the amp and testing the electric guitar chords over the speaker while Harry was trying to untangle microphone cords while carefully avoiding Louis' gaze as he tried to make eye-contact while helping him. Liam heard a loud cackle escape Louis as Harry's foot got stuck in the cords.

"Guys, if Steve likes your performance it could mean big things for you!" Gemma exclaimed as Zayn grabbed a mic and started belting out an extremely high and extremely emotional note out of nowhere.

Louis let out sharp exhale, looking straight ahead and Harry followed his gaze to see a group of guests strolling toward the gazebo. Niall pursed his lips in agitation at the sight of Nick waddling along in pink shirt, argyle waistcoat, and an electric blue bow tie. He tries way too fucking hard, Louis said in his mind.

Simon followed behind with his wife, Lauren, and their son Trey, who dodged over to Lottie the second he spotted her.

"Oh, there he is!" Gemma said, eyes glazing Aiden. "Good luck, guys!"

"I totally forgot she invited Simon too," Harry fumed as Gemma went over to them.

"Oh, the place looks exceptional!" Lauren commented to Gemma who pointed to Niall as the mastermind behind the lighting.

"Fire hazard, if you ask me!" they heard Simon reply, and Niall was a boiling mess.

***

Harry, Zayn, and Liam lead in vocals while the other boys did their thing with the instruments. The guests applaud and Anne is wreathed in smiles as the boys give a riveting performance despite their personal conflicts; Harry and Louis make puppy eyes the whole time and Louis knows Harry is in an okay place again. Zayn, on the other hand, is cold toward Liam during the song, and as
soon as the last chord plays he drops the mic and runs off on the band just as Steve comes over to
give kudos. Liam is too fast for him though and drags him in the direction of Louis' room to
explain/ apologize.

Harry gives Louis a loving smile that quickly fades when he remembers there are approximately
fifty people around them, and jumps down from the stage. He ducks through the crowd and sneaks
away toward the kitchen again not knowing Louis was close behind him.

Louis almost catches up but gets deterred by Dan.

"Louis, can you check on the babies for me? I put them down in Gemma's room! I don't want them
to wake up and nobody's there!"

Louis gives an affirmative nod and points himself to the front porch as the quicker way upstairs.

"Wait," Anne jumps in, "Louis, help me get the jello shots out the fridge!" Louis flaps his hand on
his sides and redirects to the kitchen following her. Okay, he thinks while exhaling, Harry's in the
kitchen so we can tell her in there away from all the guests...In the kitchen and Harry is nowhere to
be seen. Louis grits his teeth as he pulled the refrigerator open.

Anne sees how worked up he is and watches him get the trays of jello shots out. Fizzie's bright
last-minute idea; the tiny cups of vodka mixed with red jello- that she herself was not allowed to
have- was only in there for twenty minutes and Anne was relieved they were at least half-hard.

"You know, uh, My Dad used to like these," she says, rather nervous than conversational.

"Oh? I don't like it straight either!" Louis deadpans, grabbing up two trays, kicking the fridge door
close and disappearing out the back door.

Anne's eyes popped open wide, wondering if he was actually talking about the jello shots.

"Gemma, we need to talk," -Back at the refreshments table, Gemma turns around from a rather
hushed conversation with Luke and Simon to see a highly disturbed Cord in his Sunday Best a few
inches behind her forcefully clenching a cup of punch. She leads him to her room for privacy but
the twins are up now and Dan is somewhere outside, so she and Cord hold them a bit before giving
them to Shawna -who they spot through the open doorway on her way to the bathroom.

Niall's long-legged girlfriend then passes Harry on the stairs hurrying to his room as she tiptoes
down with the two bawling babies, and over to her boyfriend on the front porch chatting with Stan.
Doris then throws up on her and she shoves the two into Niall's hands, running up to the bathroom
again to clean up. On her way there she witnesses Liam entering Louis' room but she totally misses
Zayn going in first.

Niall must have known how to calm the twins down because Louis doesn't hear them on the porch
from the living-room when he passes after handing the jello shots to a total stranger and hops up
the stairs to get them. He opens Gemma's door without knocking- because why would he? The
twins were in there- and freezes.

And there Gemma was indecently exposed from the waist down with Cord on top covering her -
for want of a better word- from actual exposure. Only thing was Cord's arse was in full view!

"Dan said the babies were in here!" Louis blocks his eyes with his entire arm, shouting accusingly
before turning back out. Gemma shouts after him saying that Shawna had the babies, but Louis is
already out the door. She barely has time to think when suddenly Cord is jumping into his jeans
and running after the boy to silence him. Louis, already too deep in his own drama to get into
theirs, darts downstairs to his room and locks the door behind him just as Cord catches up to him.

Meanwhile, a now vomit-less Shawna comes out of the bathroom and sees when Louis goes in his room. The girl automatically assumes he's alone in there with Liam and watches as Cord bangs on the door without any reply.

Now, Harry- who was hiding in his room all this time- ambled out and slipped into his sister's room where she was now fully clothed and alone.

"Gem, can we talk?"

"Sure, little bro," she chirped, shifting over for him to sit.

Harry let out an exaggerated exhalation and rubbed his knees nervously. "Um, Gem...How do know when it's time?"- Gemma jerked her neck for more information- "Like, time...to..have sex." he drew out.

Gemma's eyebrows hit the ceiling. "Ughm... Um..." she went. The flustered girl looked down and quickly smooth the bed sheet. "Uh?"

Harry jumped back in before she could answer, "Because I feel like I want that and I feel guilty for wanting it because it's the worst time and the best time at the same time."

Gemma got dizzy trying to listen to that spur of words. "Harry, I'm sorry but I don't understand a thing you just said.

Harry nodded for the okay and explained. "Louis' been acting weird around Liam since the fair and I saw them hugging earlier and all cuddly and I just...feel so- like I'm driving him away. I've literally been avoiding him all evening. He says he wants to stay for me but he hasn't told his Dad yet so that means there's a chance he can still end up going. If that happens I have no idea when or if I'll ever see him again- that's one part- and he wants to tell Mum about us and Gem you know how that might turn out. She could stop me from seeing him and then for sure I'll never see him again," Harry exhaled and squeezed his eyes shut. "And I know we just started and it's new but I feel like I want to so we would have something -in the middle of all this...something that's ours that nobody can take away."

He opened his eyes again and looked at his sister. She looked away, "Yeah, I uh, I know exactly what you mean."

***

His back against the door of his room, Louis waited for Cord to toss off, Louis looked into the darkness of his room, and his gaze fell on two pairs of eyes staring back at him.

"Oh for fuck sake!" he screamed at Liam and Zayn. "You scared the living crap out of me!"

"Great the accomplice is here. Maybe he can fill in the gaps for me!" Zayn said, face mad at Liam.

Louis took one look at Liam's sullen appearance and knew exactly what was going down. "Look, Liam regrets the whole thing and -" he tried.
"Don't even start, Louis! You've been trying to make us feel bad for something that happened a long time ago that you shouldn't even be upset about- and the whole time you're keeping this from me!?!" Zayn fires, holding up Liam's watch.

"Don't try to act like this is the same thing! It's not!" Louis thorned. Liam's face went red but no one saw it in the dim room.

"You are so fucking sensitive! We didn't sneak around on you..." Zayn said, utterly hurt. "But you knew what Liam did with that guy and you kept it from me! Some friend, Louis."

"Sensitive? That's rich, Zayn! And I told Liam to tell you the truth! I got your freaking watch back. I know how fucking sentimental it is to you! But, you two? You lied to me for two years!"

"I didn't want to be gay!" Zayn shouted off the walls. Then he added more calmly, "That's why I didn't tell you! That year I saw how horrible Wooton and some of the other guys on your team treated you when you came out. At the end of term, you just took all that and said 'Fuck it' and I had no idea how to emulate that. I still don't! Then summer came, and after that art class, Liam took one look at me and suddenly I wanted to be gay."

He then fixed his gaze on Liam, "Nothing happened that summer but you had me from that first look. How could you do this?"

Liam's hands reached his own hair in an instant as he fought to comprehend what he must have been thinking that night with Balvin. He found his way to the bed and slumped down. Hands now holding his face.

"I'm such a shitty person. I hurt you both!"

"That's not true!" and "No you're not!" came out of Louis' and Zayn's mouths respectively but at the same time.

Zayn knelt down in front of Liam. "I'm not out yet, and I don't know if I'll ever be as brave as you and Louis but I do love you and I'm all yours, Liam. I'm still yours."

Liam touched his face and was met with tears.

"Ask Louis! I felt horrible the whole time!" Liam sing-sobbed, grabbing Zayn's dark hair, his calloused thumbs sandpapering his earlobes. For all the architecture his uncle John taught him over the weeks he still had not mastered the art of simply wearing gloves.

Zayn kissed his palm. "It's only because of Louis that I'm forgiving you. Because he got my grandfather's watch back from that jerk." He spared Louis a look that gave off his gratitude, before tilting a kissy face to Liam who leaned down pressing his buttery lips onto the dark haired boy's.

"If I hadn't come all the way to Champion to find it out, would you two ever have told me you met before? Louis asked, cutting the intimate moment as his eyes dimmed. "Because I would have championed that from the very beginning," he added with a weak smile.

Zayn tilted his head as he held on to Liam's shoulders. "Louis, you were so hurt even without knowing that part, we didn't want to add to it. We're sorry, Louis."

Feeling better about the sincere apology, Louis strode over to his dresser and dug around, pulling out an item they all knew well. "I don't feel alright keeping this."

"Don't be crazy! That's yours!" Zayn's eyes widened at the sight of the samurai T-shirt he made so
"You know, forgive and forget? Well, every time I see this I'll remember so..." He threw the item at Zayn. "Liam should have it!"

Pondering on what other secrets about his life this town may uncover for him he left to look for the babies doesn't lock the door behind him.

"Please do not have sex in my room or then I will never forgive you!" he warns over his shoulder as he trotted out of the room leaving the door slightly ajar.

***

After talking with his sister upstairs, Harry figures he was overreacting with Louis before and decides to look for him.

'It's your decision, Harry. I get it now that telling Mum you're in a secret relationship with her best friend's son is a huge deal. And I do believe you should be the one to tell her in your own timing!'

Gemma's words playing in his head as he makes his way out, he wonders why she was so supportive of his take on this whole telling Mum thing. Maybe in the back of her mind, she knows Mum can't handle her news and mine at the same time so she's agreeing that I wait with mine. Or maybe she was referring to her not telling Mum the minute she decided to make that stupid jump. Whatever the reason, Harry sure as hell wasn't telling his mother a damn thing.

On his way down the stairs, he runs into Cord who is coming back up the stairs to Gemma.

"If you're looking for Louis, he's in his room." Cord says in a manner like he had a chip on his shoulder.

"Okay, thanks." Harry goes to the door on the side of the stairs. He needed to apologize for arguing and making a big deal out everything. He makes to knock but doesn't bother when he sees the door is unlocked. The room is dark but he hears muttering and...groaning? He squints his eyes as he peeks inside the bedroom side of the study.

Even in the dark, it was hard to misplace the bushy head full of hair facing the door as Liam groans out loud. Harry's eyes fall to where Liam's hand is gripping the back of someone's dark hair twisting round and round in the nook of Liam's crotch. Painfully assuming the person is Louis - because it's his room- Harry runs out crying.

**

"Lottie, you are the prettiest girl I've ever seen," Trey waltzed her across the dance-floor in her marigold flowing dress.

She leaned in and planted a kiss on his cheek in reply.

"What do you say we go somewhere more private?" Trey whispered, garnering an excited nod
from the girl.

Anne and Mark, who were exchanging formalities a few yards away, see the kiss.

"I don't want my kids blending in with the locals too much if you know what I mean."

Anne grew a large grin. "You mean as you did?"

Mark's face turned white.

Lottie and Trey ducked through the vibrant party-goers into the car-park and slipped into the backseat of Louis' unlocked SUV, giggling like little naughty kids.

"Nobody will find us here!" Lottie giggled.

***

Meanwhile, among the laughing guests and clinking glasses, Louis talked with Calvin and Stan.

"Guys, I'm going to need your support. I'm gonna need all of your support. Harry is really scared to tell Anne tonight. Whatever happens I just..." Louis drifted. A yelp from one of the guests was followed by a huge black dog skipping through the party whining in fear of the booming speakers. All three boys looked on as Phoebe and Daisy dive through trying to catch him.

Calvin, sensing Louis' anxiety, put his hands on his shoulders. "Lou, hey, it's gonna be okay. However she reacts, we're going to be celebrating with you and Harry tonight. This is a good thing."

"Tell that to Harry. I gotta go look for him," Louis said as he bounced away.

Calvin turned around to see Fizzie standing behind him looking suspicious with a tray of hors-d'oeuvres. With a nonchalant look on her face, she watched her brother walk to the front of the house.

"Fizz! Way to a man's heart, aye?" he deflected, pushing his hand for a stuffed egg half.

She nodded impatiently and let him have one before asking, "What did you mean by 'Celebrating' with you and Harry?"

Calvin shot her a look that reminded him of Louis- which he tried not to remind him of Louis- and thought about what he was going to say. He opened his mouth but-
"They're together aren't they?" came out of Fizzie's instead.

She stared into his eyes with concern for her brother, and Calvin wanted to kiss her.

Instead he replied, "Oh, come on! You've been here the whole time. You're telling me you didn't see dat? You know, the sparks flying all over?" he made a fluttery motion with his hands causing the skin on the sides of Fizzie's mouth to crease.

"I'm not stupid. Of course, I knew about them. You know, last time we were here and Gemma got drunk, Harry called Louis to come get us at the party and he almost got in trouble for not telling Anne, just because Harry said so," Fizzie moved her eyebrows dramatically as she gossiped. "Doesn't take a rocket scientist to know when Harry says jump, Louis asks 'how high!'?"

Giving her pointed nod and looking around the yard, Calvin pursed his lips. "I think everyone's okay for stuffed eggs at the moment- Take a break?"

They fumbled over to the gazebo steps and sat down, Fizzie tucking the skirt of her mint-green spaghetti-strap calf-length dress between her knees. Calvin got a whiff of her perfume as she sat close to him.

"Gosh," he said, undoing a few buttons on his fitted fox-patterned shirt. "These lanterns are really pushing a heat."

Fizzie laughed and punched him in the bicep. "I like the aestheticism of it. Niall's talented."

Calvin nodded, engaged like a deep philosopher was unearthing the world's true shape under the sun. She stretched her legs flat out on the steps and shook her ballerina shoes playfully, and Calvin swore he saw a star fly over the moon.

"This is cute!" Fizzie said after the awkward pause, in a low, conversation-y voice, reaching out a hand to examine the minuscule pendant on his necklace that was in the shape of a little red and white guitar.

"Oh, I got this from Louis a long time ago! He likes to give stuff away."

"I know," Fizzie said, examining the object that had a triangular hole in the middle.

"You like it?" he asked, eyes brushing over the horizon of her brown hair; a soft golden outline that bounced from the light of the lanterns and complimented her cherry-apricot skin tone.

He didn't wait for her to give an answer before his veined hands were removing the necklace from his long, bony neck and slipping it onto her even smaller one.

***

As Louis searched through the heads for Harry, Dan came up to him again, this time with the babies. His eyebrows sitting on top his eyelids, he looked completely livid, and Louis braced himself for the third degree.

"Where were you!?" Dan proved his predictions. "Your brother and sister are sick! I just asked for a little help!"
"I'm trying my best! You know, Dan- how am I supposed to be there for them if they're all the way over in Wales? How does that help anything!?!" Louis yelled the last sentence. Nearby onlookers turned their heads to them, and he contained himself. He had been keeping it inside all this time but wasn't planning on saying anything. There was too much to be said while it was still fresh... while everyone was still hurting.

Dan folded his arms, his beady eyes on Louis. "Excuse me!??"

"Ernie is already starting to forget me and will completely once he settles in Wales!"

Dan offered a dry laugh. "You were supposed to come see them after two weeks, not three and a half! - What else did you expect? The whole time I was in Wales had to find ways to distract Ernie from crying for both you and Jay."

Louis shook his emerging tears away as Dan went on. "Your Dad insists he wants you in Australia. I tried telling the man that he's breaking up an already fragile family but he insists on separating us further. You think when you're gone I can stay and raise the babies in that house all by myself? I have to be proactive and think about my kids' future too. I have help in Wales!" the man bounced the babies on his hips as he sputtered to Louis. "I can deal with you cutting whatever valuable time you have with your brother and sister to do,"- there was a pause- "whatever in Champton, but I won't tolerate you saying that I'm breaking this family up by moving to Wales."

Dan turned and walked off with his babies, and Louis was left to stand there with eyes on him. He let out a growl.

***

As the music amplifies, Louis' father drifts to the front yard and sticks his finger in one ear, trying to take an important phone call near his car while Phoebe and Daisy duck down trying to get a scared Clifford out from under the SUV.

In the Gazebo Louis sees all the couples dancing around him, and feels even more determined to announce his and Harry's relationship. He walks out and spots Harry leaning on the side of the house.

Louis darts toward him and they make eye-contact. Then suddenly Harry is shooting off again, but Louis is close this time and finally catches up to him in the seemingly quiet front yard.

He grips his hand affectionately, rubbing the promise ring as he intertwined their fingers.

"I know your scared, Love," Louis starts, reaching the fingertips of his right hand to the boy's chin. "If you don't want to do this tonight then I can't force-"

POWWW!

Louis' head bounced in an obtuse angle, and he swore his body shifted out of its cosmic plane. A hand raising to his left cheek, he looked at Harry, only to meet the incensed eyes and jutting chin of the boy whom had just slapped him.

***
I really need to know what you guys think of this chapter! Kudos! Comments! Next chapter shortly!
The Gazebo Party part two

Chapter Notes

A/N:-Hey this chapter is basically a continuation of the previous chapter. Some sections are present tense here too so just a heads up. I left the deeper scenes in past tense verb form. Warning:- Fighting/ physical harm trigger in here as well.

4k plus readers...I'm speechless. You all have no idea how grateful I am for this. I have written in the past but never for online readers (or any readers for that matter) so I'm swimming in emotions right now. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart for this. Please stay a few chapters more. I have all questions to be answered. Please give kudos to my work. Please comment. I cannot wait to share my other larry fics with you!

I hope you enjoy.

---

Louis' face stings. He realizes it had come into contact not only with Harry's palm, but all his rings as well. Not giving himself time to get over the shock, he grabs both Harry's hands, but the boy shoves him away, hard.

Little does he know that all occupants of the front yard- even the two hiding inside the SUV- heard the loud crack of the slap and were now staring at them.

"HEY! Leave my brother alone!"

A furious Daisy runs to her brother's rescue. She dives into Harry and starts hitting the surprised boy in his chest and neck and wherever else her arms flew. Louis- still in shock himself- grabs her off of him, and Harry then disappears inside again.

From the roof of her mouth to the floor of the vehicle; that was the length of Lottie's jaw-drop at the moment as she and Trey witnessed the whole thing. They quickly darted back down out of sight as Mark went rocketing over to his son.

"Okay, start talking!" Mark serious-tones as he holds up Louis' chin in his fingers to get a better look at the lash. Louis lets out a burdened sigh, closing his eyes, unable to say a word.

"Does Anne know?" He asks his son after sending the girls back to the party. All Louis can manage in reply is a weak shake of the head, and Mark over-dramatizes what should be a simple inhalation, making Louis want to roll his eyes but is unable to actually do so because he thinks he may be paralyzed on one side of his face now.

"You have to tell her," Mark says, sounding to Louis a bit strangely elated for his personality.

"That's all I've been trying to do all night! Harry keeps-" a frog croaks in Louis' throat now, shutting him up.

Mark's eyebrows huddle together. "Wrap it up before we leave." - Oh, there he is, Louis thinks, finally catching the annoyance in his father's tone- "Once you're in Australia, you start fresh. We'll
work something out, Louis." he tells his son, sounding more like he was trying to convince himself.

Louis knows his dad wants what's best for him, but he just can't see past Harry. He knew he should have told him then that he wasn't going with him but all he could think about was what could have caused Harry to flip like that. If he was that determined not to tell people about them then why should Louis stay?

***

On his way back to his room, Harry runs into Zayn and Liam in the living-room.

"Harry, we're sorry you had to see us like that! It won't happen again, we swear!" the boys say in unison.

Harry's eyes almost popped out. "That was you!" he shouts at Zayn who nods. Harry's breath shortens and he is sweating now. I just slapped my boyfriend for nothing! He is mad at himself but decides to take it out on the couple before him. It is their fault after all.

"How dare you disrespect my mother's house like that!?!" he thunders. "She invited you to her party! The party's OUTSIDE!!"

Liam shields Zayn from Harry's flaying hand.

"We're terribly sorry, Harry!" he offers, but Harry is already running up the stairs like Rocky Balboa.

***

On reaching the landing, Harry bumped straight into Nick, who had just come from the bathroom. The two crash to the floor, and Harry pulled himself up, with Nick asking him if he was okay.

I'm fine!" Harry said, and stormed to his room. But he didn't get to shut the door as Nick came flooding in behind him.

"I can see you're not okay! What's going on!?" the black-haired boy asked, a close eye on Harry's shaking fingers.

Harry sat on the bed with his feet on the floor and cradled his elbows. "I'm just a little overwhelmed."

Nick climbed on the bed beside him, one foot bent beneath him. "Is it your asthma?"

"No," Harry croaked. "It's just everything. The party- It's all so sudden, you know?"

Nick flashes his eyebrows. "I know exactly what you mean. My uncle has all these expectations of me. I wonder sometimes if somewhere inside that deep dark tunnel he's proud of me."

Harry stared at him.

"That's kinda why I took the job at Ed's place. I wanted to show uncle Si I can stand on my own two feet without his so-called help. He actually cut my allowance when he found out.

"I'm so sorry about that," Harry folded his arms tighter.

"It's not for long, though. He'll restore it when he realizes I'm the only one he can really count on to
run the ranch one day. With Aiden, it's one disappointment after another, and Trey actually wants nothing to do with the ranch; says he wants to move to the Caribbean."

"The Caribbean seems nice," Harry mindlessly made conversation before adopting a more serious tone. "I hope you and your uncle work things out. But I have to say, the deli gig looks good on you."

Grimmy cackled. "Oh? Is it the dorky hat? I bet it's the hat." They shared a laugh and let it die down.

"Whenever he tells me I didn't do that good I wonder just as well if my mother would still be proud, you know? Like all mothers are when you don't do so well."

Harry lets out a snort. "All mothers? You should have my mum! She never finds anything of value in me!"

Nick shot Harry a hurt look. "Well, I don't. I'll never have a mother again."

Harry's jaw fell open and he lowered his head. "I'm sorry. It's just the party- and Louis-"

"Is he your boyfriend?" Nick cuts in too soon.

Harry's lips spread into a rigid smile, with him looking up but he heard the loud sigh from Grimmy letting him know he got the message.

"I thought as much. He seems boring and possessive to me. Why do you waste your time?"

"Why do you care, Nick?" Harry said in an irritated tone.

Nicks cheeks infused with red, and he took a moment before he answered. "I thought you'd know by now..."

Harry exhaled as he waited for the rest.

"I know we had our face-offs in the past but I've always liked you... since kindergarten." Nick's eyes were wide with a touch of honesty that took Harry by surprise.

He swallowed and pressed his fist into space on the mattess between them. "You've had a funny way of showing it all this time."

Nick never took his eyes of Harry as he leaned closer. "I can show you now."

Harry exposed all the white in his eyes for Nick to see. "Whatever in the world makes you think I'd be remotely interested!?"

Nick cracked a grin. "Well, for starters, you're no longer trembling, and I bet you don't need your inhaler anymore." He gave a satisfied tilt of the head, leaning closer yet.

******

Louis blended himself back into the party, feeling like shit, and met up with Niall. "Where are the others? Cal and Stan are already on stage for the next performance!"

Louis's shoulders dropped.

"Have you talked to Harry?" he spurted, gesturing his fingers to his forehead. "I'm so confused"
right now! He's been avoiding me all evening, and when I do catch up he hits me smack in the face and runs off again!"

Louis was hysterical. He wasn't even making eye-contact with Niall. "I knew I shouldn't have pushed him to tell his Mum so soon but I wanna be with him. Why doesn't he want the same thing!? I try to help and all I get is slap in the face? I'm sorry Niall but I can't perform right now. I'm out!"

"What!? No- Wait- He what? That doesn't make any-" Niall started, but Louis was already storming off.

Niall made to dash behind him but Shawna grabbed his arm. "I think I know exactly why Harry did that!"

When Shawna told him he almost caught a fit, and dashed inside the house. "I gotta find Harry!"

****

"Gosh! What happened to your face!?" Zayn shouts, ready to fight someone.

Louis answers in broken tones. "Harry. Harry happened to my face."

"Oh god, we just saw him," Liam adds remorsefully, still buttoning up his shirt. "He walked in on us in your room earlier and he got upset. We apologized but I don't think it stuck. We're really sorry, Louis."

"Where did he go!?" Louis says, smoothing his hurt cheek.

They both point upstairs, and Louis charges up.

We're gonna deal with this once and for all!

"The hell are you guys doing in here!? Where's Louis and Harry?" Calvin says a beat later from behind Zayn and Liam. He had jumped off the stage and come through the kitchen looking for the missing band-mates.

Zayn and Liam didn't have to be told twice. They point Calvin to the stairs, then shoot for the stage.

"The hell is Harry!?!" Niall storms in from the front porch, meeting Calvin at the bottom of the stairs.

AAAAHHHHH!****

They hear, and both turn their heads up the stairs where the noise was coming from.

****

"How absolutely delighted am I to see you again, Lee Lee," Luke took a sip of his drink just as Steve grabbed his hand toward the dance floor.

"Same here," Larissa answered as she sat down, not really sounding delighted at all.

"I do hope you are enjoying the potato pie!" Anne said to the entire table of Paynes as she fluttered around the party.
"Your cocktails haven't changed one bit, Anne!" the woman quipped taking another sip.

Anne held her heart. "Neither has your casserole, Larissa!"

"Oh, it's all lovely!" John answered mouth full as Anne made to move off. "And please tell your daughter we're rooting for her at the London competition on Thursday!"

Anne froze and flickered her eyebrows. "The London what?"

"Dad! I told you she wasn't supposed to know about that yet!" Murrey muttered through gritted teeth.

****

Harry's door was left slightly open, and Louis pushed it all the way.

Nick's head jerked away from within an inch of Harry's face. "This is a private conversation! You can't- AAAAAAHHHHHHH!!"

"LOUIS!!" Harry yelled as Louis threw a punch square on Nick's jaw sending him crashing into the distressed wood of the floorboard. Harry gripped on to the back of Louis' shirt as he jumped down over Nick to finish the job.

"Louis, stop!"

Louis eased off a few centimeters and looked straight ahead at half of Britney Spears' perfect little white teeth smiling from behind the waist of his grandfather's Burberry jacket which hung from a nail on Harry's closet door, Harry still behind him with fingernails almost digging into his back.

"Harry, I'm gonna give you a chance to give me one damn good reason not to smash his head to a pulp!" Louis yelled, not taking his eyes or his hands off the cowering Nick's collar.

Nick snarled from below him, shielding his face with his outer palms. "I don't know what you did to upset Harry, but it's over! He doesn't want you!"

That assumption alone earned Grimmy a solid punch in the eye, palms and all. Also, a screaming Harry was no match for Louis' strength, as he tried and failed to pull him off the screeching boy.

Harry screamed out as Louis got one more in.

Soon Gemma, Cord, Calvin, and Niall were rushing in, and Louis was dragged off by Calvin, who had Louis' arms locked from under his armpits. He let go and stood in front of him, shoving his hand out to keep him in place while Gemma and Cord, who rushed over from her room, dived to Nick's aid.

Harry was in shambles by the time Niall got up there. The blond-haired boy grabbed on to him like he was about to fall off a cliff. "Are you okay!?"

"What happened!? -What did you do to him!?" A drunk Aiden then appeared, shoving Cord away from Nick.

"That rodent attacked me!!" Nick peered through his good eye in Louis' direction just as Calvin finally deemed it safe to let go of the angered boy.

"Get him out of here!" Gemma yelled to Calvin, a warning -and slightly frightened- tone in her voice, as Aiden hurdled for Louis. Calvin timely stepped in the way and shielded himself with his
Aiden threw a hard shove, and Calvin went flying backward into Louis, knocking them both into the wall beside the door. Lucky they weren't hurt badly and were up in time to jump Aiden but the six-time buck-riding champion managed to throw them off with the help of Cord who grabbed them one hand each and shoved them both outside the door.

"Now I don't care what you have to do- Take a walk, run, dowse yourself in cold water- but get the hell out of here and get yourself together!" Cord stretched his arm straight out of Harry's bedroom doorway to the living-room wall blocking the side of the yard where the music could still be heard blaring outside. Calvin squeezed Louis' shoulders hard to tame him and nudged him away from the scene.

"You're no good just like your land-stealing grandfather!" they heard Nick shout from behind his cousin.

"Come again!?" Louis turned back into the room, not really caring for an answer but only wanting badly for a reason to punch the guy some more.

"Okay, that's enough!" a voice rang out from somewhere behind the small crowd. "How dare you come to my house and insult my family!?!"

Anne had answered Nick, eyes like dark beads lacking sympathy for his banged-up condition. "You really don't want to get into who stole what from who!" she turned her eyes on Aiden. "Take him and get off my property!"

Gemma helped Aiden get Nick up and they both slung his arms over a shoulder. "Rodents aren't part of the family, Anne."

Anne had answered Nick, eyes like dark beads lacking sympathy for his banged-up condition. "You really don't want to get into who stole what from who!" she turned her eyes on Aiden. "Take him and get off my property!"

Gemma helped Aiden get Nick up and they both slung his arms over a shoulder. "Rodents aren't part of the family, Anne." Aiden was brave enough to say as they crossed the threshold.

"Gemma, you and I are going to have a talk when you get back," Anne said coldly as Lottie and Trey showed up. An already sobbing Harry got even louder at his mother's statement and started hiccupsing with tears and drool everywhere. Gemma opened her eyes wide but didn't say anything as she walked the Grimshaws down the stairs.

Anne put her hands on her hips, ready to ask questions but as soon as the three started down the staircase Louis was out the door charging behind them. Calvin darted after him but he was actually stopped by Liam and Zayn who were outside all this time doing a duet with Stan on drums to cover for the lack of band members.

"Get him to his room! Now!" Anne orders all the boys around him as he tried to push past them to get to Nick.

At the bottom of the stairs watching the whole thing stood Luke with his arms folded. Larissa, who was holding in a pee the whole time her son was performing, stood next to him, not knowing if it was safe to go up.

Luke leaned just enough to whisper in the woman's ear without taking his gaze off the stairs.

"Remind you of someone, Lee Lee?"

"Hmm," she hummed, not taking her eyes off the scene.

Flashback
The crowds piled into the arena for the annual rodeo show. William stepped out into the back with his high-heeled boots and a half-buttoned shirt that showed all his chest hairs.

"Cartwright," he greeted, tipping his cowboy hat to the young man preparing for a saddle bronc ride. "This ride may be exactly what the ranch needs to get back up to where it was when Em was around! Good luck out there!"

"My pleasure! It's my dream to ride the prized horse! I'll do you proud!" A beaming Robin replied before hurrying off with his flank-men to the chute.

"It's been a year since Callum died but that horse should be in perfect condition now after Harry picked up where he left off and retrained 'em," William said to a serious-faced Perrie who joined him after pep-talking her trainees.

"Ask me how an eight-year-old did it, I have no idea," he smiled as he slid his hand on her waist.

"Harry's a very special boy. This ride is proof of that. Calum tried his best to train the horse, rest his soul, but Rapid Mane is finally back in competition," she answered wedging herself under his armpit.

The arena was full. Corn-dogs smelled up the entire front row as William and Perrie took their seats. His left eyebrow jerked upward just as a stentorian voice roared over the gibbering crowd. Dean Cowell was making his way to a good front-and-center seat.

"That bastard was supposed to kick the bucket years ago. I remember when he made the whole town thought he was dying and held a big celebration in the square. Those were the days!"

Perrie's face lit up. "I remember that! You played your guitar non-stop and Emmett sang his drunken guts out."

A recollecting grin spread on William's face. "Yeah, he lost his voice that night."

"Daddy?"

William turned his head to see Anne busying up to them with a few hot-dogs in hand. "The show's about to start! Get over here!" he called to her.

She handed them each a hot-dogs and took a large bite into hers.

William took a bite of his and eyed his daughter. "Have you thought about what I said? Robin's a decent bloke,"- Anne shot him an irritated look- "Ain't like he was askin for your hand or anything but we had a good conversation about it. He just wants a date!"

Perrie shot Anne a wide grin, mustard on her top lip.

'LADIES AND GENTLE COWBOYS! THE UNSURPASSED, ROBIN CARTWRIGHT!' the announcer boomed through he speaker.

The horse canted out and Anne held her breath.

Then five seconds into the ride, they watched as Robin went flying into the air, crashing on his belly to a pile and skating to a halt, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake.

It took Anne two whole minutes before she closed her mouth and exhaled. With a short glance at her father, who was already sprinting to the ring, she dropped the hot-dog and ran straight to the
William jumped up and followed her to the back of the arena where she disappeared into the bathroom.

He sighed and folded his arms, deciding to wait for her. His eyes drifted to the fence blocking the ring from the crowd and something. Three people he knew were having an argument in the corner behind the bench where no one sat. John, Larissa and their younger brother, Jessie spoke in hushed tones as William got closer to hear what they were saying. William squinted his eyes as he saw something in John's hand while the man gestured as though describing a fall much like the one that just happened. His eyes opened wide and he shot for the siblings.

"What is that!? Give it to me! Now!"

~~~

This is a huge deal, Gem! If you defeat the obstacle course you get to be the champion and you'll have lots of friends and get to go to lots of places!" Harry rambled on in the children's area.

"I'm not so sure, Harry. I needed more practice-

"No! Granddad said you perfect on that last jump! This is it, Gem. You make that four-foot jump and you're a star!"

'GEMMA STYLES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!' the speaker boomed, causing an uproar of applause.

From atop her Welsh pony, Gemma kept turning to Harry just as the trail course began. Judging from her face, Harry knew his little speech had been thrown out the other ear. He clapped incessantly.

The crowd roared and the girl tensed even more.

"How's she doing?" William came up beside Harry on the fence, tipping his hat out of habit.

"Horrendous! It's like she's a stone wall!"

"Don't worry. We trained well!" Perrie joined on the other side of Harry. "She just needs some cheering on."

"WOOOOOHOOOOOO!! GOOO GEM!!!!" Harry offered, and Gemma tossed him a nervous glance.

Perrie added, "YEAH, GEM!! YOU CAN DO IT!" And Gemma's look changed to 'Really? I can?'

"EYES STRAIGHT AHEAD! FOCUS!" William boomed, and suddenly Gemma was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

The games commenced and soon Gemma was riding the trail course effortlessly. At the end of children's leg of the competition, Gemma came out with a trophy.

"I told you, you could do it!" Harry shouted, Wrapping his arms around the girl. Perrie hugged her as well and William scooped her up high in his arms so she could hold the trophy up victoriously.

Gemma was squealing in joy as her friends came over to congratulate her.
"Come take a pic with us, Gem!" her friend, Kacey said, through her instant camera. Her younger sister, Mabel, came in for a quick picture with Harry, blushing as the boy's dimples emerged for the camera.

"So, Gem, you coming to get a burger with us?" Kacey asked, all excited to dine with the champion. Gemma looked at her granddad, and he nodded acutely.

Perrie took over the camera while all the children posed with William. She was about to click snapshot when something jumped in and blocked the lens.

"Come on kids, we gotta go!"

Perrie pulled the camera down to see Anne scrambling to clutch Gemma's arm tightly. The girl was so caught off guard but still held the trophy up to her mother expectantly. Anne yanked her even harder at that and William put his two arms out to calm her. She looked pale with red eyes.

"Anne, now calm down. Let Gemma just take a couple pictures first-"

"Ow! Mum!"

Mabel skipped out of the way as Anne reached for Harry's arm too, ignoring William and dragging the children away through the crowded arena.

~~~~~~~~

That night, in the quiet barn an enraged William paced with the rubber snake in his hands.

"Harry trained that horse well!" he roared. "Rapid Mane was ready! He was fine!" William boomed, every word stabbing down on them. "Em- Emmett loved that horse. Luke, I don't wanna have to think it but, that horse was responsible for Callum not making it to the hospital in time..." He looked at Luke with a held breath, the words have come out more like a question than an accusation.

Luke breathed out a condescending laugh, shaking his head disbelieving. "I'm not gonna lie. I'm glad. Glad that for once that animal can feel a portion of the pain it CAUSED!" he roared, "But you're forgetting something; Callum loved that horse too! I'm glad it got some karma but I would never! NEVER do that to Callum!"

William gave a pursed-lip nod, twirling the snake as he moved on. He passed John without a second thought. A decent young man, John was Emmett's favorite of the Payne's, and William's.

He passed Larissa with a side-eye and stopped in front of Jessie.

"You and Callum were close. You ran a small business together. Ever since Callum died, you've taken a downhill turn; Drinking, DUI's... Maybe it was you!?" he cross-examined the lanky young man. "After all Emmett had done for you!? He dragged you off the streets!" He made to whip him with the rubber snake but Larissa shrieked out before either of her brothers could speak.

"It was me! I did it! I wanted your farm TO FAIL! I wanted you to go back to your father's business and leave the farm for those of who were here to see it grow into what it was!" her hands were grabbing onto the jackets of her brothers' backs, gripping a little tighter on John's.

Eyes big and rubber snake about to snap in two, William evaluated the words, slowly nodding.

"If that's how you feel then-" he started, but the burly blonde wasn't done yet.
"Uncle Em may have initially done this for you but we all know who the rightful owner of the ranch was!"

"Lee Lee..." John appeased.

William slapped the snake in his palm and laughed out in a joyous manner. "I've tolerated you for Emmett's sake, girly. And now here you stand with the audacity to question my authority!? What do you do for this ranch, Larissa? Tell me, I'm all ears? Because according to Emmett's will you get a neat check every month- which is carried out by my nephew, by the way- and I don't see you lift a finger to help around here! Your brothers are here day in, day out feeding, cleaning, and you're what? Watering plants?"

William was mad. Emmett had paid for Larissa's college fees for whatever field of study she chose. Now, William liked her paintings but what the heck was this floral garden business? He preferred to get down and dirty looking after the horse ranch. And why the heck is she out here sabotaging the main horse that was bringing in income to the ranch and by extension her pocket!??

"It's Botany! It's an actual career with lucrative benefits, I don't have to explain myself to you!"

"Lucrative? Well, you better hope so because I reckon that's where your cash will be coming in from now. It sure as hell ain't gonna be from the ranch you tried to destroy today!" he promised, a deep and sure tone driving in the declaration. As he turned to leave, he waved the snake in her face, "I'll be keeping this."

*****

Louis was angry beyond words. He kept his jaw clenched, only huffing as Anne put him to sit down on the desk chair in the study half of his room.

All his and Harry's friends were now piled in, save for Cord who had to cover for Anne with hosting in the meantime. Niall, Shawna, Louis' Australian sisters, and the Except Sweetness crew all stood around him, worried.

Anne knelt down in front him, hands on his wrists, rubbing them soothingly. "What happened?"

she asked.

Louis jerked his brows together for a second, and Harry gulped. He knew Louis couldn't say because it would mean telling her they were a couple.

Louis sat rigid as an old car engine in a garage. Nostrils flaring, looking at Anne, but not looking at her; Harry saw it; all that wanted to be said by him, dancing mercilessly over his features as he sat angrier than Harry had ever seen him. He knew exactly what Louis was seeing in his mind right now.

"He called my brother a rat. That's what happened." Lottie piped up, folding her arms. Louis looked her in the eyes. He barely remembered that part but knew it must have been true.

"No, I mean before that, Lottie." Anne half-turned her head in the girl's direction.

"Yes but he's been calling him that all evening! I don't know but he shouldn't have been invited! The moron!"

"I agree." Fizzie added. "He called Louis names and even told me only rats had our hair color,"
Calvin sported a confused mix of expressions. He had been practically stalking Fizzie all night before they talked and didn't see Aiden get close enough to—Oh! She's covering for Louis, they both are.

Anne twisted her torso around and looked at Harry. "Is that true?"

Not knowing what was happening, the brown-haired boy flung his head up and down. "Yes, Mum!"

She turned back to Louis and stared. "Well, at least you got a few good punches in."

"One out of every three couples are in abusive relationships around the world. I think you two need to think about what happened here today."

Everyone looked at Lottie, her hands doing a calming gesture to emphasize her words. Anne had left the room to get back to hosting the rest of the party, saying she would deal with everything in the morning.

Louis' gaze moved from Lottie to Fizzie to rest on Calvin. "You told my sisters!!?" he covered his face. "Oh my God!"

Calvin raised his hands. "I don't know how she knows!" he pointed at Lottie, "And I definitely didn't tell this one!" he poked the top of Fizzie's head.

"I can't believe you didn't trust us enough to tell us, Louis!" Fizzie shouted, flaring her arms. And it was then Louis saw it; dangling from her neck. Mouth agape, he tilted his head.

"What the hell really happened!" Niall exploded at Louis, breaking his concentration from Fizzie. "What in God's name were you doing with Liam!?"

"What are you talking about!?" Louis burst out.

Cowering in the back of the room, Harry bit down on the back of his hand as his sobs flowed.

Niall eye-rolled. "I don't know how you do it in the city but we don't do like that here!"

Louis was a whirlwind of confusion with the hurt expression Niall was sporting. Liam? What does Liam have to do with anything?

"Calm down, Marshmallow." Calvin retorted. "That guy had it coming! What was he doing in Harry's room, huh?"

"Yeah, well Louis forfeited when he cheated!" Niall spat at Calvin.

"Whoah!" Louis shot his hands forward.

Harry opened his mouth and tried. "No! It was a misunderstanding! I thought he was in here with Liam earlier and I hit him and then Nick saw me upset and followed me."

Louis looked like he saw a headless ghost walking with his head in one hand and feeding it an apple in the other. "That's why you hit me!? Zayn was in here with us too!"

Lottie's brows shot for the ceiling.
Liam squeezed the skin between his eyes. "No, he means after. When he saw me in here with Zayn he-"

"Thought he was you- I thought Zayn was you," Harry finished for him.

Niall glanced at a quiet Shawna and scraped his hand on his scalp. "So, what you are saying is that you thought Louis cheated so you go and cheat in return? Harry..."

"I didn't cheat-" Harry started but was abruptly cut off by a loud snort coming from Louis.

"We need to give them a sec!" Zayn jumped in, blushing unseen in the dim light.

"No way! Look at his face!" Stan unloaded on Zayn, jutting his hand out to the large red mark on Louis' face.

"I'm sorry-" Harry sobbed, but Stan cut across again.

"Don't you use the crocodile tears with me! I knew Louis shouldn't have come to this creepy ass town!"

"Excuse me!?" Harry shot, stifling in his tears.

I know what you're up to!" Stan answered, on the beat. "Louis doesn't have to put up with this shit!"

"Stan," Louis finally said. "I love Harry. I can't change that."

Letting out a flattered grin, Harry replied with a breathy, "I love you too."

"Do you?" Louis answered, the skin over his brow bunched up. "Then what were you doing with him?" Louis then turned to the others, "I think we do need a minute."

Everyone piled out of the room, leaving a timid Harry looking around for cover from imminent yelling.

Louis massaged his biceps. "Everyone keeps asking me what happened," he walked over and leaned on the partition, "But I should be asking you. So, what happened, Harry? What happened between yesterday and today to make you go so far as to let that -" Louis stopped himself as there was no word bad enough to call Nick.

"I saw you with Liam in the party and I got paranoid. And I know you didn't do anything but then I walked in on Liam and Zayn and-" Harry said in tears but Louis pushed in again.

"Do you have any idea how hard it was to get my dad to give me the rest of the summer to figure things out? I have, by the way. I realized I want to stay as close to you as possible and if that means staying in Doncaster then I'm great with that. I wanted- right after we told Anne- to just sit and discuss it with her and see what we come up with, I don't know. I just know I want a future with you. And then you go and ..." It was difficult to form the rest of the words, and they were already coming out swishy and nonsensical so he just stopped. It was only a split second of contact but that second meant everything to Louis. That split second of that snake's lips on his boyfriend was raging war inside him.

"I never would have let it happen," Harry took his queue to defend himself. "If you had waited a sec, or even been there the first time..."
Louis flicked his eyes on him. "Tell me what you mean by that."

Harry looked down at the slightly eaten floorboard, sticking his shoe in the crevice. "It's not the first time he tried to kiss me."

If Louis was angry before, his blood was certainly boiling now. "When?"

"At the Cowell ranch after-party."

Louis' face was red hot and he offered a disgusted laugh, scratching his chin as he looked at the ceiling.

Harry went on. "In my defense, Louis, we weren't together that time."

"The hell we weren't. We had already kissed!" Louis' eyes were stones of seething and his tone a mixture of emotions.

"Kissing someone doesn't automatically make them yours! That's basically the point I'm making here!"

"I asked you to be mine first!" Louis whined. "I spilled my guts to you about how I felt, and then you had to go to that stupid party!"

"I called you to come get me before anything happened! Why are you overreacting!?"

"Harry, because we made a deal!" Louis gestured, shoving an invisible bowl at him. "I'd spend the rest of the summer here with you building up the courage to tell your mother about us so we won't have to look suspicious whenever we want to see each other in the future. I can't hide with you forever. I want to run in the sun with you. And I certainly can't be worrying if when I leave for college your going to be snogging around. Look, put yourself in my shoes; What if it was me, and you saw me kissing someone else- which will NEVER happen, by the way- What would you have done!?"

A lump swelled up in Harry's throat, and he thought about how Louis giving Liam a simple hug made him so angry. Why does Louis get to get away with that? They used to be a couple. They had...sex. Harry has only ever been weirdly pursued by Nick, so why was Louis getting away with being so insensitive?

"Are you saying I'm a slut because I almost kissed some guy that wasn't you. Is that what you think of me? You're so high and mighty- like you would never-" he squinted his eyes, "How am I supposed to know you won't do in the future!?"

Louis' face morphed into a cross between 'are-you-for-real?' and 'I'm-the-one-who-was-cheated-on-here!'

Harry clutched his own shoulders, and tears welled up in his eyes. Louis was so angry and Harry knew he had messed up, but his voice was so cold toward him. He felt isolated from him.

Louis, sensing, he was too harsh, came closer to him, cupping his chin.

Despite his insecurities and inexperience, Louis had never before made Harry feel like he wasn't good enough for him. He was. He wanted to be...

He swallowed as Louis spoke.
"I don't want you kissing anyone. Or even getting close enough to be kissed," the older boy said slowly but harshly.

Nodding wildly, Harry grabbed his arm and moved closer to him until their lips were almost brushing.

Looking down at Harry's lips and breathing heavy, Louis suddenly took a quick step back.

"I love you..." Harry tried, moving his hands down from his biceps to his hands, locking them with his.

Louis bit his lips as he looked at Harry, re-enforcing the hold.

"I love you too but I can't- I can't kiss you right now," he said, voice raspy but soft at the same time, "'cause then it'd be like we both kissed Grimshaw."

He semi-circled around Harry as he let go of his hand and made his way to the door.

The second Harry heard the door open behind him he couldn't hold back his emotions anymore. He let out a choked up sob as he covered his mouth, falling to his knees. He heard the door slam shut, and removed his hand from his mouth, wailing.

As he cried he felt a pair of warm arms wrap around him and heard a soft voice whispering "Sh, sh...It's okay..." The moment he heard it he gasped out a loud sob and gripped the embracing arms tighter around him.

Louis combed his hair back from his eyes, and kissed the back of his neck, whispering how much he loved him against his skin. His heart broke when he heard his boyfriend crying and he just could not leave no matter how angry he was.

He rocked him gentle and comforting, pressing kisses to his hair as well, but the boy just latched on to him crying his eyes out. Wanting to hit himself in the nose, Louis eased his way in front of Harry and gripped the sides of his head. Without a pinch of hesitation, he leaned in and kissed him hard and vigorously...on the lips, stopping at intervals only to tell him he loved him over and over again while the sobbing boy caught his breath.

"Harry, I'm sorry, Love," he said pressing another kiss. "I couldn't walk away from you. I love you. I'll never stop loving you. I should've remembered that it's not just about me, you're affected too. I changed your whole perspective on life when we met. You know no more than I do about where our love leads. But I'll tell you this: My heart is yours forever."

Harry threw himself onto Louis and held him tightly like he never wanted to let go.

"I love you so so much. I want to be with you, and only you."

"You hit like a girl, by the way," Louis got in.

A laugh escaped the curly-haired boy and he had to stifle it under a sorry face.

*****

Luke watched with a highly raised eyebrow as Harry dumped his blanket and a bunch of clothes in a garbage bag, spinning around to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything. Steve walked in backward with two large suitcases and set them by the bed where Luke shakes his head and proceeds drag off all the remaining bed sheets and pillowcases. Harry looked at him.
"What? I don't know what you've been doing on these sheets!" Luke answered throwing them on the floor and pointing them up for Harry to get rid of.

The boy rolled his eyes and grabbed the heap up, dragging them out with him.

"I think we all know what teenagers do on their beds, Luke," Steve prompted, pulling off his sweater. Luke smiled. Steve loved to wear white and for the life of him, Luke couldn't figure out how they always stay clean after hours of partying. Steve then sauntered over and tethered to his neck, pressing soft lips to the sensitive flesh. Luke threw his head back to make more surface area.

"I think what you meant to say is, 'Thank you, Harry, for letting us stay in your room for the next two weeks...' he moaned as he pecked. Luke gave the longest eye-roll as Steve suddenly pulled away. "I gotta shower!"

Luke turned his body to the closet as Steve closed the door, and stopped dead. "O. M. G. Well I'll be damned!" he exclaimed, sliding over and lifting the arms of the dark blue Burberry jacket hanging in front of him. "Uncle Em..." he whispered, eyes frowning in curiosity. He folded his arm, running the fingers of the other over the double-breast buttons, and stopped. The edge of something white was peeking out from the lap-pocket.

He tugged it out and read the words. A smile reaching on his face, he quickly tucked it back in all the way.

"What are you doing here, Luke!?"

He was yanked out of his thoughts, turning to see Anne standing there, still in her dress, with a fresh set of bed sheets in her arms.

A sly grin appeared on his face. "Hmm, I can't put it any other way, I simply missed my family! I missed Gemma... you... Harry..." he said the last two names with anything but nostalgia.

"Oh, cut the crap!" she said, eyes on the roomful of luggage, way too much for just a night's stay. "And don't give me the 'Gemma asked Steve to come see the band' crap! What are you really doing here!?"

Luke's grin disappeared like a deflating cake. "How long did you think you could keep him here without me finding out?"

"I saw you at the funeral," he said to Anne, "but I didn't think you had the guts to actually contact him- Or you to actually let him come here," he tilted his head to the side, eyes fixed on someone behind Anne. She turned around to see Mark standing in the doorway, eavesdropping.

"This is just my grieving son fulfilling his mother's last wishes. He has a life to get back to, and to that end, my son and I will be out here first thing Monday morning!" the man growled with a small condescending smile before moving on the bathroom.

Anne shot Luke a look of pure terror, but the curly-blond just let out a chuckle that grew into a full-on cackle. "Not to worry, cousin. Louis isn't going anywhere, anytime soon."

"I'm the one who brought him home, not you. Now, you somewhat respected my father's wishes while he was alive, and I beg of you now to respect mine! Louis will know everything when the time comes but on my terms, got it!?"

Luke was taken aback by her outburst. She looked stressed and utterly tired. "It was supposed to be tonight but as you saw, everything took a different turn," she massaged her forehead, a hitched sigh
blasting out of her nostrils.

Luke looked at her thinking, Oh my god, hope she isn't going to have a melt-down again. Not now!

"I want you to know, whatever plays out; I am [italics] on your side," he gives her an awkward half-rub on the back then took his hand back.

"I've been keeping this horrible secret the whole time I just don't know if I can actually tell him." she sobbed.

"It's not a horrible secret, Anne. It's beautiful. Two people were in love and did everything they could to be together and remain relevant in each other's lives when they couldn't. And they got a child as a result. A beautiful child that they loved and did everything to protect. That's what you tell him, Anne."

"Oh, it is horrible. You don't know what this causing, Luke. I feel guiltier every day that he stays here. Yet I can't just let him leave."

*****


Louis pov

"Is this place even stable?" Louis asked, shoving one of Niall's lanterns into the darkness of the ghostly room.

"Oh, shut up, it's not that old!" Harry countered, taking a brave step forward.

The party had ended somewhere around midnight and everyone associated with the house - except Gemma who still hadn't returned from going off with Aiden and Nick- had helped clean up before trudging off to bed. Louis' sisters had relocated to Gemma's room, so Dan could take the guest room to make space for Luke and Steve in Harry's room. Louis had told his dad to take his room saying he and Harry were going to stay in the cabin with Calvin, Stan, and Cord again- Niall had taken Shawna home, and Zayn left with Liam and his Mum- but Harry had other plans, leading him instead to the old dilapidated living quarters next to the barn. It was a two-story building with six rooms, kind of like a small motel, but no one had occupied it since they closed down the rodeo ranch. It was an eyesore against the otherwise sunny back-drop of the fields behind the round-pen but Anne couldn't bring herself to break it down.

"Granddad's workers used to stay here. It's creaky but the board is still sturdy- AAYEE!!"

Louis rushed around to see Harry's foot properly gone through the floor.

"Fuck! Harry!?!" he shouted dropping the lantern and coming to his aid.

"I'm fine! I'm fine! It's so hollow there are not even splinters in there! It's just skin!" Harry said of the floor where he pulled his foot out.

Louis checked for blood and gave a sigh of relief. "OH, 'It's not old', he mocked.

Harry shoved his hand over his mouth, "Shut up!"
They laughed, and Louis grabbed his waist. "Let's get out of here. We can sleep in the cabin with the other boys."

"No! I-" Harry swallowed, bending to pick up the lantern. "I kinda wanted to be alone...It's been a long day..." he drifted off, setting it on the nightstand.

Louis couldn't argue with that. It had taken him almost a half-an-hour to get Nick's dried blood off his knuckles, all the while feeling completely disappointed in himself for showing that side to Harry. That side his mother had helped him bury a long time ago...

Louis flashed his eyes wide at the mounds of dust illuminated on the stand. "Harry, your asthma..."

Harry smiled, giving a little body-shake. "What do you think I brought all these sheets for?"

Louis watched as he threw the fitted sheet over the bed and covered it with the loose one, then he dug in the garbage bag for the blanket and threw it on top of that. Louis dug inside his own garbage bag and tossed the pillows on the bed as well, wondering what to do next.

"Are you sure the second our weight hits that bed it won't go crashing through the floor?"

Harry laughed. "It's the ground floor, so we won't have far to go."

Louis didn't know why but he was finding it incredibly difficult to breathe properly. Maybe he had asthma too. He sat at the foot of the bed, back facing the boy and listened as he heard shuffling in the bag again. His heart started racing as he knew he was preparing to change for bed.

"Do you want me to go outside..."

"What? Why?" Harry said, slight annoyance in his tone.

Louis just shook his head to brush off the topic and shut his eyes, trying really hard not to picture what happening behind him as he heard clothes sliding and shuffling. He decided it reasonable to get out of his party clothes himself, and started undoing his shirt buttons. He pulled it off leaving his white t-shirt underneath, then started fiddling with his trousers, which was proving a bit harder than he anticipated as his fingers shook like an air conditioning motor. Slightly lifting himself off the bed to get the trousers off he sank back down and pulled the legs off leaving his Tartan-plaid boxers on.

He sat and waited for Harry's shuffling to stop but for some reason, the boy's movements had increased in the background. The bag got noisier and Louis sensed clothing being thrown on the bed and being scooped back up simultaneously.

"Okay," Harry said in rap. "You can turn-", there was a slight pause, "around now."

Louis flew up and swung around to jump in the bed, but froze mid-action. Harry stood in front of the lantern with his hands crossed over his bare chest, holding his shoulders. A tuft of hair strayed down his forehead, threatening his left eye, a look in his eyes that read like a nirvanic note of music or a Shakespearean verse.

Louis lowered his gaze further down. It took every breath away from him to see Harry in nothing but the pink panties that haunted his dreams ever since he first saw them.

His heart was beating so fast.

"Fuck!" He whispered with force. He stared at Harry in amazement. Louis was at a loss for words.
Gliding toward him, he reached out to touch Harry's face and he moved backward. He looked like he was about to burst into tears.

"Harry..." Louis tried to finish the sentence but the words wouldn't come out. He tried to hold Harry but he wouldn't let him.

"No," Harry kept moving backward, and then he started to cry.

Louis couldn't take it anymore. He lunged forward, grabbing Harry's face, and pressing his forehead into his.

"Harry, you're beautiful," he cried holding Harry's head tightly. "You don't ever have to feel ashamed in front of me. How many times am I going to say it?"

They were both now a crying mess. Harry kept trying to pry open Louis' hands from his face, but he wouldn't let go. He needed Harry to see. He need Harry to finally know... so he didn't let go. Even though he wanted so badly to touch him elsewhere.

Harry was so tough to break, but Louis knew it was worth it. He knew he could just seduce Harry and take what he wanted but he wouldn't. Not while Harry was falling apart. He needed him to stop hurting. He needed him to be okay.

"I'm the one who should be ashamed for showing that horrible side of me," Louis cried.

Harry started shaking his head rapidly. "I don't blame you for that."

Louis fought with himself to breathe evenly as he felt the boy gradually ease in his grip.

Harry stared into Louis' eyes and made a move to wipe his tears, and Louis kissed his hand. Harry then dropped it and looked at Louis, looked at his mouth, and just as Louis parted his lips to speak again, Harry pushed his head forward and connected their lips.

Louis smoothed his hands down to Harry's shoulders, to his waist, and rested on the small of his back. His right hand tethered to Harry's hips, playing with the edge of his panties like a circling wolf daring not to go further, waiting for permission.

Then Harry pulled away.

"Harry..." Louis said grabbing his hand.

Harry spun back around and shrugged, looking down at himself. "I'm trying, Louis."

"You don't have to try," Louis breathed, reaching for his jawline. Harry let more tears out, closing his eyes to Louis' touch. "We don't have to do anything. If you feel pressured-"

Harry's eyes snapped open, giving Louis a look. A look Louis couldn't place.

"Louis, can I be completely honest with you?" Harry asked, voice almost a whisper. Louis nodded, and Harry exhaled. "If I asked you to have sex with me for every reason you think I might want to, would you do it? Because I don't want you to think I just want to because I'm scared to lose you. I am scared but you said you were staying, and I want to be with you so much. If we weren't at this uncertain place, and just a normal couple with no obstacles I would still want to have sex with you right now." Harry bit his lips hard, swallowing. "So would you?" he did not wait for an answer before rattling off again, "Because you said you wanted to tell my Mum about us... but I'm not ready," he said, wet eyes moving all over Louis' face. "I'm not ready to make her a part of this.
This, Louis, is my life, and I at least want the chance to properly live it without anyone's input." As Harry spoke, the saline sheet rose higher in his eyes. "Before it's all taken away from me."

Louis nodded wordlessly, and more tears escaped his eyes.

Harry let out a grin.

Then he cupped Louis' face in his hand and planted the softest kiss on him, drinking him in. Louis took it, letting out an involuntary moan. Then before Louis knew it he was being pushed toward the bed. He pushed back gently, just enough to be able to sit instead of fall back on the bed, and shifted himself to the middle of the sheets. Harry kept coming and ended up half on top of him, coming in for another long, heated kiss.

Stopping for them to catch their breath, Harry raised himself up a little and started pulling away Louis' t-shirt.

Louis sat there frozen, not knowing how to process what was happening, so Harry made all the first moves. He kissed Louis all about his neck and face, and moved his fingertips along his chest, taking even more of Louis' breath away from him.

It took all Louis' will power to snap him out of his trance so he could be able to move with Harry. He threw his arms around Harry's waist and held him close, not wanting the moment to fade.

The next thing he knew, Harry was pushing him down and tugging at the waist of his briefs. His hands then slithered to his balls sack, and Louis let him touch him there, accepting his mouth as he lowered his lips to his wet tip.

Louis just laid there, powerless to Harry's lips. His mouth suctioned so tight he wouldn't come up for air. *He wants my cock so bad,* Louis thought. He wanted it as bad as Louis wanted his mouth on it.

Then Harry took the base of it in his hand and started jerking and sucking at the same time. Louis let out noise at this that he was sure sounded like a wounded animal.

Gripping the bed sheets with one hand, and grabbing Harry's curls with the other, he lifted himself halfway, looking at him, waiting for him, hoping he feels his urgent grip and comes up for a kiss. He does this so good, he thought, letting out necessary moans.

Louis felt so weak from the bliss he was in, he yanked his cock out of the boy's mouth.

"I can't. I can't take it anymore. You don't know what you're doing to me," he said, breathing deeply, still in bliss. Even though his cock was no longer between Harry's lips, he still felt him there like an invisible mouth still sucking and pleasuring him beyond words.

"Fuck, Harry! I need you," Louis sat all the way up and pulled Harry closer to him. The boy was still on his knees in front of him, and he moved them forward until he was close enough to kiss him gently on the lips. Louis grabbed the back of his thighs and reeled him in even closer, savoring the soft, wet mouth. "But we can't, I don't have any condoms."

Harry ripped his face away to say, "I have a few. Don't ask me where I got it." He pressed his torso at an *eleven o'clock* angle on Louis, and chucked his hand under the pillow, pulling out a handful.

They both look at each other with wide eyes, and Harry let out a laugh at the look on Louis' face.

That look was actually a series of looks; surprise, curiosity, and realization, in that order as he
suspected it was either Gemma or Niall who gave him the items. Nerves were in there too, and Louis tried so hard to hide it. His heart beat so fast and his fingers struggled to stay steady; he was flabbergasted by the fact that a boy like him who had a bit of experience could be this flushed and nervous now. It was like being with Harry over the past few weeks had wiped the slate clean and made him into a virginal mess in front of the boy now. It felt so new and fresh and Louis didn't know what the heck he was supposed to do anymore.

Shakily taking one out of Harry's hands, he noticed they were a bunch of different ones, and he raised his brows at the choices. "Glow in the-" he started to enunciate but was met with a dismissive kiss on the lips.

Louis took his lips away from Harry's and set them on his Adam's apple, leaving pecks as he worked his way down to his stomach.

"I don't want you to think we have to..." he said, coming back up.

"Really? Because I'm pretty sure I came on to you first," Harry dead-panned, a finger to Louis' lips. "I even brought condoms!" he said condoms with much enthusiasm.

Louis breathed in, frowning. "Um, Harry...condoms aren't the only thing we need to..." He let the remaining unspoken words linger.

Harry looked at him aloof for a moment then opened his eyes as big as could. "Oh gosh! I didn't think of that! How could I-"

Louis grabbed his cheeks and kissed him, still nervous as hell. "You are so cute, you know that?"

Harry shoved him away. "Stop that! I'm not trying to be cute! I'm trying to be...sexy! And now we really can't do anything- What?" - Louis was now growing a wide grin- "What's that look?"

Louis leaned in and whispered in his ear, "There are so many things we could do besides fucking."

Harry let in a gasp as he propped his hands on Louis' shoulders, knees sinking into the mattress. "Don't you think we should restrain ourselves and wait till another-"

Louis cut him off with another equally charged whisper. "This is me restraining myself."

Peeling the dainty underwear from Harry's smooth hips and stopping them at this thighs, Louis reached out and grabbed the fabric between Harry's legs, bunching it up in his left hand. The wet crotch of the panties' contact with his palm made his heart beat like a vintage alarm clock.

The fingers on his right hand moved up to his arse and slid between, causing Harry to let out a foreign noise. Louis felt the soft little hole clench, and his eyes burned with a fire he knew not how to out, neither did he have any desire to.

"I want you," he groaned, moving his left hand to hold Harry's cock, still feeling him up with the other. "- to lie on your back," he finished out of nowhere, making Harry hitch an exhale.

The boy wriggled in his hands and obeyed. He made to remove the underwear from his thighs and was met with a strong grip on his hand.

"Don't," Louis said. "I like it just like this."

Louis propped the boy's legs up in a knee bend and put his hands on his outer thighs, dipping his head between and breathing the underwear in.
"Louis..." Harry all but clearly spoke.

Louis ignored him, taking another long drawn out whiff before licking a long line down the underside of his thigh to the start of his right arse cheek.

Harry's butt cheeks clenched so tight he was almost off the bed.

"Harry, are you uncomfortable?" Louis asked in a freakin dreamy, surreal way that scared Harry so much he frantically nodded a reply.

Dropping his thoughts, Louis came up and slumped himself down on him, their faces almost touching. "What's wrong?" he asked, sounding slightly annoyed but normal again.

"You sound really weird right now!" Harry said with a lopsided eyebrow.

Louis blew a sigh. "You're not the only one trying to be sexy here, Haz."

Harry whined. "You sound like the guy from that Sesame Street song 'Would you like to buy an 'O,'" he sang.

"Lefty?" Louis said, teeth wide. Harry giggled and he threw a pillow at him. "You are such a child right now!"

"I'm sorry! It's the first thing that came to mind!" Harry said, genuinely sorry but still grinning.

Louis sat up and raked his hands through his hair; head hung and soles touching. He didn't think he wanted anything more than to be close to Harry right now. The boy just shoved everything off Louis' desire shelf and placed himself on it without even knowing it.

The silence in the old room was stone gritting, and pleasant, and casual all at the same time, and Harry shifted not knowing what to do next.

"Um, maybe, we should-" he made to climb off the bed. But a then two arms were now flying toward him, engulfing his face. Their lips molded together and they pushed into each other without hesitation.

Louis soon overpowered and then Harry was slowly falling back into the bed. They kissed like that for a good ten minutes with hungry sucking to Harry's neck and venturing hands to his privates. Then his head left his neck and he started licking and kissing his perineum.

"Louis," Harry squeaked, wriggling under him. Louis pulled away and Harry was panting. "Can we stop a second? I feel a bit overwhelmed."

Louis flew up. "Do you want your inhaler?"

"No, no. I just need to-" Harry stopped talking to breathe deep. Louis waited with his own breath held, and when Harry's eyes closed with slower chest movements, he finally exhaled.

Trying hard to go crazy at the vision of Harry lying on the bed with his underwear still halfway down his thighs and semi-hard cock leaking a small dollop of pre-come, Louis waited. Harry's head tilted upward a bit and they locked eyes. Then Harry's sweaty palm was reaching for Louis' sweaty forearm. The boy swallowed and gave a nod, seeming to know what Louis' eyes were asking; 'Do you want to continue?'

A happy Louis crawled all the way down on top of him, one hand on the pillow beside his head.
and the other gripping both their cocks together. He kissed Harry heatedly on the mouth while gently jerking up and down with his hand.

Harry escaped the kiss to let out a curse but Louis shoved his lips in again, "Shh...Don't say anything."

"Can you promise not to be mad?"

"What is it?" Louis asked, brows furrowing. A sweaty Harry was now safely tucked under Louis' arm with his own arm resting on his torso. They had been lying like that for ten minutes after coming, not having penetrated at all.

"I sort of already had lube in the bag."

Louis' mouth widened.

Harry shut his eyes and burrowed into Louis' armpit. "I got the coldest feet ever in the history of cold feet!"

"Harry! I am never forgiving you for this!" Louis giggled. "I'm just kidding, I'm NOT glad you lied about it but I kinda got cold feet too. I was so scared. I'm glad you didn't buy the 'o'."

"Would you like to buy an 'O'?" Harry drawled out in the sexiest drone. Louis smiled and pecked him on the nose.

"I don't like 'Os'. I'm more of an 'I' guy."

Harry took a moment to get it, then burst out in the biggest cackle when he did."Or maybe a 'P.'"

"Well, that's basically an 'o' with an 'I' on it.

Harry grinned. "Yeah, it's both. You can have both."

Louis burst out laughing, his head flying back almost hitting the lantern.

"I love you," Harry said out of nowhere. But Louis could feel the words crash into him like a strong breeze washing him clean.

"I love you, Harry. So much." Louis emoted, breath taken away. They held each other for a while; Harry pressing his ear into Louis' armpit.

"You know, my dad used to stay in this room," Harry murmured into Louis' breast.

"Really?" Louis said, his left arm around Harry in a cradle, stroking shapes on his arm, his right arm looping over his waist under the blanket.

"Yeah, when uncle Emmett hired him."

"And this isn't weird for you?"

"No! If anything I wish he was. It sounds creepy but -I always wanted to know how he would have taken my being gay."

Louis' eyes opened wider but Harry didn't see. He's saying the word gay effortlessly now...
"Wherever he is," Harry continued, "He knows. And I'll never know what he thinks. If he's proud, or disappointed, or ashamed..."

Louis frowned and dipped his lips to his hairline. "Don't- No. He's proud..." he whispered, taking all Harry's fingers in his hands and counting on them. "He's proud, and elated, and telling everyone up there 'That's my boy! Do you see him there with his boyfriend all happy and blissful?' No father could be prouder than me.'"

He knew what Harry's dad would say because he knew it was what his own mother would say. He dared not mention that his own father now knew about them too. He figured Harry would start to worry and it would ruin the perfect moment they were in now. Plus his father's reaction wasn't worth mentioned either.

Harry bent his neck up at him, dimples present in the lantern light, and Louis' heart just went diving far from the shallow. He raked his hair back, sending his neck even farther backward, and leaned to kiss him, slow.

I feel so close to you right now," Harry whispered when they pulled apart. They were alone and didn't need to whisper but even as they did they could hear every noise, every breath coming from each other. "I just want to forget that the world exists right now; my mom, Australia,-Louis smiled to himself, feeling endeared by Harry using 'Australia' instead of 'your dad' to be sensitive to Louis already missing one parent- "anyone named Grimshaw,- Louis gave a pointed 'hmm' at that one- "Luke..."

"Yeah, about Luke-" Louis gasped, "I still can't believe Steve Aoki's here and married to your cousin. I still can't believe you have a cousin." Louis was about to address the weird feeling he knew him from somewhere, but Harry jumped in-

"I know, I should have told you about him, but to tell you the truth I threw him out of my mind a long time ago. He hates me and I hate him. End of story."

Louis rubbed his shoulder. "Look now, it can't be that bad?"

Harry sighed. "He did something horrible that I'll never forgive him for."

Harry's voice cracked and Louis stared at him, concerned.

Harry sighed again. "You remember the horse I told you about; Rapid Mane? He was your granddad Emmett's horse and I told you Robin fell while riding it and the horse went lame?"

Louis nodded. He remembered Harry mentioning it when he first came to Champton.

"Yeah, you told me your Mum had to put him down..."

"Yeah, well before that competition something bad happened -that I don't wanna talk about- and the horse went crazy and Granddad couldn't fix him so I did. I really fixed him. But then he fell and a couple of years after that my Granddad died and left Luke in charge. He had him put down and I lost my zeal to train horses. Granddad's horse trainer, Perrie, started up her own business and wanted me to be her protegee but I didn't want anything to do with it. I had just lost my granddad and Luke took that horse from me too right after. If he had stayed things would have gotten worse. We didn't need him around. He's the most selfish person I know- only looks out for himself." Harry curled up under Louis' arm and closed his eyes. "I don't wanna talk about him anymore. Let's get some sleep."

Okay... Louis soaked in the new information. Seems to me this Luke guy is part of the reason Harry
A vibration on the floor jerked Louis upright in the bed, and he rubbed his eyes to make out his surroundings. His moist, naked body paired with the warmth of the curled up blanket next to him triggered his memory of what had happened. He forced out a breath as he shoved his hand in his trousers for his phone. Five o'clock!? he thought as he opened the screen-lock. He had six missed calls and an urgent text from...Gemma?

A quick eye on Harry, sleeping soundly, mouth wide open and lightly snoring, Louis eased out of the bed and threw last night's clothes back on.

"Hello? What-" he started once he had reached outside the building, but was interrupted by incoherent rambling, and...crying?

"Wait- calm down! What happened!?” he said hoarsely into the morning mist, a rooster competing with the phone for volume. "Okay, okay, I'm on my way- Stay on the line!"

Up in the house, a sleepwalking Luke dragged himself downstairs and put on a kettle. He turned up his nose at the sound of Mark's boisterous snoring on the couch. As he opened the drawer for a spoon, a smile spread on his face as he remembered why his arse was sore. He pressed his other hand on his neck. He loved when Steve left love bites there. He was surprised he let the man touch him at all in Harry's bed, the weirdness of it, but once his tongue came into play he quickly succumbed. Comfortable bed, he thought now as he moved with his coffee cup to the back porch.

He slumped down on the chair and lifted the smoking cup for a sip.

"Ahhh! Holy shit!" he cursed, steadying the cup as the hot contents scalded his hand. He had tumbled it over at the sight of Louis' phone light speeding across the otherwise completely dark backyard.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so I absolutely love this new show Yellowstone. I totally drew energy for the William of this chapter from Kevin freakin Costner in Yellowstone. I love that man so much I can't even! Comments? Kudos? Please? Pretty Please? how was the smut?
Louis took the SUV knowing it would make less noise pulling out of the yard since Anne's bedroom window was facing the front road. He hoped she was still sleeping for the flashing lights not to alarm her.

The wheels sped down the lonely main road and came to a stop in the middle of nowhere, no houses or buildings or even a streetlight for about half a mile.

The door was thrown open and a shaking Gemma climbed in without so much as a coat to fend off the cold country morning sting.

Louis glued his eyes on her. She grabbed all of her hair back and sniffled. "Just drive."

Looking forward, he shifted gears and turned around for home again.

"Talk to me. Do I have to go clear him out?"

"You'd done enough of that last night," Gemma reminded.

Louis shrugged and momentarily looked out his window. He made a sharp return and quipped, "How did you end up here? Have you been walking all night from that ranch?"

"God, no! He threw me out of his car!"

"What do you mean? While it was moving!?"

Gemma rolled her eyes and sighed. "He's not a murderer, Louis! Of course, he stopped the car first!"

Louis squinted his face. "And that makes it so much better!?"
"What is up with you!?"

Louis slammed his hands down on the wheel. "Forgive me, here, but I'm just trying to understand how he could just leave you by the side of the fucking road!"

"I told him about me and Cord. We talked about it and he was angry and scared of what Simon might say..."

"Scared?" Louis frowned. "Bastard should be talkin you out of it. I still think it's a bad idea."

"All I have to do is make the jump and I get my granddad's ranch back. There's just this one thing that went off plan," Gemma said, building momentum. "I'm pregnant."

The car screeched to a halt as Louis mashed brakes hard, holding the wheel tighter. The car stopped and neither said a thing. He turned to her not knowing what to say. She just stared at him with an 'are-you-trying-to-kill-us' look.

"Is it...?"

"It's Aiden's, so you have to keep what you know to yourself," Gemma answered in a heartbeat. "No one knows except you and him now. You have to promise not to tell anyone. Especially Mum."

Gemma was in tears now. Louis stared her down. All this time they all thought she had the flu. Aiden? God! You mean to tell me she actually slept with that guy? Louis wanted to beat him down like he did Nick all of a sudden.

"I won't let you jump!" Louis emphasized, stretching his hand over and rubbing her shoulder. He closed his eyes, "You don't just leave a pregnant woman in the middle of nowhere at night! What kind of animal-"

At that Gemma buried her face in her right hand, full on crying now. "I told him thinking he would say not to jump," she wailed, shaking her head to gesture, "- and he'd take care of everything because it's his baby, but he said that his uncle has a lot of money on that jump."

"Of course he did," Louis choked out a laugh. "Of course he does."

"Aiden said I should get an abortion before Simon finds out. I can't do that because one; the competition is only a few days away, I won't be fit. And two; I can't just do that, it's a baby, you know."

"If I don't jump, I'm screwed because I need that ranch, Louis!"

"Gemma, I'm sorry but, what's there to discuss? You're not jumping, full stop. It's too risky for both of you!"

Gemma stopped crying all of a sudden like she got a renewed sense of determination. "How are you going to stop me, city boy?" she said with an otherworldly vigor. Louis swore he was now conversing with a different person from a minute ago. "If you say anything to Mum I will tell her about you and Harry. I'm not getting an abortion but I have to make that jump!"

Louis chose to ignore the threat she proposed to him and Harry, and said; "If you fall-"

"If I fall it'll most likely be after the horse goes over the obstacle, and I get the ranch back. If I don't fall I get a kid on top of that so it's a win-win!"
Louis' mouth flew open. "And you're willing to risk falling and losing the baby for a bloody horse ranch!"

"Louis, didn't Harry tell you? I've done trail jump competitions as a kid and I have yet to fall off a horse, so Yes- Yes I am one hundred percent willing to risk it!!!!"

A fire blazed through her eyes as she said the words, and Louis was suddenly reminded of Jean turned Phoenix from the X-men. The skin between his eyes folded as he placed his hands back on the wheel. As a kid, she says.

Louis knew she wasn't in her right senses. Pregnancy hormones must be all over the place making her talk like this. But her telling him in the first place knowing he would be angry may have been her way of reaching out for help.

"If you know you wanna do this then why did you tell me!?!"

"I told you because I need you to stay in Champton! After I jump Mum will find out I'm pregnant and she'll need you to keep her from killing me and Harry!"

Louis mashed brakes again. What? "Harry knows?"

"No! And you're not gonna tell him! He'll never speak to me again if I tell him I'm pregnant and still jump!" Gemma said, eyes fixed on a shaken Louis. "Look, we know our mother; even if Harry doesn't know I'm pregnant, she'll still blame him for agreeing to me jumping in the first place!"

"Gemma..."

"We both know if your dad gets you in Australia none of us will ever see you again! Harry will never see you again! As I said, it's a win-win, even for you!"

"You can't expect me to keep this from Harry?!" The look she gave him in reply to that made Louis go silent for a while, thinking seriously of taking her straight to the hospital, or the nearest mental institution.

"And I still don't get how you see Anne signing away half her farm to that leach!" he remembered to add.

He looked at her and it dawned on him. "That's where Luke comes in, isn't it? Harry said your granddad left him in charge?"

Gemma sniffled. "Granddad left the ranch to me and Harry, but not Mum. She doesn't have a say. He left Luke as Executioner of his will. That will consist of a set of rules of who can do what with the ranch. I have yet to take a look at it but Luke said it's just me, him, and Harry. I need Luke to sort the papers so Simon can be a partner."

Louis furrowed his brows. "Whether she's in that will or not she's the one keeping the farm running. It's not right to go behind her back."

"What's not right is Mum closing down the ranch and causing me to have to make a deal with the devil in the first place."

Louis couldn't believe what he was hearing. Gemma was really willing to let her baby be collateral damage in a power quest that even Louis saw she couldn't win.

And asking him to keep a secret like this...
"You're not jumping in the competition, Gemma. There other ways you can get what you want.

"And how is that? Not everyone has a daddy to run to for everything little thing they want!"

Okay, definitely pregnancy hormones.

"Okay, my father didn't die, but he did leave me and my mum, and took my sisters halfway across the globe where they had to be the bloody adults all this time. So if I want to bloody hell ask him for whatever the fuck I want, I sure as fucking hell will!" He stole glances while saying it, and when he was done he stole one more and realized she was staring at him from under raised brows.

"Gosh! I thought I was the pregnant one?"

Louis' mouth dropped open a bit, and he drove on, shaking his head.

******

Harry woke up to a biting coldness. He turned to Louis on the bed. Only Louis wasn't there and he landed on the empty space.

"Lou?"

He sat up and looked around the small room. No Louis. Through the window, the newly emerging sun shining a golden light over the horizon. The wick in the lantern was out now, and Harry pulled the covers back over himself, laying back again. He let his hand wander to his panties, giggling to himself as he remembered the night before. He had never experienced anything like that before. He wanted so badly to go further but his anxiety had gotten the best of him. He got scared thinking he was going to get an asthma attack but Louis took his time to make sure he was as comfortable and pleased as possible.

His mother's voice sounded from the stables, and Harry flew out of the bed, dashing on his clothes. He dug around for a coat and didn't find one in his bag so he searched through Louis' things. He found a pretty baby blue cashmere cardigan and threw it on.

Rushing out the door, Harry mashed brakes and almost fell backward; Luke was sitting on the boulder by the round pen with his legs fancy-crossed, casually not looking at Harry.

"Looks like it's been a long night for everyone," he said, not a muscle in his face moving.

Harry wrapped the cashmere tighter around himself and ran a hand through his hair.

"How long have you been sitting there?" he asked timidly.

Luke's half-lidded eyes moved over Harry's face and neck, a ghost of a smile appearing.

Harry searched him with his eyes, then rolled them when he realized Luke couldn't possibly know anything.

"Who is it?" the man questioned. "Fizzie, or Lottie...or...."

The 'Louis' hung precariously in the undertone.
"What do you want!?" Harry snapped, and a large grin spread on Luke's face like soft butter.

"You know, Steve and I are keeping a secret that I'd give anything to be able to tell the world. You don't have such a large burden, Harry. You're surrounded by people who love you. People who aren't out to loaf off of you and exploit you. You have a chance of a normal life."

"You have no idea about my life so just stay out of it!" Harry vocalized.

Luke recoiled and stared amazed. "And here I was thinking you were just angry I took over your room."

"Don't get too comfortable," Harry retorted, marching off to the house. He heard the faint snort escape the man behind him and rolled his eyes.

*****

Six a.m and all the boys were still asleep in the cabin except Niall who had left with Shawna after the party. Gemma was now resting in her room; she and Louis had tiptoed inside so as not to wake Mark up as he snored on the couch, and Louis watched her go up the stairs and shut the door just as Dan came out of the guest room with the sleepy babies. They were all dressed in their coats and smelling like baby oil and vapor-rub. Louis walked them out to the car and kissed his brother and sisters goodbye before Dan placed them in their car seats, and turned to offer Louis a hug.

"Good luck, Louis," the man said as Louis gripped his back, fighting back tears that just didn't want to get back in their ducts. "I may not be your dad but I want what's best for you too. If that's Australia then so be it."

Fizzie and Lottie said goodbye to the babies and the older set of twins hugged Dan as well. Dan's tears ran free as he didn't want to let them go. Louis knew he was thinking of every meal, every holiday, every trip to the pizza parlor downtown, and Louis had to look away to Fizzie as she ducked her head in the backseat. While she kissed Ernie's head, the child reached out and grabbed her necklace. Louis noticed the colors and make of the pendant, and grew curious.

"Where did you get this, Fizz?" he asked, holding it up in his fingers.

"Calvin gave it to me!" she said sprightly, a smile emerging. "Said he got it from you. But you're not getting it back!" she teased. "He gave it to me, so."

"Do you mind if I borrow it?" he asked, eyes on the thing as it fell back down. "I'll give it back before you leave tomorrow."

"Sure," she said, looping it off her head. "Wait- before I leave?"

Oh oh...

"You're- you're not going?"

Louis brought his index to his mouth to shut her up in front of Dan and the others. Then he whispered in her ear, covering it with his hand, "I'll tell you later."

Once the car doors were shut and the babies realized Louis and the girls weren't going with them
they started screaming, and Louis made to reach in the window to comfort them but the car was already mobile. Dan gave a quick, distracted wave as he backed out.

He tried extremely hard but as soon as the wheels scrunched over the gravel and turned out of the yard and away from the ranch, Louis broke down.

*******

Wind. That was all Louis got to grab as Harry darted away from him in the sheep pen.

"Har-

"I woke up to a cold and empty room!" Harry whirled back around, a warm baby bottle in his grip. "You just left me there! What if I had fallen through the floor again!"

Louis swallowed back a lump and dropped his gaze. He had to take the lashing out. He hated himself for it but he knew he had to keep Gemma's secret. But still, after what he and the boy shared he felt even worse about keeping this from him. Keeping this from Anne. He was lucky she took his side in almost ruining her party, and shuddered at the thought of her throwing him out on his ass when she found out he was sleeping with her only son and condoning her only daughter's pregnant hormones' influence in putting her unborn child in danger.

I don't know how much longer I can do this...All of this. It wasn't like Louis didn't already have a lot on his plate; between his Dad's urgency to drag him out of the country, and Dan letting him have it for 'abandoning' the babies and then only allowing Louis a few minutes to say goodbye before driving away with them at six o'clock sharp an hour ago, Louis was a walking china glass, even the wind had the potential to break him now. Louis feared it might have already happened.

"Now you're concerned with the safety of the building?" he said in a rude manner, walking off on Harry. He was so fed up with his hot and cold antics.

"Excuse me!" Harry called behind him. He couldn't even come after Louis as the lambs surrounded him now. He turned to face the boy while he sat trying to feed Penelope.

"You heard me!" Louis tossed him a side-eye and started walking again.

Harry dropped his arms. "Louis!"

Louis spun around with angry lines across his face. "What, Harry!?"

"I got scared!" the boy said shakily. "I thought you changed your mind and didn't want me anymore. It's not like I gave you much reason to stay with me last night." Harry dropped his head in shame.

"I thought we cleared all that up? Look, I enjoyed every minute with you last night. We're a whole package now. Get that through your thick head!" Louis did an angsty motion with his hands, as though pretending he was squeezing said thick head.

Harry shoved his arms back in a fold, looking at Louis like he wanted to hit him again.

“Orange is sick,” Harry said of the lamb that was born on the night of the Cowell party. “She
doesn't want her milk today."

Louis stooped down and petted the small thing. She was wobbly and reserved, and Louis began to worry. He looked at Harry's drawn eyebrows, there because of concern for the animal, and Cotton started *bah-ing*. Harry's face softened and Louis took that as an opening to wrap his arms around him.

"I'll give you your milk in a minute," he cooed at the lamb as Louis nibbled at his neck. "Just as soon as Louis' done giving his apology."

Louis rolled his eyes. "I actually wanted to ask you to borrow your guitar pick."

"My guitar pick?" Harry processed, already shoving his hands in his pockets to look for it. "It's, uh, I think it's still in the room in one of my jeans. But why-"

"LOUEHHH!" Zayn's voice suddenly called out, cutting him off.

"I'll tell you later. When you find it let me know." He planted a giant kiss on his mouth before skipping out of the pen.

****

Louis met Zayn and Liam by the gazebo helping Cord and Murrey pack up all the musical equipment and furniture. Josh was there as well wrapping up all the cords and wires for the sound system, while Steve helped John stack up chairs while taking the time to have an insightful conversation with all the boys about the music business and where they could potentially end up if they pursue a full-time career. He even asked the boys if they knew what they wanted to do after high school.

Zayn made it pretty clear he was destined for the stage and Liam just nodded in agreement. Louis knew Calvin always wanted to be a lawyer, and him sharing this information sent Luke's -who wasn't helping at all just sitting like a prince in a chair- ears up to the conversation.

"Oh well, if you want advice and stuff I can provide that because you know, I am a lawyer."

Louis heard a loud snort roll out from someone, and cocked his head wondering who dared be so rude. He puffed out a laugh when he saw that it was Harry walking up to them. The boy started punching the keys on Louis' keyboard while Stan was saying he wanted to be a banker.

Niall said a social worker, and Harry stopped and thought when everyone looked at him.

"I don't know, I've always wanted to work with animals, I just don't know as what yet. Maybe a veterinarian?"

Louis smiled proudly. Harry had mentioned that to him once. He momentarily 'left' the scene thinking what a great vet Harry would make.

Everyone looked at Louis next. Ah? And his mind went blank...well, not completely, as his only thought was...Harry. But seriously, Louis had known before he came to Champton exactly what he wanted to be, a psychiatrist like his mother. But now he wasn't sure anymore. All he really cared
about now was whatever Harry cared about. Whatever Harry wanted to be was what Louis wanted to spend all his energy making happen.

"You don't have to answer now, Louis," Steve assured in a tone hinting to Louis he was aware of his current grief and how it currently clouded everything else. Harry moved closer to Louis and brushed his hand supportively. Then Anne and Mark joined them, and he was two heads away from Louis again.

Murrey glanced at Louis. "I know it's tough being separated from your family right now, Louis. Listen, we're going to Roger's later, you should come."

"Yeah, it'll be fun," Josh jumped in the conversation. Louis eyed him and the guy smiled, going back to his wires.

Harry, who was listening, looked around at everyone else. "Are you guys going too?" he asked with a hopeful tone.

Liam shrugged sadly. "We're all under eighteen."

Zayn raised his eyebrows. "Even if we got in, we couldn't sneak you in, Harry. You'd never pass for eighteen."

Luke returned snort times ten and almost fell off his chair.

Harry's middle finger made a snarling appearance, which Anne caught.

"Hey! Watch your manners, young man!"

****

Later after the yard was clean, Stan and Calvin left for Doncaster with the SUV, and Louis tagged along with Cord and Murrey to Roger's bar. Not an ideal way to spend a Sunday afternoon, but he needed to get away from his father's eyes beating down on him all the time. And If he was honest, he needed to get away from Harry too.

He lit a cigarette as Cord and Murrey started up at the pool table. He knew he had completely lost it the night before with Harry acting out, Dan yelling at him, his dad, and nearly ripping Nick to shreds. He felt between a rock and hard place with Harry and his sister's secrets, and his dad pushing for him to leave. Louis honestly didn't see how he could stay in Champton knowing he harbored all these secrets that could potentially hurt Anne and have her lose trust in him. He didn't see how she would give him her blessing with Harry after all of it. But how could he leave? The weight of the same secrets driving him away was the same weight keeping him there. He loved Harry, and he cared about his sister and the unborn child she was carrying. He carried the weight of love, life, and death in these secrets and he really didn't know how long he could bear it.

Of course Cord and Murrey only knew some of the parts about him and Harry, and basically thought he was having a hard time with his mother's death and saying goodbye to the babies again, which was true and only added to his stack of woes.

A few beers later and Louis was singing at the top of his lungs to Total Eclipse Of The Heart in the jukebox and climbing onto a chair in the crowded, cigarette-misty bar. Murrey was banging his fist
on the table cackling away at him, and Cord had staggered away to get another round.

He jammed up to the counter, beating it in tune with the song. "Three more, please."

"No, that's enough for today," was the surprisingly stern answer from the bartender.

"What? It's only five p.m! The night's not even started!"

"I said. That. Is enough!" The bald-plated man looked at Cord with venomous ocean eyes. "You get that boy and you get the fuck out of here!"

The bartender then turned his attention away, and Cord was left flabbergasted as the man served the other customers. He squinted his eyes confusedly.

"Dude! What the fuck is your problem!? I asked for another round! Now, your job is to-"

The man rolled up his sleeves to reveal his toned veined arms and slid from behind the counter. "You wanna walk away from this, kid."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! What's going on here?" Murrey bumped up to the counter. The bartender's gaze shifted to Louis now dancing on the pool table and singing to Mr. Brightside.

"He takes of **HIS** dress now!" Louis sang, pulling off his coat and swinging it around in the air as the crowd jammed around him, cheering him on.

The three's mouths fell open and the bartender shut his as he refocused on Murrey. "Just what the hell do you think your doing bringing him in here!?"

Certain that he was witnessing a homophobic comment from a man he knew since he was little, Cord tried to squeeze in but then Murrey started talking to the man.

"He's having a rough time right now. Thought he needed to let loose a bit," Murrey explained as a drunk Josh scooped Louis off the pool table and swung him around like a married couple before setting him down.

"So sit him down!" the man barked in a whisper, pointedly gesturing with his hands. "Have a talk with him. Don't bring him here!"

"I'm sorry. I totally forgot- it won't happen again," Murrey stammered.

Cord was drunk. He knew that much. But he was sure that wasn't causing his confusion at the moment.

"I'm sorry, am I missing something?" he asked, trying to figure out why they were talking like they have regular conversations about Louis.

The two looked at him.

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**Louis' pov**

Louis found himself dizzy, staggering forward as Josh twirled him around. The place was dark with flashing blue lights and only sweaty alcohol smells mixing in with cigarettes and barbecue. He turned around, looking for the two he came with, and felt a hand on his hip. He didn't think much of it- I mean, he was staggering and stepping on shoes- but the hand he thought must have been
automatically placed there to stop him falling, sort of... didn't move. Well it did, just not...off the spot. As a matter of fact it seemed to be moving further around his curve.

Whoah. Okay. He looked Josh big in the eyes. The guy wasn't looking back at him; he was focused on the jukebox.

"I'm gonna put another one in," he slurred in Louis' ear, but still not looking at him. "I'll be right back. Don't move!"

Suddenly feeling dazedly sober, Louis started moving. Fast. He was bumping into people as he slugged to the bar. Cord and Murrey came into focus and it seemed like they were having a heated discussion with the bartender, who wasn't behind the bar. Weird. The man caught him approaching and seemed to regather the fact that he was supposed to be selling drinks, and with a pat on Murrey's shoulder he scampered back to work as Louis walked up to them.

"I think we need to get out of here!"

Taking his gaze off a petrified-looking Cord, Murrey nodded to Louis. "I couldn't agree more."

******

Harry came in the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, throwing Luke a side-eye. The man was grating a carrot in front of the counter full of vegetables.

Harry took out the milk and grabbed a glass, propping himself up on the dining table.

He swallowed some milk. "Steve seems like a nice guy."

Luke lifted his head for a second to smile then went back to his carrot. "He is."

"So, when did you get married? Steve says we can't take pictures of you two together. Do you have any pictures of the wedding?"

"Last year. It was one of those really secret things that nobody can know because it's a celebrity thing," Luke said without looking up.

"You mean, he's in the closet?" Harry asked knowingly, taking another mouthful of milk.

Luke looked at him. He pursed his lips at him in reply and took up a head of cabbage. "Is there something you want, Harry?"

Harry observed wordlessly as the large chopper sliced through the cabbage. "Are you happy living like that so long? In the closet?"

"Yes and no. If we were out we'd never have a moment of privacy. But sometimes it's hard not being able to just grab dinner in public like other people."

Harry's gaze dozed off on the thought. He related.

Luke served him a questioning look, and sighed. "Look, I care about you, Harry. I care if you get your heart broken. I know a thing or two about that... Puppy love in the workers' quarters- I've been there."

Wow. That was the first time Luke brushed on the topic of Callum. Like, ever. Harry wondered if
he should even entertain such a conversation with the man.

"Did you talk to Jessie last night?" he asked casually, trying anyway.

"You mind talking about something else?" Luke said quietly. Harry thought as much. Even if Luke did want to talk about it, it would never be with Harry.

Harry looked at his hair, tucked in a low ponytail, wondering how his own hair would look like that long. That blonde. Harry looked at Luke's rings, comparing them with his own. He recognized the one on his middle finger to be his granddad's.

"Harry!" Anne exclaimed as she came in from the stables for a glass of water. "Get off the table! And why are you just sitting there!? Help him!" she said clogging down the glass and dashing back outside.

Harry skidded off the table.

"You still have that?" he nodded to the ring, pulling on an apron.

"Actually, this ring is why I'm here..."

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**Flashback** -

Labored breaths grew heavy in the room as William lay on his bed, tucked between his sheets by Anne.

Luke was summoned and Anne left the room.

"Luke, my headstrong cousin," William said in barely a whisper as the man sat on the long bench put to accommodate visitors. He started taking off his ring with great effort as his hands were shaking uncontrollably.

"Take this. Don't bury me with it. I'm already going to meet my love. It should stay with you..." he couldn't manage to finish without taking a good few breaths first.

Luke gasped as the man shakily placed it in his palm. "Shouldn't you be giving this to Harry?"

William closed his eyes and answered, "You suffered a great loss and I know how that feels. Let this remind you of the lessons you learned while here on the ranch. I wish you would stay for those kids, but whether you go stay or go back to the Cowells, you aren't the same person you were before you came to stay with us, Luke. You found love... and lost it... same as me..."

Luke's face twisted into a sob as he clasped his hand over William's.

"You understand everything you need to do?"

Luke sobbed. "Yes. I'll do exactly as you wish, cousin," Luke sobbed and redirected his eyes to the doorway where Harry was peeping in.

"They're your family and they're going to need you now more than ever."

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"I'm here to give it to the rightful heir," Luke said lowly. "I think Will knew when he gave it to me
that I'd have to come back here and do this.”

"You're here because of Gem, aren't you?” Harry sighed. He knew it wasn't just for the stupid party.

"Smart boy. But Gemma's not the one he really wanted me to give it to."

Harry got mad at that. Luke always used this condescending tone with him that made him feel so unimportant. He frowned, his cheeks turning hot as he remembered William’s speech to Luke on his deathbed.

"Granddad wanted you to stay and run the ranch," he said heatedly.

Luke froze for a millisecond and went about his food prep as normal. "Granddad wanted a lot of things he didn't get, boy."

Harry was just thinking up how to answer that when the front door opened and Cord and Murrey tumbled in with each of Louis' arms hung over their shoulders. They both glued their eyes as the boys carried him up the stairs.

"Keep it," Harry then asserted, throwing off his apron and side-eyeing the man as he walked out. "I already have something of my Granddad's."

Luke did not answer. He just looked at Harry with the same mysterious, unreadable look that he always did.

*****

He caught Murrey and Cord whispering outside the bathroom door. It was halfway open, and he spotted Louis half naked sitting under the shower.

"Harry!" the boy shouted joyfully, arms wide on seeing him. Cord and Murrey broke apart and rushed to close the door.

"Harry, where's your mother?" Cord asked.

"She's out on the farm with Robin." Harry drew eyebrows together tilting his gaze to the door.

"Once upon a time I was falling in love! Now I'm only falling apart!"

"Is he singing...Bonnie Tyler?"

Cord glanced at the door and sighed loudly. "Great, go get Louis some fresh clothes. She can't know he's been drinking!"

*****

**Louis pov**

Dinner was a symphony of clinking plates and stuffed mouths and side-eyed glances. Louis missed
Ernie and Dory throwing food at everyone so much. He sat between the twins and directly opposite Harry. The boy kept sending large forest colored eyes and tiny stiff smiles each time he glanced over until Louis just stopped glancing over at him in the first place. Then his head started throbbing.


The men looked at each other. Harry sat next to Steve, so he tilted his head a bit to see Luke's face.

"Well...I was doing a show in Paris and was Luke here had a backstage pass with a couple of friends."

Louis watched as Harry's eyes moved curiously from staring at the couples intertwined hands to his mother's face.

Anne smiled. "That's nice. I wish Luke had said something though. I would have baked him a wedding cake."

Louis saw the twitch in Harry's shoulder on hearing that.

"Mum?" Gemma asked out of the blue, a kind of dread in her tone.

Everyone looked at her.

"There's something I need to tell you."

Harry's eyes turned to Louis like a magnet. Louis felt his big, and index toe wrap around his shin under the table for comfort before the storm. He let his other leg rub against his in response.

Gemma started telling her mother everything about her deal with Simon and the jump. All except the one thing Louis wished she would...the baby.

When she was done the room was so quiet, all eyes now on Anne, whose expression was blank and pale and unblinking.

"Harry supports me, so you should too," Gemma pushed, and Louis's eyes widened because Harry's toes were now pinching him extremely hard.

Anne took a hard bite of her meal.

"And what makes you think I'd agree to something so preposterous?" she chewed without looking up from her plate.

Louis shared a glance with Gemma, then Harry. His headache was throbbing more now.

"Mum, Luke is in charge until Harry is eighteen, remember?" Gemma tried again. "Then Harry and I will have all the say together."

Anne pursed her lips and tossed her head haphazardly at Luke. "Did you know about this deal?"

Luke gave a timid glance at Steve before drawing out a nod. "That's why I'm here, actually. To-

"So you told my daughter that she can just give away my father's ranch to your friend Simon," Anne said like she couldn't believe it herself.

Louis' guard went up immediately. "Friend?" he asked a little too loud. Mark clenched his plate
tightly in response, but no one was on him.

"I went to school with him," Luke defended. "I had lots of friends!"

"Plus, he used to work for Dean," Harry in dotted to Louis.

"Dean Cowell happened to be in charge when I took the job, but it was My uncle's William's dad's-business for years before that," Luke retorted heatedly.

"You're still friends with his son," Anne said pertly. "I saw you two chatting away at the party last night. I bet you stayed in contact with him for the past five years as well," she said with a voice that made Gemma drop her head.

Luke threw down his fork-cleaved hand on the table. "For God's sake!"

"You can't be seriously thinking of signing away half the farm to him?" A still drunk Louis jumped politely.

Mark cleared his throat very loud in response to Louis' comment. Anne squinted at him but couldn't help the smug smile from emerging on her face from the man's discomfort. Luke stifled his imminent smile so good no one saw an inkling of it.

"Look, it all depends on this jump! If she succeeds then we can talk about who is signing what!" Luke said and picked up his fork dismissively.

Everyone was eating in silence for approximately three minutes when-

Aiden came bursting in. He stopped dead in his tracks as he panted, hands on the door frame.

Louis' face burned like hot brand at the sight of the boy gluing his eyes on Gemma.

"Get out!" He stood up fast, pointing to the entrance.

Anne looked at him, then at Aiden.

"I need to talk to you!" Aiden said to a startled Gemma, voice broken up and slurred.

"You're not welcomed here!" Louis shouted again. "Get out!"

"Louis!" Mark exclaimed, but Louis wasn't listening. He yelled at Aiden who completely ignored him.

"Gemma! Gemma, I have to talk to you! Did you tell your Mum yet?" Aiden pleaded, tugging at her sleeve.

"Don't you touch her!" Louis shouted halfway over the table.

Harry's hands hovered over the table, eyes large with bewilderment.

Then Gemma flew up. "Louis! It's fine!" She threw her napkin down and sped out with Aiden, shutting the front door.

A fuming Louis pulled his arm away from Cord's grip and threw a punch in the air.

Mark flew out of his seat. "Louis, what is the meaning of this!? Why are you acting so unbecoming!?"
Louis' eyes caught Harry's. He was now standing and looking at him with a troubling gaze. He shifted to Anne who looked just as deeply concerned.

Louis dropped his shoulders in surrender. After all, he could only hold so many secrets.

"Out on the main stretch to the Cowell mansion-you know there aren't any streetlights for about a mile-? He just left her there- by the side of the road!" Louis mumbled emotionally. "I had to go get her this morning before the sun came up!"

A few seconds passed as the room processed, and the next thing Louis knew, Cord was darting out the front door without a word.

With a disturbed but slightly smug look at Mark, Anne followed suit.

***

"I went back for you but you weren't there!"

Aiden bounced about in the cool air out in the front yard. Gemma pulled her jacket around her.

"I had to call Louis. He knows about..."- Aiden's eyebrows shot up, ready to flip- "He's not gonna say anything!" Gemma assured.

Aiden tightened his lips as he looked at her belly, and gave an accepting nod.

"I'm so sorry, Gemma. I didn't mean what I said. What I told you to do...I was scared. I talked to uncle Simon today. Offered to jump in your place but he wouldn't hear it. Laughed in my face."

Aiden's jaw tightened, indignation crawling on his features. "He doesn't believe in me. He never did!" Aiden's face was so bitter with the thought of always having to prove himself to his uncle.

"But I swear I don't want to be that guy to my own kid. We were both using each other and had fun in there, but it's way too real now. We-uh-we have a kid. I can't just let you jump! But I can't tell uncle Simon about the baby. He'll cut me off!"

Gemma's eyes were wide and worried. If they tell Simon then the deal she made would surely be off. Simon wouldn't risk jail time allowing her to trail jump in her condition. Gemma shook her head; she made a dumb deal that left her pregnant for a guy she didn't love, and to top it off, no ranch for all her trouble.

The front door burst open.

"Get the hell off my property, Grimshaw!" Anne yelled. "You left my daughter out there!? In the dark!?"

Cord was already rushing to block him from Gemma. "Best leave before this gets messy, Grimshaw."

Aiden laughed, his facial expression yearning to tell Cord he was fighting a losing battle, dying to throw Gemma's pregnancy in the guy's face but he knew he couldn't risk anything going wrong with the jump, especially since he couldn't take her place.

"I'll call you, okay Gem?" he said instead, now backing off and turning to his car.
"Tell your uncle he'll be hearing from me!" Anne shouted behind him as he pulled out to the road.

****

Mark was outraged. "Louis, your behavior is unacceptable! This is how you behave on your very last day here?"

Louis pressed his palms on his face. He'd just about had it with his father and-

"I don't want to go to Australia," he said, removing his hands, plain as though talking about the weather.

Mark recoiled. "Sit down, you're not thinking strai-" he caught himself before he said the rest of the word.

Louis let out a loud sob and covered it with both hands. He dashed out the back door to the porch where his father stormed after him.

Mark grabbed him and he broke down in his arms. "I want my Mum! She's the only one who understood me! I want my Mum now, the joke is over! Where is she?- Mum?" Louis screamed into his shoulder frantically.

"Louis!" Mark wrapped his arms around him and held him tightly. "Louis, listen to me! This place is stressful for you and the girls. Our family needs to be together right now. Look at you, you're in pain!"

Louis cried louder, the words coming out cracked. "Ernie and Dorie are family too! And you're asking me to move to another country and leave them!? Dad? I CAN'T!!!!"

Quick footsteps were heard by the door, and they looked to see Harry staring. Mark saw him in the corner of his eye.

"Can I have a moment alone with my son!?" he barked at the boy.

"Don't talk to him like that!" Louis told him, emotional but not loud.

Fizzie was behind Harry and the boy eyeballed Louis not to say anything further about the two of them.

Mark looked at Harry and nodded at Louis as though coming to a realization.

"And what about your sisters, Louis?" he tried again. "You're gonna choose these people,"- he cocked his head to Harry-"over them!? They don't know you! They never spent their life trying to protect you!"

Harry opened his eyes big as if begging Louis not to answer that. Harry hated that term 'these people' like they were aliens or something. But he didn't really blame the man. Who wants to live in an old town where there weren't even adequate street lighting?

Fizzie tugged Harry back inside. Lottie had taken the twins upstairs and Steve and Luke had relocated to the living room where Anne and Cord were now discussing with them the Trail competition and Simon's offer.
"He can go to hell, Luke. Simple as that!" Anne was saying. 

Harry looked back to Louis and Mark was and whispered to Fizzie, "Sure it's a good idea to leave them alone?"

Fizzie replied, "My Dad's not a bad guy, Harry! He just comes across that way. He loves us. They just need to come to an understanding."

****

"I thought it was that Liam guy you stayed for but then that scene at the party with Anne's kid...You know when she learns the truth she won't be happy, right? You know she won't want you here anymore? She'll be glad if you leave with me. She already hates my guts."

Louis shook his head, wiping his eyes. "I don't care. I'm not leaving him."

"Harry is young. He's about Fizzie's age, not correct?"

"Yes, Dad, but-

"And you're willing to throw away your future for someone so young and immature? He slapped you in the middle of a parking lot, for crying out loud!"

"You don't get it- He's the only thing that kept me together since that day Mum d-" Louis couldn't say it. It was just too painful to say out loud.

"And that's good. That's what friends are for! Not to dally around and get yourself in trouble! What has gotten into you to get involved with someone so under-aged!!"

Louis dropped his head in defeat. There was no way his father could ever understand if he thinks Louis somehow took advantage of Harry.

Mark made to lift his chin but he slapped his hand away.

"Don't touch me! Is that how you see me? Like I'm some kind of rapist?"

"God, no! That's not what I meant! What I meant was that you are young too but you're at a stage in your life where you can make better decisions-" the man enunciated.

"...and move to Australia," Louis finished for him. "I know you wanna make up for leaving me and the twins behind but I can't go now. It's too late." Louis swiped his fringe out of his eyes. "What are we gonna talk about, Dad? I don't know you, and you don't know me!"

"You're my son! Of course, I know you... what's best for you!"

Louis pointed to his heart. "What was best for me died. And so what's best for me now isn't in Australia. It's here. He's here."

Mark looked straight into his eyes, his mouth agape with a slight sweat beading on his mustache, both unblinking.

"Okay. If that's truly how you feel..."He scratched his head, defeated. "And there's nothing I can say...?" He still prodded, holding on to a grain of hope.

"Dad, I can't go with you. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry it had to come to this. I know I should have come clean about all of this before you had to see that at the party."
Mark gave a slow calculating nod. Then he sighed. "Son, if this is really what you want to do-staying here and seeing where it leads- then I have to let you do it. I have to do right by you kids. I just don't want anything breaking you further than what's already happened. I don't want you hurt again. All I was trying to do was prevent that."

Closing his eyes as Mark pushed his short tuft of hair fondly, Louis wiped his eyes and contained his crying. A few rubs on his back while Mark went over some plans he had to change to accommodate Louis' decision got the boy a bit calmer as well, and they headed back inside.

*****

Harry sat on the single chair in the living room with a front and center view of Luke and Steve cuddling on the couch. Anne had gone to clean up the kitchen and Cord was arguing with Gemma on the front porch.

Steve leaned in and rubbed his noses together before completing with a kiss. Blinking it away, Harry's gaze lowered to his phone, and he was checking his messages to distract himself from the sight when an idea hit him.

SNAP!

Luke's head swung around from Steve's embrace to see Harry holding up his phone. Luke looked like he wanted to combust at the sight of a menacing Harry looking back at him with a look of pure threat.

He lifted off the back of the chair fast to grab the phone but then the door swung open and Louis and his father came in. Louis had stopped crying and was strides better. Harry watched as Mark rubbed the boy's back supportively.

********

Everyone had settled, some watching TV and some asleep in their rooms. After dinner on a Sunday night wasn't usually this quiet but then they'd never gotten such an eventful dinner before.

Louis was alone in the kitchen playing candy crush on his phone while eating a pack of M&Ms, with a face like something was on his mind.

After the older boy had spilled about saving Gemma it was like something ignited in Harry and he suddenly wanted to go all the way with him. So after his mother had gone to bed he snuck a couple of blankets -and other items- in the truck, and came looking for the boy.

He ran his fingers nervously over the dining table edge. "Do you wanna get out of here?"

Rubbing his temples, Louis looked up at him dependently. "I don't think I should be driving. I'm sort of hungover from the bar, and I don't know but I think Josh was flirting with me."

"Josh? From church, 'Josh'?'" A small cloud of rage rose on Harry's cheeks as he considered that for a minute. "How many drinks did you have?"

"I don't know, six?" Louis wondered himself.

"Did he touch you?" he asked slowly, quietly. Louis rolled his eyes around the room, obviously trying to remember, or maybe trying to look for the easiest way to say yes.

Okay, this is unacceptable! Harry yelled inwardly. I have to move now!
"I can drive," he clipped. "I'll go slow, I swear," he added when Louis gave him a face.

******

**Harry's pov**

Harry parked the truck on the edge of the road by the lake. He smiled smugly at Louis, who gave a little mocking clap, and dumped all the M&Ms on Harry's head in lieu of champagne, or confetti. Harry cursed out a laugh and picked them all up, shoving them in Louis' coat pocket. He tried to feed him one but Louis had his elbow propped up on the window and wasn't completely present. If anything, he looked pretty sad.

"So, that's where you went this morning? To pick up my sister?" he opted to eat the candy himself. "Why didn't you just say something when I asked?"

"You mean when you freaked out?" Louis replied sarcastically. Harry fixed him a stare.

"She made me swear not to say a thing," Louis said haplessly. "I'm sure she's gonna yell at me when Anne's not around."

Harry accepted that answer. He was inwardly squealing from the fact that Louis brought her home safe *without* all the added information and didn't want to argue now. Smiling to himself he changed the subject to Louis' dad. He was also really high off how Louis stood up for him back there with the man.

"So, what did your dad say?"

Louis gave a little smile. "He let the whole Australia thing go. He'd convinced Dan to sell our house some time ago but now he says he'll try to stop that transaction from going through so I can stay there if I want. I guess he didn't want to leave anything for us to come back to. He said he'd cancel the deal he made for my college transfer as well. So, long story short; I'm staying."

Harry looked him all over as if thinking then said, "So you're staying with us? Like, for real?"

Harry was so sure this was it, this was the last night he'd get to spend with Louis before he got shipped off to another world. The days spent being positive about Louis wanting to stay and him declaring that he refused to leave had, a minute ago, felt like eons, but now this was really happening. Louis was really staying on the same soil as Harry. He gripped his shoulder excitedly as his mind started racing with ideas.

"You can stay here and maybe you and Gemma can be roommates at the dorms and you'll come home together. Or maybe you'll come home more often than her because she hates Mum. And I can come to visit you sometimes..." Harry's voice trailed off when he realized the boy wasn't listening to a word.

"What's bothering you?"

Louis gave a half-hearted shake of the head without even looking in his direction.

Harry reached for his hand. He fumbled with his fingers a bit then leaned towards him. He was hoping the boy would take a hint and close up space for a kiss but he was as clueless as a blind crab in a bucket.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he tried, a tad less enthusiastic now.

Louis tightened the grip on his hands. "I just really, really miss my mum right now."
Harry blinked and placed his other hand to add more support to the hold. Okay, he needs me now. If he wants to sit here all night and cry, I have to be prepared for that.

"She's proud of you Louis."

"No, she's not. I know she's not right now."

"Why not? Because of me?" Tears burned behind Harry's eyes. "Do you think she'd be mad you're not going with your family?"

"No, Harry. Never. I will never regret this."

Harry bent his head down. Maybe I should've let him go. What kind of selfish person takes someone away from their grieving family?

"It's just... Harry, please promise me that you will love me no matter what. No matter what happens, no matter how mad you may get at me."

"Why would I be mad?"

"Just promise."

"I promise. There's nothing that could make me hate you. You have been nothing but honest and sweet this whole time."

They sat in silence for a while fiddling with each other's fingers and listening to the radio. Louis' mood hadn't lifted much in the space of time but he wasn't crying either so Harry had hope yet.

He looked out into the night. The stars were out, giving a mild light to the tranquil scene. The only sounds were crickets and frogs in the bushes.

"Do you wanna go for a swim?"

"Nah. I'm not up for it."

Harry blinked disappointedly. He didn't really mind not swimming it's just that Louis was always so keen to jump in every chance he got. The fact that he was passing on it now spoke volumes in the crappy mood he was in. Harry started to wonder whether he should follow through with his plan or not. He didn't want to make things worse by assuming Louis would be up for sex right now much less their first time which was supposed to be special and distraction free.

He settled on still spreading the blanket out on the grass. He figured they'd just cuddle and watch the stars or something until Louis was better, then just go home.

He felt the boy's eyes on him as he climbed out an opened the back door to pull out the blankets. He sauntered away with them and hoped Louis would just follow eventually. He heard a cigarette lighter flick as he spread the blankets out and sat down facing the lake thinking a strange thing suddenly; what would he do if he had a choice to bring back either his dad or Louis' mother?

He scratched his head. He never knew his dad but he loved him a lot and he felt that loss his whole life. What he'd do if he ever had the chance to have at least one conversation with the man. But Louis? Louis had his mum his entire existence and were close. Louis said he told his mother everything. They were like best friends. And to lose her after all that?

Harry wiped his eyes. He realized he couldn't even begin to scratch the surface of Louis' loss. So he
would choose her. He didn't have to think about it. He was accustomed to one living parent. Louis wasn't. Hotter fresher tears pushed through and he found himself sniffling just as he heard the truck door shut in the distance.

He quickly passed the sleeve of his t-shirt over his face as Louis' footsteps drew closer. Soon the boy was sinking down on the blanket next to him on his left. Harry's eyes fluttered, and he inhaled deeply; the scent of Louis' lingered cigarette smoke was causing something animalistic in him, and his heart started beating as he remembered he had left the condom and lubricant back in his coat in the truck. He shut his eyes momentarily to get the thoughts out; this wasn't about him right now, Louis needed the friend part of their relationship now.

He watched as Louis gave a weak smile, shifting himself to lie down flat on his back.

"Come here," he said, and Harry dipped under his right arm as it enclosed around him. He felt relaxed in his embrace; He couldn't bring back either of their parents but they had each other, and Harry needed Louis to know that he wanted to be there for him through everything.

They laid back and watched the stars. Harry's eyes inclined to a really big one in particular.

"You see that one?" he pointed his finger way up and Louis hummed in reply. The thing sounded so sexy ringing in his ear, he almost forgot what he was even saying. "That one's your mum."

Sure the boy's spirits would enliven now, he started to feel a bit proud of himself for saying something to make Louis feel better, but then Harry suddenly felt the boy's weight slide out from under him.

"What is she doing up there Harry?" Louis was now hunched over his knees in a ball and crying. "She's supposed to be down here with us! I can't-"

Harry flew up and threw his arms around the boy. His face twisted up in a painful realization. Nothing he said could make it better right now. He let his tears flow on Louis' back as he held the boy. Louis' hands gripped tightly on his as he let it all out.

"I'm sorry I always say the wrong thing. I know I should shut up sometimes because I never know what to say to make things better."

In a flash, Louis turned around and grabbed him in his arms. "No. Don't cry. I don't want you crying too, Love. I'm sorry."

Harry then moved his hands up his shirt, and Louis kissed him.

"I wanna make it better," Harry gripped on to his collars and pecked softly at his chest. "Please, let me make it better."

Louis kissed him again harder, more intently, his hands escaping under his Tee.

"You always make it better. I couldn't do this alone, Harry. I don't want to be alone."

"You're not!" Harry whispered emotively. Then Louis started sucking on his neck. Harry had to squeal silently as he had a firm hold. The way he was going Harry was sure he'd need a turtleneck or a scarf the next day. Great, a scarf in the summer. How do I explain that to Mum?

He threw the thought out and tried to focus on the moment.

"God, Harry," Louis growled emerging. "I don't know if I can fucking control myself around you
"Hmm," Harry hummed. There was a hand on his nipple, taking hold of the entire muscle around it, and he liked the feel of that. He wrapped his arms around him and let him nibble at his neck and fondle his breasts.

Things were getting intense and their combined heat eventually took over from the conversation. It grew pretty clear Louis wanted more than just a make-out session. Gently pushing him off when it got too hot to handle, Harry had to dive to get away from the kiss closing in on him without wait.

"This is getting too much for you, isn't it?" Louis backed away, wiping his sweaty palms on his lap."I don't want to push if you don't want-"

Harry gave a little jump and put his index finger to his mouth. "I do want this. Why do you think I brought you out here? I just wasn't sure if you'd want to."

Louis kissed the finger on his lips. "I want you so much."

A quick nod, Harry muttered about the condom and hopped back to the truck to go get it.

Hurrying back, he dropped the items on the blanket and started taking his clothes off.

"Wait! What are you doing?" Louis' voice alarmed.

Shirt already off and jeans unbuttoned, Harry froze mid-unzipping. "I- I'm taking my clothes off - I thought-"

Louis reached out and pulled him down. "No!"

Harry gulped as Louis pressed him down flat on his back. His fingers hooked in the loops of his jeans and he slowly pulled at them, leaning over him to kiss his stomach.

Harry let out a tiny giggle, and watched his jeans slide away, leaving his legs bare in a pair of red underwear this time.

Louis breathed in deeply. "So pretty. I love this," he hummed, index finger veering under the rim of it at the leg joint.

Harry closed his mouth and swallowed. He felt like coming now. He was going to come now. He was already thinking that way but then Louis got up on his knees- back facing Harry- and took off his own clothing; all of it. Then Harry heard the crumpling and tearing away of wrapping paper, and he started panicking inwardly.

Oh my god this happening! It's really happening!

He watched the boy's head bend downward as he put the condom on, then before he knew it, Louis glided around and started pulling off his panties, lifting his right leg completely free from it. He was so swift and on point with his movements; Harry then remembered that this wasn't the older boy's first time, and he started on a higher level of nervousness.

Feeling exposed in the open night air, Harry's right leg moved to close back his crotch, with the underwear still attached just above his left knee. He already knew the lacy material would be staying there for however long this was going to be, and he caught the little smug smile as Louis gave it a little pat.
The older boy then smoothed his hand lightly down the surface of his leg until he reached his knee, where he nudged them apart. Trying with all his being not to have a panic attack, Harry propped his feet up, legs wide, and Louis sailed between them. He leaned down and licked his semi-soft dick with care, covering more surface area with his mouth until the whole thing was being worked by his salivary organ. Harry squirmed in every direction, eventually sitting up and grabbing the older boy's hair. Louis took a long good suck before raising himself back up on his knees, the tube of lubricant in his hands.

Gently, he pushed Harry back down on his back, and Harry looked away to the stars as he kissed his inner thigh while rubbing a couple of gelled fingers on his hole. And just like the night before, he touched him until he opened, and the fingers dipped inside.

"So fucking soft. I love it," Louis said, and immediately caused Harry to involuntarily clench around his middle finger.

"Relax, Love," Louis laughed lightly. "Do you want me inside you?"

Harry nodded, hand on Louis' shoulders, and he fluttered open.

Louis rubbed his free hand on his knee, kissed it, and Harry's muscles shut once more.

Frustrated with himself, Harry covered his face with the back of his hand. What is wrong with me!?

"It's okay. It's perfectly normal for the first time." He rubbed his thumb over the surface of it. "I know what can relax you," he singsonged.

Harry blinked at him.

"Would you like to-" Louis started singing. Harry slapped the boy's mouth shut.

"Stop!" Harry giggled, keeping his hand over his mouth. Before he knew what was happening, he let out a loud gasp; breaching his now loose hole, was now something that definitely wasn't a finger.

He shut his eyes tightly and stiffened.

"Lookatme, lookatme, lookatme." Louis pressed a sweaty left hand on his face and bore into his eyes as he opened them.

The new movement was smooth and slow, and Harry's mouth flew open as it made a little 'pop' when he entered him. Louis stopped just then and waited a few seconds in which he peppered tiny kisses all over Harry's face and jawline. He had not been paying attention before but now he was aware of Louis' fingernails painfully digging into his flesh as he held his right wrist. He didn't alert him to it, mainly because his own fingers were gripping a mound of flesh on the boy's back as well, frozen with nervousness himself to even make a sound. He knew his rings would leave imprints there for days.

Harry guessed it would have been more painful without the lubricant but he still had yet to be totally comfortable with the feeling, even with the product.

The boy's face was buried in his neck in the next moment as he eased himself further in.

Harry breathed in deep and sharp. Louis' length had touched him where a cluster of sensations was gathered making his eyes water and his insides scream in pleasure, but he was still so nervous and
scared to express it.

"Are you okay?" he heard, barely audible in his ear. But was still too early to answer that.

"I don't know."

Louis offered a small nod and then started moving inside him, merging their foreheads and breathing on him. He had let go of Harry's wrist and was now holding on to his right hip as his other hand stayed on his cheek.

His thumb rubbed on to his chin as he shifted, uncertain, and another strange thought surfaced in Harry's head; *now that we're actually doing it, does this change everything? Will Louis look at me the same? Is he gonna want this again?*

While these thoughts pursued Louis quickened his pace a bit and Harry responded by widening his legs more to accommodate. The sensations in him intensified and Harry found himself letting out a little moan. Louis seemed to react to this as he had made an involuntary thrust just then. Harry dug into his back, and their lips met. It was a heavy, trailing kiss with no pulling away. Somewhere in between the kissing and the nervous thrusting Harry realized he was enjoying being taken like this, and a series of moans escaped him now.

"I want you," Louis panted. "If you want to stop, say it now."

Harry stared at him through watery eyes as his body moved up and down together with Louis'. Stop? Harry had long forgotten the meaning of the word.

"Say now, because I wanna go harder and if I continue I'm not gonna stop for you. You can't ask me to stop."

Harry's eyes grew large. Since it was his first time he didn't want to rush it. "Can't you just go slow a bit?" He was just processing his surprise at how quiet that question came out, when Louis answered, making him jump.

"No!" Louis had groaned out sharply, and Harry's whole self fell into a personal cave. He closed his eyes and loosened away his grip off the older boy's back.

Louis blew out a shaky breath. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry baby please don't do that, please don't be like this." His breathing was super botched up and he seemed to be fighting himself on whether to pull out or stay, as Harry felt the boy shuddering inside him.

Harry grabbed his hair with both hands and reached up to kiss him. Louis moaned into his mouth moved even closer to him if that was possible. When they pulled away from it Louis looked into his eyes; an apologetic, begging, hungry look. Harry felt wanted, needed, and powerful.

"Don't stop," Harry demanded, steady and unblinking, wanting to provide Louis' needs.

Louis kissed him again. A rough biting one that did knick him somewhere in there, but Harry didn't mind. He knew the last thing Louis wanted to do was hurt him. The boy just wanted to forget his pain for a while and be happy with him. The least Harry could do not be a diva about it. He told himself that whatever Louis needed now from him that didn't result in the boy falling into a hopeless sob, he'd give him. And at the moment, that seemed to be every square inch of his body, according to Louis' own body language.

In his drunken desperation, the boy inhaled his hair and pecked all about his collarbone while his pelvis thrust into him. His upper legs pressed into Harry's and he felt so much heat he feared he'd
Then Louis gave way to a large grind, digging into him in what seemed like an endless motion. The slow force pushed Harry upwards on the blanket and he suddenly felt indescribably candid. His hole didn't belong to him anymore, being stretched and taken so unabashed by Louis. He was sure now there no part of him that Louis didn't know, didn't love.

The grind turned into a curve and he was coming back again with the same slow intensity, forcing out a moan from Harry. Then Louis' lips met his and he tasted salty tears when he ventured his lips to the side of his mouth.

"Lou?" He was so afraid that Louis may not be enjoying it. "Are you okay?"

It was dark. The truck faced sideways from them, throwing the light that way, but in the little light that came through Harry saw the boy's wet eyes twitch and his brow frown as he seemed to be thinking what to reply. In the end, he thrust again and smoothed Harry's hair off his sweating forehead while he blinked more tears out. He was moving so slow and deep with every thrust, and as he lay under his control, Harry realized he was going slow on purpose for Harry. Like Harry wanted. The way his legs dug into Harry's as they latched on to them told him how much the boy was tearing apart inside trying not to ravish him. But the way he felt grinding hotly inside him and rubbing on his prostate had Harry in extreme but steady ecstasy. Louis was being the gentleman he was but didn't feel like being at the moment. He was being unselfish.

"You feel soooo good," Louis groaned and cried into his neck, rhythm kept. All Harry could do is make brazenly honest noises of pleasure beneath him.

Then -"Oh god, Looouiiiss?" -Harry barely had time to say that before he was coming all over himself and Louis.

He sniffled and cried as Louis shushed him and kissed him. "It's okay, Love... You are so beautiful."

Harry fell limp, and Louis clasped the sides of his head, bringing his face upwards. "I love you..."

Louis then lifted Harry's legs a bit with his elbow joints hooked under Harry's knees, and he rutted in for a good few minutes until he came as well and fell into a heap of pants on top of Harry, who blew on his sweaty forehead.

***

**All Through the Night-Cyndi Lauper**

They laid there under the blankets a while, holding hands and looked up at the stars. Louis seemed so much more relaxed and present now, and Harry even glimpsed a sparkle in his eyes as he smiled.

"Louis," Harry said, making conversation. "Why is your name 'Louis' and not 'Lewis'?"

Louis shot him a puzzled look. "I don't know. It's a French thing I guess?"

"I like your name. I wonder how you got it."

"Why don't you ask her." Louis moved Harry's hand up to the sky, gesturing to the star Harry had
Harry looked at him; he was looking up at the stars, smiling like he ate cake.

"Okay," Harry followed his gaze, "Mrs. Tomlinson, how did you decide on 'Louis'?'"

Louis grinned. "Well, first of all, my name is Mrs. Deakin," - Harry gasped and stifled his giggles and everything in his palm, showing apologetic eyes only, and Louis jiggled with laughs- "And second, I named him after my mother, Elouisa," Louis explained with a teasing smirk.

Harry grinned and erupted in more giggles.

The older boy's face was so bright and full of charm as he continued in a casual tone, "She died when I was little, I missed her a lot, and my first kid happened to be a boy so I just changed it and took out the first and last letters."

"Wow! I didn't know that?" Harry ran circles in his palm. "It's perfect...just like you're perfect and this night is perfect."

Louis flipped on his belly, caressing Harry's cheek. "You are the perfect one." Mum He pressed a kiss to his bottom lip. "You know, Mum never mentioned her mother much. Grandma always had to explain these things to me," Louis added, referring to his great aunt Sophia.

"Just like with my granddad." Harry said, now shifting to grab his clothes up, aware of how late it was getting. "I don't think there was anything he didn't tell me. He was my best friend."

The boys dressed and folded the blankets. They walked back to the truck and climbed in. Harry pulled his coat on and raked his hair back.

He looked at Louis.

The boy was sitting there gawking at him.

"Why aren't you starting the engine?"

Louis quickly developed an irritated face and made a whiny noise like a lovesick puppy, stretching his arm out to Harry, who giggled and leaned over.

They kissed for a long while, Louis grabbing Harry's hair up and turning his head every which way to access his tongue.

When they finally let go, Louis still grabbed his hands up, and when Harry looked, Louis laced them in his and kissed the back of them simultaneously. "You make me so happy. I've never felt anything like this before."

"You are so cheesy!" Harry started to giggle, and reached over into his pocket, dumping a handful of M&Ms on his head this time.

Louis gasped and made a fake hurt-puppy-face but Harry responded with a mercilessly raised eyebrow, shoving an m&m in the boy's mouth.

***********

Louis' pov

The truck slowed into the yard, Louis noticed the porch light on. Behind the railing was a docile
"Fuck!" A curse flew out of Harry as he shifted gears. "I'm not supposed to be driving! She's gonna yell at us!"

Louis blurted out a laugh and shot his eyebrows up. "Or she's just gonna know we came back from a romantic time under the stars, and... yeah, most likely yell at us."

"Louis!" Harry hit him.

"Look, just stay calm. She can't see us out here in the dark. And if she asks we'll just say what we always say; we were at Niall's." Louis concluded in a matter-of-fact tone.

He saw Harry's eyes move nervously as he tried to reassure himself of his words.

"Okay," he replied. "Luke and Steve are still in my room so I'm sleeping with you, okay?"

Louis smiled. "As if you wouldn't anyway."

With an eye-roll, Harry shook his head and opened his door.

"Wait! You have to climb out this way so she won't see." Louis gestured towards his side of the truck.

Harry took a second to think then nodded in agreement.

"Give me the keys." Louis reclined a bit to allow Harry to squeeze between him and the dashboard.

Louis took a chance and pinched the boy's arse as he slid over him to exit, and he almost fell out of the truck.

"Louis!" he rasped lowly as he slammed the door.

A quiet fit of giggles left Louis' throat, and he watched the boy 'casually' walk up to the house.

Louis climbed over into the driver's seat and jumped down from the truck.

He heard Harry give a small "good night, Mum," before disappearing inside, and felt a sense of relief he knew Harry shared as well that she didn't question him. But as he himself reached the third and last step up the porch, she cleared her throat pointedly.

"Hang back a bit?" she tossed her head to the empty space next to her on the swing. She was in her nightgown and robe, spectacles on, with a book beside her she must have put down when she saw the truck coming. She crossed her legs and pulled off the spectacles.

"Thank you for what you did this morning. I'm super relieved your phone was on to get her call. Anything could have happened! There are coyotes out there, you know."

Louis swallowed a tennis ball thinking of the number of missed calls he had gotten before he had actually picked up the phone, and what he was doing at the time...

My daughter is brave and can handle a lot of situations but I know she had to be really scared to
call you. I'm glad she and Harry have you as a friend. I know I can rely on you."

Louis' mood faltered. Here she was thanking Louis for being 'reliable' and 'a good friend' when he literally just fucked Harry, and on top of that is keeping a huge secret for Gemma.

All he could manage with his building guilt was a slight nod in reply.

Anne gazed at him for a moment, and Louis was certain her lips moved a tiny bit to add something else, but then she must have decided to hold it. He watched as her eyes fell a few inches and stopped at his chest. Her face turned ghost white. Louis tilted his head to catch her attention as she was not blinking.

"Earth to Anne?"

"What?" she came back oblivious.

Taking it all for tiredness, Louis eased himself off the swing. "It's been a long day. We all need to rest now."

She gave a slight unfocused nod and Louis began to saunter away.

"Oh- Louis?" she said suddenly, raising her hand,- he turned back to face her- "Don't let Harry drive at night. If you're too drunk to drive, stay home."

****

He found Harry already asleep and taking up three-quarters of the bed. His pink blanket lay spread over him and he was tightly hugging Louis' pillow. Louis knew he was asleep because his mouth was agape and his breathing slow and steady.

Harry hadn't showered, and Louis decided that he wouldn't either. He pulled off his t-shirt; something hit his chest. It was the necklace Calvin gave Fizzie. He hadn't realized he was still wearing it. He totally forgot to ask Harry if he found the pick yet to check it with the necklace. Louis was almost certain they belonged together somehow. But the girls' flight was first thing in the morning and Harry was sound asleep. It was extremely late now, and he didn't want to wake the boy just to ask about a guitar pick. He took the necklace off and rest it on his dresser. Way too curious about it, he thought; I can't give it back to Fizzie yet. She'll have to leave without it.

He sneaked into bed, pressing into Harry's back and smelling his curls, and draped his arm over his waist.

"I can't believe she knows you were drunk!"- Louis recoiled at the unexpected outburst next to him- "How did she know that!!? And suppose I needed to go somewhere important or one of us has an emergency? Does she expect me to let you die instead of just driving to the hospital?" Harry was flapping his hands on his sides in rage to boot.

Stupefied, Louis blinked. Harry looked over his shoulder expectantly for an answer but Louis was unable to give one at the moment. He was still trying to process how it was that the boy was sound asleep one minute and wide awake the next. Harry didn't seem to mind though; he just went on ranting.

"What if you weren't here and I had to go get Gemma? Would she prefer I "stay home, {there was a head toss with that} and leave my sister by the side of the road!?"
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Please, I need to know how this was. Comment? Vote?
A/N:- Here it is. Chapter 41. Don't worry guys, it's almost over. Are you enjoying it? I hope so. Thank you all once again. Kudos? Please?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**

Practically mangled with the boy and the sheets is how Louis woke up.

He raised his head and started to stretch just as the door knocked.

He immediately sought to put some distance between him and Harry, and the sudden movement woke him up too.

Harry yawned, and the door flew open.

"I came to apologise to Harry for what happened at the party," Daisy whined, standing by the door.

Phoebe, on the other hand, waited for no invitation to climb on the bed. "She wasn't going to but Dad said she had to before we leave."

"What are you guys talking about?" Louis said, confused.

Harry gasped. "No, Daisy. You don't have to do that. I kinda deserved it."

Realizing what it was they were referring to, Louis' brows went up. He was about to address it, but Phoebe cut in.

"Daddy said you're not coming with us," Phoebe prompted, and Daisy climbed up next to her.

"Well, see, there's a really good reason I decided to stay. Um,"- he looked to Harry for guidance. His eyes went wide, stumped for words, and Louis turned back to his sisters- "I know it's hard for all of us and it's hardest for you last four...I've really been trying extra hard to accept that Mum is gone, much less for you guys. And I believe that part of the reason I'm not crying all the time is because of..." - he glanced at Harry's hands then looked to his upper left in thought. "Clifford!"

Harry screwed up his face confusedly. They looked at eachother, Louis raising both eyebrows in finesse. Harry blinked rapidly.

"You- know- Clifford's been,- a- great dog! He's always available for hugs, and -" Louis went on, fully aware he had just expanded the dog's actual name. Harry's eyebrows drew closer in befuddlement.

"Oh, shut it, Louis!" Daisy shouted. "We know!" she hit Harry an eyebrow. "Lottie told us."

Louis looked from one twin to the other. "You mean -you two knew about-" he pointed between
him and Harry. The girls nodded.

_Wow, I'm losing touch with reading them._

"Is that why you're not going? Because she attacked him?"

"Nah, I think he made it pretty clear it's because of Clifford," Harry quipped, serious-faced.

Louis stared at him. _Okay…I deserved that._

"No! Harry isn't mad and I'm not mad," he continued telling the girls, looking pointedly at Harry while stressing the words 'isn't' and 'mad'. "It was a huge misunderstanding and he apologized for it. I'm actually proud of you, Daise, for defending me like that. I'm a proud big brother always."

He threw his arms for tight hugs and kisses to their heads.

"Me staying...It's not just because of Harry. I think it's this place in general. It makes me feel closer to Mum. You guys are young and still have a long way to go through childhood and school, and you need Dad. More than I do, and I'm old enough to be on my own for a while. I kinda need that right now. And it hasn't got anything to do with you guys! It's- just- that-"

"We get it. You're whipped," the twins said together.

Harry's eyes went big and he gave Louis a 'choked pig' look. He in turn slapped his hand down supportively on Harry's wrist.

"Um, yeah," Louis said slowly, and Harry almost choked for real.

Louis started rubbing his back. "I wouldn't say exactly 'whipped', but,"- he looked at Harry again - "I care deeply about him."

Harry's blood seemed to love running around his face this morning.

"Look at you, you're actively shaping your statements to whatever you think he wants to hear so you won't hurt his feelings!" Daisy tumbled over laughing on the bed.

Louis covered his face and Harry continued to blush profusely.

Phoebe wasn't laughing though. She climbed up on her knee and hugged her brother, resting her head on his shoulder. It didn't take long before he noticed she was crying.

He wrapped his arms around the girl. "Phoebes?"

"No matter what you say, I know you miss her the most because you knew her the longest," she sobbed into his shirt. He squeezed his eyes shut and tightened the hug.

The girl continued. "Plus you stayed up late all the time talking after we get sent to bed. You two chit-chat all the time about stuff Daisy and I don't even know about. She wasn't just your mum. She was like your twin person. I have Daisy, and you had Mum."

Louis felt an invisible sharp object pierce him in the middle of his chest, and the tears didn't take long to follow. He cried and cried with her, then she emerged and wiped her tears.

"You never cried when she died," she said, "But I saw you cry at dinner lastnight-"

Daisy added; "Dad always makes you angry and sad."
Phoebe nodded in agreement. "I don't want you to go with us if that's what's going to happen all the time. Better stay here where you're happy."

"I swear I'm only one phone call away," Louis said in a low, heartbroken tone. "And if you ever need me I'm on the first flight to Australia, okay, Phoebes?"

Phoebe nodded tearily and sat back down, and Daisy moved forward, hugging Harry. Louis was busy wiping his and his sister's tears but was certain he heard the girl whisper quite loudly in the boy's ear; "I know you love each other but my brother is not a punching bag. Don't hit him again!"

Harry hit Louis a one-second 'Yikes' face and smiled at her as she went back to her twin sister again.

"I'll tell you what, how bout I make a promise and we'll pinky swear on it," he said, holding out his little finger.

The girls giggled when they saw the small ring on it, and Harry frowned perplexed.

"Why do you have a ring on your baby finger? Do they all have to have rings?" Daisy laughed.

"All, except my thumb."

"What's this one?" Phoebe took hold of the one Louis put there.

The older boy scrunched his nose. "That's for another promise he had to make."

Daisy made a 'vomit' face, and Harry was blushing again.

"Come on," Louis growled, stretching. "Big hug." The girls piled on, and he tickled Harry to join in.

The sound of thudding coming from the staircase broke up the hug. "Girls! Come get ready! We leave in an hour!" Mark's voice called.

The girls jumped up and scurried out and they heard their feet stomping all the way up the stairs and into their room.

Louis gazed at Harry. His neck was slightly tilted up to focus in the direction of the girls footsteps, and Louis noticed the hickies-yes, hick-eys- he had put there last night. Swallowing, his eyes moved up to his face glowing with early morning sheen. His fingers couldn't help but involuntarily move up to his hairline, the hair behind there just couldn't help but keep falling over his satiny forehead.

"I meant what I said, you know…"

Harry give a pinch of a raised eyebrow, and side-eyed him.

"I do,"- Louis leaned an inch-"care,"- another inch - "very,"- and another -"very." - he kissed his neck, -"deeply," - another kiss- "about," he started moving up- "you..." He left one on his lips.

Harry sat still and fought to keep his mouth closed. "I'm pretty sure Clifford will be glad to hear how you feel about him," he deadpanned when Louis was done, and jumped out of bed with a smirk.

***************
I love you, Fizzie," Louis squeezed the girl tight. "Promise you'll call whenever you need me."

"Promise, big brother." She kissed his cheek and moved aside for Lottie to hug her brother.

He leaned to them to whisper; "If Dad gets drunk again -"

"I know, I know. You're on the first flight to Australia!" Fizzie and Lottie laughed, swaying with him.

"You are spending next summer in Australia, young man!" Fizzie warned, getting in her father's car.

"Damn right he is!" Mark roared out, coming up and dumping two duffle bags in his trunk.

Lottie objected. "No way! We're coming back here next summer!"

Louis grinned, noticing her 'Trey' face.

Anne strolled up to them. "Well, look at you now, Miss I'm not touching those farm animals, my nails are too cute…"

Louis threw his head back and Harry covered his giggles.

"Nah ah!" Mark but in. "Maybe Christmas but not the summer! Can't risk you spending the whole six weeks like Louis here!"

"Don't worry, Dad, at least you know Lottie can't live on a farm for long so she's bound to come home sometime."

Gemma hugged Lottie. "Mum, I don't even help around, and my nails aren't as nice as Lottie's."

Anne snorted and showed her stumpy nails. "Well, I guess we can't all be like Harry. I'm still baffled how he keeps his so well with all his chores."

Harry glared offendedly and Louis smiled at him, and he turned away, blushing now.

Steve appeared with his suitcase. "Where are you going!?" Anne said, watching him dump his luggage in Mark's trunk.

"I have stuff to do in the U.S," he said busily. "I'll meet up with you guys in London on Friday for the competition." He gave Gemma a reassuring look and dived in the car. Louis looked back at Luke leaning in the doorframe looking like he already got a thorough 'goodbye' last night.

The twins clambered into the back seat with Daisy next to Lottie- "Oh God!"- and Mark revved up the engine.

"Take care of my boy!" Mark called out looking at Anne then Harry, gaze lingering pointedly on him.

Once again, Louis found himself waving off his family members as they drove away to their lives without him. These tears were a given.

Cord came and dropped a supportive hand on Louis' shoulder as he sobbed, and said; "It's a good thing you stayed. After what happened yesterday, I'm even more convinced now that this is where you belong." Figuring he was referring to him rescuing Gemma from the possible coyotes, he accepted a pat on the back, and they all moved inside.
Harry's pov

In the kitchen a few minutes later…

"Give me the phone!"

"Sod off!" Harry held his phone away from Luke. "Picture's in the cloud now."

"The fuck?"

Harry forced in his grin.

"Harry, delete it!" A disconcerted Luke shouted. Cliff let out a loud bark at the man, and he lowered his voice.

“This isn't a game. This is serious. Life is serious. Steve's career isn't a game!"

- "WOOF!!"

"I want my room back first."

"The fuck, no!"

"Louis' sisters are gone now so you can sleep in the spare room!"

"There's a bunk bed in there!"

Louis walked in suddenly, and a curious look swept over him.

"The bottom is bigger than the top!" Harry explained to Luke, still oblivious to Louis' presence. "You can have the bottom!"

Louis' face was flushed. "What exactly are we talking about?"

Harry spun around and gave him a weird dear-in-headlights look and shook his head dismissively.


Rolling his eyes, Louis grabbed a slice of toast and piled out the back door to his chores.

"You know, you should be glad I'm in your room. You have an excuse to sleep in his room. Been a while since the workers' quarters doubled as a bouncy castle."

Harry eyeballed him as his phone rang. The man held up a stopping finger and moved to the living room to answer it.

Gemma slugged in in her uniform.

"What were you two yellin about? Hear you all the way upstairs."

Harry poured Cliff some milk. "You know, you could have given me a heads up about him coming here."

"Sorry. Wanted it to be a surprise for you boys with Steve."
"I can't believe Luke's married now," Harry mused. "I can't believe anyone would want to marry him, let alone a celebrity."

Gemma poured herself a cup of coffee and started on her toast. "That's harsh."

Harry eyed her. "Gem seriously, why are you drinking so much coffee lately?"

Gemma fell dumb just as Luke came back in with Anne and John.

"Harry? John and Murrey are going to start tearing down the old treehouse today, so stay around if he needs anything, okay?" Anne ordered. "Luke is going to be here too. I have to go do a few things in town."

Anne left through the front door and Luke disappeared with John through the back, leaving Harry to finish his breakfast with Gemma and Murrey.

"Should be saying I told you so, but I told you so," Murrey ate, a side-eye at Gemma.

"I don't have time for this!" the girl barked.

"Seriously, Gemma? Cord just told me everything! Aiden left you to die out there and you're still doing this?" His eyes moved judgingly over her uniform.

Harry took a drink of milk just to cover his face.

"Don't be so dramatic, I wasn't that far from home!"

"What were you guys arguing about?"

Harry looked at his sister wondering the same thing.

"That's none of your business. What's important is that I'm one jump away from getting my granddad's rodeo ranch up and running again like old times. You are supposed to have my back here. You are just about the only real friend I have over at that ranch. Don't cop-out now when I'm this closet to getting my dream."

Murrey shut up.

******

Murrey and John threw all their tools from their truck on the ground in the backyard. The tree was overdue to be cut down but Anne had requested to do it after her party, so here they were Monday morning, ready to do some demolition.

Louis was leading Salsa and Poppy into the pen to run wild for some exercise, when he saw them and jogged over.

"Gemma's hell-bent on winning that competition on Friday," Murrey was saying.

"The Cowells have had their eye on this property for years ever since Emmett acquired it," John told his son. "This deal Simon offered Gemma is just another ploy to take control."

The two men saw Louis coming and went silent, but Louis had already heard.

With the treehouse structure about to be taken apart and thrown in a heap, Harry jumped around the trunk taking a few last pictures to remember it by before John started cutting it down.
Louis saw that something was catching the boy's attention behind the tree.

"What is it?" he called, following him.

Harry was running his palm over a spot on the tree. Taking a closer look, Louis saw it was small engraved initials. 'E' plus sign "E" inside a heart.

"Me and Gem played in this treehouse when we were little but I never noticed that before."

"Wow! 'E' must be Emmett and 'E' for Elouisa, my grandmother. They must have put it here long ago."

"That's so cool," Harry said, showing his dimples.

Feeling elated, Louis leaned in to kiss him. They were behind the tree and out of Luke's and John's eyesight. But as he leaned to brace his chin, Harry pulled back. A sorry look in his face, he ran out from behind the tree and pretended like nothing had just happened between them.

"We wanna keep a part of the trunk with the initials on it," Harry told John, showing him the picture in his phone. The boy then gave Louis a comraderie look that seemed to think it could sweep what just happened under the rug, and skipped away to the sheep pen merrily, much to Louis' annoyance.

John smiled. "I barely remember miss Elouisa. I was a wee little one when she died. Mama never forgot her kindness though. She still talks about her in her old age. Says we all owe our careers to her and uncle Emmett."

Louis urged him to elaborate. Luke shot John a secret look. "Why don't you start from the beginning, John?"

John smiled. "Emmett didn't know the owner of this property-the original owner- was William's dad's business rival, Max Payne."

Louis needed a repeat. "Payne?"

"My grandfather. Liam's great grandfather. When Dean took over the town he acquired this property from Max who had no choice but to sell. When Emmett came in and got it from Dean he didn't know who it originally belonged to until sometime later when he spoke to a lawyer, Elouisa Fairchild, who helped him reach out to the struggling Payne family. He couldn't give us back the land because his ranch was already flourishing but he and Elouisa made sure we were all okay. They even stood in church as Larissa's godparents. Emmett took care of us for years until he died."

Louis took a seat. Why didn't Anne or even Larissa say anything about her being his mother's god sister? Why didn't Liam?

"Does Liam know about this?"

"Of course he does," John sharpened his saw. "But he wasn't around yet those days. That's all in the past now. Emmett and Elouisa are gone now and we all moved on."

Louis muddled this. "Okay, so he got the property and built a ranch and took care of everyone but I'm still curious as to why Granddad Emmett stole the property and opened a ranch in the first place. I mean, from what I know he's a city man with no experience in horse training. What sparked his interest in that field?"
"He did it for his friend, William."

Louis and John turned to see Luke, his hands in his pockets like he'd been standing there for a while. "Dean put a lot of people out of business and some families on the breadline. "The Paynes being one. Emmett was a God send at the time. But his motivations were not unbiased."

Louis folded his arms and cocked his ears.

"William's father was a prominent businessman. He owned a lot of land in Champton. He groomed William to take over the business one day and just as the time had come to do that, Dean came and swept up everything and he made my uncle nothing more than a lackey serving his purpose. William hated his father for selling out. He left home to chase his childhood dream of running a rodeo ranch. That's where Emmett came in. He wormed his way in Dean's office and got this property for William. He figured his friend would use the land and open a ranch and make his dream come true, but William didn't want anything to do with the I'll gotten gain. Emmett tried to reason that Dean was the real bad guy but William didn't want to hear it. Of course years later when Emmett died he changed his mind."

"So, my grandfather built the ranch and ran it all those years by himself but it was all really for William?" Louis tried to understand.

"Yep!" Luke dismissed quickly. "And that's the whole story so can we get along with our individual work?"

*****

Louis was preparing to groom Phoebe the horse when Harry walked in. Scotch whinnied and Salsa flared her nostrils at him.

"You're not doing any chores today?" Louis asked, eyeing the white sweater he had on.

"Wait -is that mine?" Louis fought back a blush as it sunk in. Harry slowly nodded, propping his hand on the wall. The sweater was way too big for Louis and he only brought it to Champton because he supposed the nights made pretty cold out in the country bushes. He had not worn it yet though, and quite admired how the cute and fluffy material looked on Harry. He smiled and tried to get back to work, now aware of the boy walking over to him.

"Mum's just went out on an errand…" Harry blew in his ear, and Louis found himself being nibbled there as he brushed the horse.

"Harry?"

He had to let out a little whiny noise as the boy's hands tethered to his hips while his tongue moved along his neck. It was so good, but Louis didn't want to encourage it. Anne may not be home but what if someone else walks in, like Cord or John?

He caught his hands just as they were veering to his crotch, and pressed their foreheads together. Harry's curls crunched against his skin. He pushed out his nose to rub Harry's.

"We can't be acting like sneaking around is okay. We have to figure out how to tell your mother that we wanna be together."

Ignoring Louis and wrapping his warm cotton sleeved arms around Louis' neck, Harry diverted to his Adam's-apple, leaving gentle sensations pulsing over the skin of Louis' throat. He threw his head backward, allowing Harry to move down to the nape of his neck as his breath quickened with
"It's better this way, Louis. No one to tell us no." He sucked one last time before raising his head to face his boyfriend. "I don't want to share this with anyone. I want to be with you without consequences-"

Louis gasped. "That's exactly why we can't hide anymore. If you want us to last, we have to be honest with your mum!"

Harry shook his head in answer. Louis took his hand and tried to comb their fingers but Harry pulled away.

"Are you saying that you won't be with me anymore if we don't say something? Are you giving me an ultimatum?" Harry's eyes were borderline tears but focused on Louis'.

Louis sighed. He didn't know one person could make him feel like an ice cold fruity drink by the beach on a hot day; like he was looking through a mirror at the thing he wanted the most trapped inside; and the annoyance of a beautiful painting that kept tilting on the wall no matter how many times he tried to fix it, all at the same time. He wasn't giving Harry an ultimatum, he did not see a place for a choice. What choice was Louis going to give him? Tell Anne or lose Louis? No, Louis would be with him anyway! It was him and Harry for the rest of his life, full stop. But Anne was part of their lives too. A huge part.

What about their wedding day? And Louis had already thought that far ahead. He dared not share it with Harry so soon fearing it would scare him away but Louis wanted a big wedding with all their friends and family there, and Anne there. He wouldn't even think to marry Harry without Anne's blessing. He thought of his own mother and what she would think of this whole thing. He was happy that he and Anne bonded over her and valued their friendship to a point where he woke up in the middle of the night cold sweating over lying to her about him and her son. Telling her was the only way to make sure he and Harry had a life together guilt-free no matter what her reaction was. He wasn't giving Harry an ultimatum; he was giving Harry his all.

He stared back at the boy he loved. How do you tell someone you only met a few weeks ago that you wanted to spend your life with them and that you didn't see a way around it.

"Harry," he said. He wanted to say all that he was thinking, but only the summary of it all slipped out instead. "I love you. I love you. I want-"

Harry threw his arms around his neck and burrowed into the V of his T-shirt. "I love you back," he said, the words bouncing onto his chest. "I don't want to talk about this now. Another time, please. Please?"

Louis sighed. He was so tired arguing with Harry about the same thing over and over so he let it go for now. He hugged him back until he couldn’t feel his arms, and when they finally pulled part he didn’t say a thing about the topic again.

He turned and unhooked a small sack from a nail in the wall and took out all the necessary items to continue grooming the horses.

The shine spray fell off the small table as he felt Harry's hand yank his shirt. Spinning back around, he was met with a rough kiss that wasn't exclusive to his mouth! Harry held Louis in place and was licking vigorously in one long trail all over his face like a lawnmower.

Louis pulled away, shocked and a bit scared of this strange action, and looked at him.
Louis gave him a pained expression and turned away but Harry grabbed hold of his arm and pushed himself onto Louis, kissing him again; hard. Louis felt the heat in Harry's groin and moaned through the kiss. Harry kept pushing him until he hit the wall a few meters away and Louis put his arms around him.

"Harry," Louis breathed heavily as Harry knelt down and started unzipping his trousers. Louis was mad at himself for letting him do it. But he wanted it so bad.

He waited for him to take out his already hard cock and blow him but then Harry stood up and started unzipping his own jeans and removing it. And he was not doing this slowly, he looked like he was on a mission to interfere with Louis' mentality.

Louis watched as his panties fell away and he climbed out of the legs. He was irritated by this disregard for his preference but he had to admit the sight of the boy naked from the waist down was sinful. Harry stood in only the white wool sweater, his curves running smoothly below in an aesthetic to match his heavy breathing. Louis let out an involuntary squeak as he felt himself pre-cumming at the sight. Taking his eye off him for a moment, Louis bent slightly to remove his fallen trousers from around his feet.

The look in Harry's eyes was begging, pleading, and Louis reached for him, not for his hand like a slow and polite jest, but for his waist and thighs like a wild hoisting where he was up in his arms and being carried to the empty stall door where they kept haystacks. Louis kicked it open and continued until they were slamming against the back wall.

Harry wriggled and started grinding into him as his hands pressed the sides of his face, the white of the sweater clashing with everything else in the scene.

Louis put him down, and continued moving his tongue in his mouth.

Heart beating like a drum, Louis looked on as the boy he loved knelt again and started softly biting his hard dick through his boxers. Louis was so turned on by that, he yelled out causing the mischievous boy to giggle while he pulled down his boxers.

"Harry?"

Harry shook his head in an answer as he took the tip and pushed his mouth over it, sucking further until it hit the back of his throat. Louis was astonished at how fast the boy learned to control his gag reflex. Harry kept sucking hard like he wanted Louis' dick to choke him. He felt his pre-cum rub against the wall of his throat, and moaned out in spirals. He wiped the sweat off his nose and realized he was drooling on Harry.

"You're driving me crazy," he panted, grabbing onto Harry's hair and wiping the drool that dripped between his eyes, as the boy looked up at him, deep-throating him. Not being able to handle anymore, he pulled himself out, caressing his dick covered in Harry's saliva. Harry pushed his head toward it again and rubbed his face in a circular motion on the hard tip, sending Louis into a frenzy.

Hot wet kisses were now being planted on his hips and coming up his torso until Harry was face to face kissing Louis on the lips, raking his fingers up the back of his head.

Louis dipped his legs down enough for their crotches to meet, and took both their dicks in his right hand, wanking them in slow, timely motions. As Harry groaned into his neck and he into Harry's hair, His left hand drifted onto Harry's right arse cheek. The first time he had ventured to touch Harry there in the lake he had flinched but now after being intimate and finally sealing the deal the
night before, they had established an unspoken agreement that they were each other’s to touch and hold without needing to ask first.

He involuntarily dug his fingers into the flesh causing Harry to whimper as he held onto his hair.

He braced their pelvises together as he removed his hand from their crotches to grab Harry's other arse cheek, dragging the surface of his tongue over his neck and shoulders, savoring his saltiness.

He squeezed, groaning at how soft he was.

"Harry, can I?" He whispered as he brushed his fingertips over the joining of his cheeks in a tender motion, unrushed. He didn't want to force it if he was still sore from the night before. He wasn't really sure if Harry even knew how ready he was to do this again so soon after the first time. But Harry nodded into his neck, so he opted to go slowly in case he stopped him.

He pulled the plump flesh of his right cheek slightly with his left hand and etched his right fingers between Harry's legs, prodding his hole. The moan Harry let out was raw and honest.

Louis bit into his neck. Harry winced at every touch but didn't stop him. He let him run his hands everywhere.

Then Harry went down on Louis again, sucking on him with pressure, and gripping the back of his thighs, making Louis scream silently. The things this boy was doing to him…

He grabbed Harry's hair, and it was then he realized what Harry was doing; the boy was creating mounds of saliva on his dick. Even knowing that Harry wouldn't be walking around the farm with lube in case of these encounters he was still turned on by his improvisation.

He immediately pulled Harry off by his hair and motioned for the boy to get up. He then spun him around, holding on to his biceps while kissing his neck and ear.

Harry braced his hands on the wall, his legs apart.

Louis wanted Harry so bad. He positioned his dick on his hole and moved to go in. He was immediately stopped as Harry clenched involuntarily. Thinking quick, he sent saliva down from his mouth onto his dick, rubbing it together with Harry's spit to help with the friction.

He caressed Harry's hips and legs hoping to relax him enough to go further, and as soon as he felt a little ease he pushed his in. Both boys made noises of pain and pleasure. Louis moved slow, trying not to hurt Harry, but the heat was so intense he couldn't help but want to push hard. He pulled back, unable to control himself, and pushed in again, groaning out. He held it for a second and then gyrated inside him, feeling his soft insides.

He felt drunk over the noises Harry was making. He pulled outward again and pushed in a little harder than before, and almost came with the intensity of that one push. He breathed hard on Harry's neck and continued fucking him, picking up the pace as he felt his dick get hotter and hotter. Harry groaned in tune with every thrust.

"Are you alright Harry? You want me to stop?"

"No," Harry answered annoyedly through groans. The boy grabbed on to Louis' hip and pushed himself backwards into him. Louis groaned loudly with the deep impact and they moved together like that for a few minutes, loud slapping noises resounding apart from their intense groans.

"Ahhhhh!!!" Harry moaned as he came on the wall.
"Fuck!" Louis groaned as his dick throbbed for Harry more now. With his right arm wrapped protectively around Harry's sternum, he touched his dick with his left, smearing the remains of cum on his tip all over the boy's own torso. He took his thumb, wet with cum, and brushed the boy's lower lip as he turned his head sideways to get closer to his face. Louis pressed his lips on his and kissed him slow and passionate, sharing the taste of the boy's cum with him. Harry accepted all, moaning with the feel of his tongue swirling inside his mouth, licking up everything.

Louis then felt him go weak in his arms as he was unable to stay standing having come with Louis' dick still pounding into him, but Louis wasn't finished. Louis wanted to give him everything he had been holding back even during their first time. He needed Harry to feel exactly what it was like to be wanted.

So he held him up, dick still inside, and moved over to the hay a foot away, draping him over a few lower stacks, like a rag doll, and continued fucking hard into his ass full speed. Harry grabbed on to the pile and moaned it out.

Louis moaned weakly through his orgasms.

After a few minutes, Harry started crying and calling Louis' name out loud.

All Louis could manage now was a stifled "yes" in reply as he felt a hot rush channel through his dick and into Harry.

Panting, He took the crying boy from over the stacks as his dick slipped out, and pulled him down on a scattered bed of hay. He held him close as he sobbed, and kissed his head.

"I wanna stay like this with you forever," a sweaty Harry said through his sniffles. "I wanna be with you. We could live together and you can take me to see the ocean, and we can be free. No one has to know or care about what we do. We don't have to hide from the whole world like Luke and Steve." Harry then moved his face upward to look at Louis and when their eyes met his face dimmed further. "I just want to keep it from this one person. Louis, you said you loved me so can't you give me that?"

Louis curled a few strands of Harry's hair on his index finger and slowly shook his head. "I love you so much, that's why we have to do the right thing."

Harry tore his hands away and swung his body in the opposite direction.

"Just think about it, okay? We don't have to do this now," Louis said out loud but inwardly thought, Yes, now. Now is the time.

"I'm not gonna change my mind about it!" Harry barked over his shoulder.

"And we-" Louis tried to continue. They could still go to the beach and have the freedom they want. If Louis could just take this whole situation and dump it in the ocean, he would gladly.

"And nothing!" Harry's voice cracked. He just wanted Louis to stop fighting him on this. Because doing the 'right thing' would surely cause a swift death to their relationship.

"We can have everything you want, but just think about it; other people know. What if someone else tells her? Do you want her to be mad she didn't hear it from us?"

Eyes now red and damp, Harry pleaded. "When I turn eighteen I'll run away with you. Wherever you want to go, just far away from here -"
"Baby..."

"You don't understand!" Harry burst out, full on crying now. Louis’ heart started beating loud and fast. Harry was now snatching up his clothes and sniffing as he stumbled to put them back on.

************

The job getting labored as the sun grew hotter, the men opted to take a break- Murrey and his father, that is, as Luke had been sitting crossed-legged the entire time on his iPad.

"I'll go get some water," Murrey drew out, parched. "That's Harry's job but God knows where he and Louis disappeared."

Luke pursed his lips but gave no other sign that he heard him.

Murrey started a jog to the back porch and realized his tool apron was too heavy on him. Turning back, he took the thing off. He was about to rest it down when he noticed his father and Luke striking up a low conversation behind the large tree.

John's smile tightened and his hands gripped stiff on his waist as he shot a glare at an unsuspecting Luke sitting on a fold-up chair.

"Why are you here Luke?" Murrey's father questioned. "That family is doing just fine without you."

Luke shrugged. "Thought you of all people would be glad to see me again," he said with chirpy sarcasm.

John rolled his eyes. "Emmett's grandson is asking questions about the past. If what we did gets out-"

"We?" Luke said, looking nauseating at the hens running about the yard. "As I recall, John, it's you who set all of this in motion." He pulled out his handkerchief and started rubbing his white shoes. "I'd keep out of my way if I were you. This one is not easily spooked."

~~~~~~

SLAP!!

The sound was sure to be heard around the arena as Larissa hit Jessie after William walked out with the rubber snake.

"Do you see what you've done!?" the woman screeched. "He just cut me off! Now tell me what did you do!?" Larissa said as soon as William left.

"Jessie didn't do anything," John informed. "What happened was that I just spooked Rapid Mane."

John then started explaining that Dean made him spook the horse because he wanted Robin Cartwright to fall off Rapid Mane and lose the competition, so he could swoop in and make him join Cowell ranch instead.

"He's the best cowboy in these parts right now. Dean has a sharp eye on him."

Larissa, on hearing this grew brewing in thoughts. If Robin signs with Cowell ranch that leaves William without a champion rider or a star horse, and by extension the ranch will be put out of business. With Emmett's daughter gone and Anne wanting nothing to do with the ranch, William
might have no choice but to return the property to the Paynes. Larissa was no fan of the man who stole it from under her grandfather in the first place but if the old hacker blindly and unsuspiciously drives the property straight into her hands while on his own mission to take over it, she wasn't about to complain. Larissa knew William would never sell the ranch to the Cowells.

"And what was your hand in this?" she looked at Luke. "Why would you agree to help Dean? What's in it for you?"

"Well, Dean made me an offer I couldn't refuse. He doesn't want the real estate business anymore. He's interested in expanding the rodeo ranch business which I convinced him is the more lucrative avenue. All I had to do to prove my loyalty was to be the one to ask John to do the dirty work, and make sure he did."

"Why would you help damage that horse?" Larissa's eyes narrowed. "Calum spent a lot of time training it. How would he feel about you turning to the dark side?"

"Don't you dare mention his name to me again!" Luke said, eyes red and veins popped. "He is no longer here to pull me out. I want what Dean stole from my uncle. And I'm this close to getting it!"

"You have to be barking mad if you guys think you can get away with this!" Jessie put in his two cents. "You saw the look on uncle Will's face!"

Larissa clasped her long nails into the back of her brother's neck. "I'm already in hot water here, but if you do anything to thwart this I swear to you…"

Jessie yanked away and shook his head. Hitting Luke a glare, he walked out.

~~~~~

Murrey's face contorted in something akin to nausea. He froze, unable to process what he had just heard. With the disturbing information he pulled himself together and snuck away to the house without the two men seeing him.

**********

A few hours before dinner that day, hyped up about the initials on the tree and and about what John and Luke said, Louis was now even more curious to know about his grandparents. He sat examining more of his mother's letters by the side table in the living room. He was looking for more. Something that could tell him more about why she stayed away from Champton. But he had read all of them already. But checking over the dates, he realized something.

Anne came just then yawning as he was stacking them up, and he reached out to her. She took a chair and surveyed the scene.

"John said that my grandmother, Elouisa, was my grandfather's lawyer and she helped him compensate the Paynes for Dean Cowell taking their land," Louis quipped exitedly. "It makes me feel a whole lot better about him taking the land from under Dean. It's nice to know how in love they were. She made him a better man."

Anne swallowed and pasted on a smile. "Yes, uh, that's true. Uh? Is that-uh- all you found out about her?"

Louis thought. "Um? Oh! I've read all these letters but some are missing. There are gaps in the dates they were sent? I'm thinking maybe they could have something more about her. I just wish Mum had talked to me more about her parents."
Harry came in and passed by behind Anne just then but when he saw them he made a beeline and didn't spare a look in Louis' direction as he continued up the stairs.

Anne gazed away in thought. She seemed to be struggling to come to terms with a hard decision.

"Alright," she drew out tiredly. "I'll check and see if I have any more lying around somewhere."

*****

The pillow was a soft beaten up heap. Louis had punched it ten times before squirming into bed. Harry had ignored him all day.

He fought back anger and tried to sleep. Then the door opened.

Harry tiptoed in and quietly jumped into Louis' bed. Louis was facing the wall but he felt Harry's warmth next to him as he spread his blanket over them both and laid down next to Louis. Poor thing, unaware of Louis' anger, cuddling like a hapless bunny making friends with a lion.

"Louis?"

"Goodnight, Harry." The sentence came out harsh and dismissive.

Louis didn't want anything to do with Harry right now but he smiled to himself knowing Harry still couldn't sleep without him.

"Louis? I love you."

Harry said it in question form, and Louis opened his eyes abruptly to face the boy who was laying there staring at him sadly. Louis wanted to believe it. He wanted to bask in it and be proud that the boy he loved him back but Louis knew he'd be setting himself up to be ignored when it counted. Louis wasn't falling for that again.

"I love you too, now get some sleep."

He made a quick turn and kissed his forehead, and was about to turn back around when he felt Harry's hand on his crotch, gently squeezing it. He put his hand to shove it off, and caught the feel of the skin on Harry's hips; the smoothness went all the way up his leg, exposed too high to be shorts. Louis heart started beating fast in his chest.

Then Harry whispered in a requesting tone, "Louis, I want you to fuck me, like you did in the stables."

Louis didn't know how to answer that, he just knew the statement alone sent hot pre-cum squirting through his briefs.

Harry stood on his knees in the bed and the blanket fell away revealing a dark blue, lacy pair of panties.

It happened in one swift motion; Louis was rutting into him, pinning his hands down on the bed over his head, ignoring the surprised moans that came from him as his hungry tongue fished in his mouth.

They pulled away after a while only for Harry to throw him a smirk while reversing positions and going down on him.

Harry sucked for a while and Louis wanted him to stay. He started thinking about their first time
and the second time that morning, and how Harry refused to talk about things let alone look at him, and now Harry is saying he wants it like that again? No! Harry deserved better. Something he would be proud to talk about with Louis. Louis dared not pretend he didn't like what they did in the stables, but maybe he could make tonight memorable in a good way and not end it in a fight, despite all the tenseness between them.

"Harry, that feels so good. But-uhhh huhhhhh- Stop, please..."

Harry groaned a "no" and sucked even harder, sending Louis into a frenzy of pants. Harry was good at this, holding on to the base of Louis' dick and shoving his mouth repeatedly over it with suction.

"If you don't stop I'm going to come," he panted with pleasure.

Releasing him, Harry sat up and made an annoyed noise. Then he grabbed Louis' dick again and started jerking it. Louis had to grab away his hands and kiss them.

His mouth watering, he swallowed at the sight of Harry's body in the cotton panties that were holding his bulge.

"I know the last time wasn't-"

Harry cut him off then, placing the pads of his fingers on his lips.

"It was amazing," he whispered, barely audible.

Louis smiled to himself. He wanted them to be that invincible couple Harry spoke of in the stables. He wanted to drag down the roof of stars and lay it his feet for everyone to see what Harry meant to him.

Harry connected their foreheads and Louis gave him a quick kiss before shuffling away. "Wait right here for me, okay? I'll be right back." Then he climbed out of bed and left his bewildered boyfriend alone in the room.

----

In his boxers, on his tippy toes, Louis peeped from behind the stairs at Gemma and Cord platonically watching TV in the dark living room. Looking in the opposite direction he quickly checked to make sure no one was in the kitchen before creeping over into it.

From atop the staircase, Anne leaned over the railing quietly in the dark, eavesdropping on the two in front the television. She gasped when, in the corner of her eye, she saw Louis sneaking to the kitchen in his underwear. She observed as the boy tiptoed to reach the top shelf of the cupboard.

He pulled out two champagne glasses and proceeded to take out a bottle from the fridge that had remained from the party.

----

"Louis? What -" Eyes bright with happy surprise, Harry sat up with his hands between his knees over the covers.

"I know we don't agree on certain things at the moment," Louis said, uncapping the bottle. "But I want- I need for these times to be memorable for you."
Louis filled a glass and held it out to him but the boy didn't take it just yet.

"I know you want it to be special, but I just want you inside me." He planted his hands on his jawline and smiled at him. "I know we didn't use a condom and we can if you rather that but I just want you to know I trust you."

After Louis insisted they make a toast to him staying the rest of the summer, they took a sip, and kissed as they fell on the bed. Harry started panting as Louis bounced around on the mattress to take off his boxers.

Louis' mouth then wasted no time in taking Harry's length as he pulled his panties halfway down. Harry was soft and firm at the same time, and Louis liked it so much he was torn between making him last and allowing him to shoot his juices down his throat as soon as possible.

Loud moaning ensued from Louis' mouth as he sucked. The shudders and noises from the younger boy persuaded him to leave his post and lick random parts of his chest and neck coming around to his lips where he planted a passionate kiss not void of the constant moaning.

Harry managed to squiggle his head away to say; "You're being loud! Even Cord will hear us from the cabin!"

Louis whispered, eyes cold, "You ran out on me, Harry. So you don't get to make the rules now. I'm gonna make you scream so loud the whole house will hear you. She will hear you and know that you're mine."

"I'll scream into my pillow," Harry teased still unaware of just how upset Louis was.

"It's not gonna work. I'm gonna leave you begging me to stop," Louis stated as his hands touched Harry's crotch, sucking on his neck, then his chest, then his stomach.

Harry moaned out as Louis reached his cock and started licking it again.

Then all of a sudden Louis' hair was being grabbed and jerked sideways. He looked up surprised and saw that Harry was in an orgasm so intense that he was unable to make a sound, eyes tightly closed, and mouth wide open, ready to moan out loud at anytime...

Then a hot squirt stung Louis' chest. He ignored it, opting to quickly sit up and pull Harry onto his lap, allowing the boy to moan through his orgasm into his neck. Louis caressed him and held him through it, and then proceeded to coat his own dick with some lubricant.

"You like it rough, don't you?" Louis blew in his ear as he lifted the boy's arse off the bed just enough to allow room for penetration of his wet fingers to help loosen up his tension. The boy's only answer was to groan out in a little series of emotionality, making it clear he wanted it any which way Louis was willing to give him.

Louis gasped lowly as Harry sank onto his throbbing dick. He looked down at the motion and saw that Harry was yet again hard, having came too early.

He held on to Harry's face and stole a lick from his chin to his nose as he pumped his dick up inside him, Harry bouncing on his hips like a basketball.

"You're so hard for me baby," Louis whispered as he stroked the velvet firmness of his dick. "You're still hard for me?" he hissed in broken croaks between the slapping thrusts.

"Ummh!" Harry singsong-moaned. It was clear he was in a serious state of want.
"My poor baby..." Louis said softly, propping himself backward on his left palm. He didn't want him to come too early again, so he slowed down his gyrations in Harry's hole, while enjoying pumping the boy's dick with his right hand.

His eyes watered as he moved inside him, and he too wanted to cry, feeling the sweetness on his tip.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"Noooooo!!!!!!" Harry groaned, his palms slapping onto Louis' face to steady it for a sloppy kiss. Only -due to the jumping- it was more like an open-mouthed connection of their tongues predominantly. Then he wrapped his legs around Louis' waist and started twerking on his dick slow and passionate.

Louis didn't know where his thoughts went. All he knew was how happy - or angry - he was with Harry. Nothing else mattered besides being in this moment with him.

"Ohh!" Harry moaned as a merciless tooth nicked him by accident. This seemed to further drive him into a frenzy as he squeezed Louis' face harder, the moist, plump flesh changing shape in his grip.

Harry moved slowly up and down then started jumping on his dick making sexy little noises of weakness with every single slam.

"Ride my dick baby, yes!" Louis breathed into his neck. His strokes on Harry's dick were becoming faster and he felt heat like a furnace bursting from both their bodies.

"Do- you want me -to come -inside you, Ha-rry!?!" he barely managed to ask.

"Yessssss!!" Harry said loudly through his orgasms. He had long forgotten about the pillow.

Louis sucked on his nipples before replying. "Then fuck me, Harry-Fuck my -dick -hard..."

Gripping and jerking Harry's dick as best he could with the crazy thrusts, he felt it vibrate in his hand, and Harry moaned out loud as long shots of cum sprayed onto Louis' hand and chest.

Louis enjoyed the sight of this and the thrill made him so hot he felt himself about to come as well. Picking up the pace he held Harry's face in his hands and shoved his tongue in his mouth hungrily, his thighs burning with the weight of Harry on them.

Louis' head blanked out the moment he felt his hot cum wash back and surround his tip and shaft, lubricating them.

Harry fell back limp on the bed, panting deeply and wiping sweat from trickling down his eyes.

"I sh-should go." Harry breathed heavily. I'll sleep in the spare room or the couch." He looked so apologetic and self-berating, and ashamed. But why? Of what? Being with Louis? Yes he had been angry before but the minute Harry had touched him it went away.

"You're staying," Louis said, laying on top of him. "You're staying right here with me."

He clamped Harry's hands over his head in the bed and held them there, dropping his face in the crook of his neck. He panted in sync with Harry's own heavy breaths, both their hearts beating into him like dodge balls.
"I'm never letting you go."

****

Breakfast was going well the next morning, everyone chatting and sharing their schedules for the day, until-

"Louis," Anne rang out in an alerting tone. He looked up.

"Might want to bring Liam by for dinner perhaps, instead of sneaking him into your room late at night."

Louis' face flushed straight down. His first instinct, he looked at Harry, but regretted it. The boy was burning red and wore the expression of a man deeply insulted and having to hold his tongue.

Liam? Why would she think I had Liam in my… She thinks Liam and I…? Oh no. No. She saw me last night in the kitchen!

He ripped his eyes away from Harry just then. He didn't want her to see. To find out that it wasn't Liam in his room all half naked and spread out on his bed.

He turned his eyes to Cord who had been covering his mouth to contain his growing smirk. Gemma, on the other hand, was looking at her mother with something akin to disbelief. Louis figured she must be wondering how dumb Anne was not to see clear as day that Harry owned Louis' heart not Liam or anyone else.

"May I be excused," the dreadfully hoarse tone came from Harry's end of the table.

Nobody answered and the boy just got up and walked out the back door.

****

He fought with his limbs the remainder of breakfast not to up and run after the boy. He ended up gobbling down his meal and dumping everyone's dishes in the sink to try make it look like he wasn't in such a hurry. Anne didn't seem to notice but Gemma, on the other hand, hit him a glare.

He rolled his eyes at her. He really didn't want to be around her right now, especially with Cord and Anne around oblivious to the fact that they were both being lied to by them.

Louis jogged down to Cord's cabin after breakfast, hearing the sound of Harry's guitar coming from there. He sat on the porch playing, eyebrows together in deep thought. He stopped when he saw Louis approaching.

He shared one look with Harry and they both knew what the silent conversation spoke of. See why we should tell her, Harry?-Why would she even think that?

"Look at it this way; she seen me in the kitchen last night. Would you rather she walked in on us?"

"Yeah, but Liam? Imagine if I was with Liam. Would she still want him over for dinner? Would I get the same respect as you?"

"She's just being gracious and welcoming. Maybe if she knows it's us who are together she'll be even happier. You can't ignore how she is with Steve. She likes him," Louis tried.

"Yeah, but she hates Luke..." Harry returned.
Louis tried again in a soft voice. "I want to tell her. I want to tell her what we are to each other and all of it."

"She won't understand."

"Yes, she will! Let's be positive. She'll be happy for us."

Harry laughed sarcastically.

Louis sighed frustratedly. "I can't just make this turn into a couple of sneaky times every summer and on holidays. What happens when you're old enough to get married like Luke and Steve? How are we going to explain it then?"

Harry did a double take. "You'd marry me?"

A hand brushed his cheek. "I would."

A huge grin expanded over Harry's entire being, and he tossed the guitar on the bench and got up, grabbing Louis' hand. He pushed the cabin door open and grinned wider as he pulled Louis inside. Taken by surprise and adrenaline, Louis shut the door and leaned on it as Harry moved in to kiss him.

His hands were warm, his skin glowing as he moved backwards, leading him by hand further inside the dim room.

Giving him the eye, he let go of his hand and sat on the edge of the bed. The sheets were visibly clean and well made up, and the room looked generally tidy as opposed to the last time they were there. Taking a look around, Louis shoved his hands in his jean pockets.

"We shouldn't be in here. Cord actually cleaned up. I don't want to…"

Rolling his eyes and taking off his converse, Harry explained, "Oh, please. Cord's been sleeping in Gem's room for the past two nights. From the looks of it they'll probably make an announcement by tomorrow that they're back on."

Louis google-eyed him. It had just occurred to him that he hadn't told Harry about what he walked in on at the gazebo party. But here Harry was saying he already knew? What if he knows about the pregnancy too? What if he gets mad at me for not saying anything?

"They don't think I know but I see him sneaking in while I'm sneaking in your room. I'm sleeping with you again tonight, by the way."

Louis grin-nodded. Why is he so smart… and sexy?

Harry then gave him a look, his eyes moving down his body and back up again.

"Come here, Lou."

Louis looked at the bed. "It's still weird to…"

Harry started unbuttoning his jeans. "I'm taking my clothes off. You can stand and watch or get over here."

Black. It was a pair of black lace with a pink bow this time, and Louis was so dumbfounded as to how Harry got away with wearing these things around the farm. But the fact that he was wearing them with so much confidence now and just for him, had him completely blown away.
"So you'd marry me, huh?" Harry asked Louis, who was naked on top of the boy in a heartbeat. He was even thinking anymore. Not with his brains.

"But you didn't say if you'd accept," he said like a question.

"Under one condition,"- Harry prompted, and Louis kissed his temple -"Promise me we'll always be like this." He opened his legs and wrapped them around Louis' torso. He wanted to take him just like that, simple, cute, but the black freakin lace wouldn't let him. They were just calling for him to drag them down halfway and turn him the fuck over on the bed.

So he did.

He turned him over and sent his face diving in between his arse cheeks, his tongue unleashing on his hole.

Harry gasped then giggle-yelped, then his face went crashing into the mattress while the fingers of his left hand reached back and grabbed on to the back of Louis' head.

The sheets crinkled in the boy's grasp and Louis got even madder with heat. He sucked and rotated his tongue, digging it in.

Squealing sounded, and Louis got concerned. "Harry? Do you think you can try holding it in a little longer, Babe? I don't want you to come on the sheets, I want you to come on me."

Getting a muffled hum in permission, Louis gave a last lick to the beautiful loose, sucked hole waiting to be penetrated by more than his tongue. Sixteen. The boy was only sixteen, he might want Louis today and change his mind next week. His mother might find out about them and all the other secrets Louis had been keeping and he'll never be allowed to see him again. This could be the last time they get to be this close. So even though he knew this was probably the time to stop this before it got out of hand - I mean they were having sex all over the farm with no condom, and although Louis knew he was clean it was still irresponsible of him being the legal adult here- he let himself have it. He just didn't care right that moment; his boyfriend wanted him, and he wanted him.

Harry made all his noise in the mattress, coming up for air every few seconds while grabbing the bedding. Louis knew the intensity of what was happening with him; his hole was looser and red now with sensation, and it felt good around his dick, the small rim of inside-flesh coming out with it whenever he pulled outward. He was in a pool of emotion.

"Tell me if it's too much." 

"No, don't. Don't stop," Harry groaned, twerking back.

Louis took the panties and wrapped the material around his fingers like a bandage, and slid his arm around harry's neck, inhaling the underwear while kissing his shoulder. Harry gripped on to his arm and moaned in ecstasy.

"I think- I'm gonna come!"

Louis leapt into action quickly pulling out of him and getting on the bed to lie on his back. He motioned for the boy to climb on top of him. Harry moved slowly to sit on his pelvis. His lips were plummy and his eyes dilated. He looked on a high. He sat there not moving, only panting unsuredly like a lost puppy.

Louis sat up, leaning on the headboard, and held him. "It's okay, Baby. I'm here. I'm not going
anywhere. Just come when you're ready, Love. Come all over me."

Harry nuzzled into his neck, sobbing, his penis still withholding the shot.

"No no no, don't cry. How bout I sing you a song. Any song you wanna hear."

Harry looked at him. A smile broke on his face. "Total Eclipse of the Heart."

"You wanna hear that?"

"I liked how you were singing it the other day."

"No, I wasn't!" Louis lied, blushing all of a sudden.

"Yes, you sang it in the shower when you were drunk." Harry smirked at him, his fingertips on the skin over his chin.

"I don't recall," Louis whispered, with deep eyebrows. "But I'll still sing it."

Harry kissed his shoulder deep and wet. Louis closed his eyes and welcomed the eroticism of it.

He ran his hand over Harry's stray hair, wishing to be back inside him. "Turn around, I get a little bit helpless and I'm lying like a child in your arms..."

Harry stopped the song with an unexpected kiss. He moaned and gripped the sides of Louis' face, rutting into him. Louis felt the wet heat squirt on his belly, and groaned into the boy's mouth as he too felt himself releasing.

Louis started wiping the mess they made with the panties. They got soaked and still didn't clean everything up. He stuffed them in his fist and inhaled.

"Do you mind if I keep this a while?"

Harry observed as he planted a kiss on the object. "Dude, that is so creepy."

Louis burst out in laughter and wrestled Harry on his back, tickling him. His knee draped over his waist with his soft, wet dick on his left hip. "And you luring me in here isn't, aye?"

They were giggle-panting on their backs, bellies covered in cum, when a voice was suddenly calling from a distance.

"Harry!? Louis!?

Louis looked at his boyfriend. It was Anne. She sounded like she was in the direction of the cow pen.

Harry's expression was dreading. "She'll stop in a sec."

"HARRYYY!! Where in God's name are they!?" her voice grew closer and Harry spotted her silhouette nearing the cabin. It had now hit Louis that the windows were curtain less.

"I have a plan. I'll tell her you seduced me." Louis twiddled his fingers along Harry's back.

Harry snorted.

"Haaarry!" they heard much closer now…almost as if she were -
"Oww!"

Harry yanked Louis' arms and rolled, and they tumbled off the bed, Louis; back first. Harry lay in top of him. "Where -" Louis started to ask if their clothes could be seen from outside the window but Harry slapped his hand over his mouth as his mother's voice called again. Only Louis' eyes were exposed now, an they stared at him lovingly, pitifully. Harry was amazed at how much the eyes could tell when the lips were covered. His heart beat close to his and the heat still lingered in their groins as they touched their too. Louis' breathing grew heavy with the hand on his face and he rest his head back on the floor, his arms wrapping hopelessly around Harry's neck. 

Then Louis' phone vibrated from in his jeans cast on the wooden floor somewhere behind his head. Harry almost lost it. He stretched and retrieved it. "It's Stan!" he whispered harshly, cutting the noise off. Louis let out a giant snort. Harry slapped his mouth shut, harder this time so it hurt. Louis closed his eyes, trying to breathe away the pain as the sound of Anne's voice grew smaller and smaller as her footsteps moved further away from the cabin. Is this really how it's going to be? Louis began to wish she had seen them together like this, in love, then all this would be over with. Harry flew up and started jumping into his clothes. Louis just lay there. He put his arm over his eyes, and Harry turned to him. "What are you still doing on the floor!!? Come on, we have to get out of here!" he whispered harshly. Then a large sob came from Louis. He felt Harry sink back down in front of him and lay his hands on his chest. "Louis? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings." "I'm okay," Louis croaked. "I just - You should go first. She doesn't need to see us both coming out of here together."

***********

Louis strolled into the quiet house, placing the guitar pick in the space inside the guitar pendant hanging from his neck. He had picked it up off the cabin floor after it probably fell out of Harry's pocket when he had scrambled to get back to his chores. The boy hadn't noticed his pendant yet and Louis didn't want to show him until he was sure the two items were a match. As he placed it, he was sure now. All the squiggles aligned and it fit into the groove like a puzzle piece finally together after years of being apart. He sat on the third step, gawking at the thing observantly. Why does Harry's guitar pick fit perfectly with a guitar pendant I gave Calvin a long time ago?

He quickly tucked it back inside his shirt as Luke came in from the back and crept up the stairs with his laundry basket.
Louis shifted for the man to pass but then he was squatting down beside him. He rest the basket behind him and offered Louis a not-so-cheery smile.

"Louis, people like Harry weren't made to settle in one spot, hidden away from the world. One day he might want to go and see what's out there beyond this little town of Champton Valley. We Selleys tend to do that."

Did I miss something? Louis silently asked himself. He had yet to see where Luke was going with this.

The man clasped his hands, his elbows propped on his knees. He kept turning his body pointedly to Louis as he spoke but not really looking him in the eyes.

"You must follow your own path aside from Harry otherwise when you lose him to his destiny you'll end up with no sense of self," he stressed in a low voice. -Louis shot him a shocked but defensive stare, and the man raised his eyebrows innocently to explain- "I saw you two leaving the old squalor at different times."

Louis eyes hooked into him. He was surprised Luke knew about them and it made a dread rise up in him that it was that easy to see.

Luke shrugged. "I'm just saying, be prepared to lose him to his passions." He then reached behind Louis, grabbed up his basket, and went on his merry business.

Louis jumped to his feet. Luke knows!? That means Steve must know too. The list just goes on and on…

It was fueling his need to tell Anne even more now. What if one of them slipped up in her presence? He was growing frustrated to a point where he might slip up, because literally everyone knew except Anne. It hurt Louis so much because their relationship had evolved now. They had become intimate. In the wake of Anne's misguided assumption, he thought back on his previous relationship with Liam. As much as he wanted to ignore it, he couldn't help but see the similar pattern now, and hoped with everything in him his relationship with Harry didn't have the same outcome.

"Louis!" - Louis spun around to see Anne all disheveled- "I've been looking all over for you! One of the lambs is really sick!"

*****

How is she?” Louis stooped down to take a better look at Orange.

“She’s not doing well. She got worse,” Harry said, lying on a blanket he brought out to the pen, curled up next to the lamb. “She’s in some kind of pain and I don’t know how to help. Mum already called the vet.”

"Are you still mad at me?"

"No." Louis glued his eyes to Harry lying on the blanket curled up next to the lamb. He felt sorry for the thing but he was curious as to what the animal had and if Harry's airways should be that close to its fur.

"Look, do you wanna get out of here?"

"Louis, no. I can't leave her."
Louis nodded. He wasn't surprised Harry wanted to stay with the thing. She followed him everywhere but inside the house like he was her mama, but that too was expected since her mother Betsy herself adored Harry.

He sat down and made himself comfortable.

Harry shifted to make room, observing him.

"Hey!" Harry's mouth flew open. He reached out and touched the pendant. "Where did you get this? It's like mine!"

"Um …" Louis proceeded to tell him everything about Fizzie and the necklace and how Calvin got it from him.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Harry gasped on hearing it. "Louis, that-that's like-this is so unreal! I never thought this would be part of a pendant?"

"I think it's so the guitar pick can stay safe," Louis said, holding the pendant. "It's amazing how we had these two things our whole lives but never knew each other."

"I know. I'm curious about how you ended up with this. Granddad must have given it to your Mum, or maybe Emmett."

"Yeah."

Sometime during the conversation the lamb had fallen asleep.

Louis took his boyfriend's hand.

"Whadyou say we go for ice-cream? Cheer you up."

Louis got a satisfaction from the dimples emerging now. "Okay, but we come right back."

"Mhm," Louis replied, helping him up.

*********

Harry pov-

"This is killing me!" Louis pleaded as he eased off of an indecently exposed Harry in the back seat of the truck. "We have to tell her!"

They had bought their ice-creams and taken off to 'Niall's' again, parking up in a quiet spot on the old lake road. They had decided not to drive all the way out there for fear the ice-cream melted by the time they reached but the sun was already on that. The radio played softly while Louis licked melted ice-cream off different spots on Harry's body as he lay there pouring it naughtily.

They were basically about to make love when Louis had suddenly stopped. The guilt had outweighed his desire.

Harry lay beneath him, frustrated. He couldn't believe they were yet again in another clash over the inappropriateness of sneaking around.

"Louis, now? You chose to talk about this now?" He was throbbing with want and hoping they could spend a bit more time without having to worry about it getting late or someone walking in on them. They would spend the entire afternoon straight into the evening out here together.
Louis shook his head, and his voice broke as he apologized. "She almost caught us. Harry, your heart beat a mile a minute! I've never seen you that scared."

"I know, we have to be more careful next time. Just throw it out of your mind for now and touch me."

The older boy nodded sadly and resumed his kisses. Beneath the cherry vanilla flavor they both still smelled and tasted like the love they had made in the cabin. Louis went down down down until he suddenly stopped at his abdomen.

"Luke knows about us," he blurted out, dropping down on Harry, face in the crook of his neck.

Harry grew angry. "What did he say to you?"

"Just some weird advice about not getting too attached to eachother," Louis muffled from Harry's neck.

"He told you to break up with me?"

Quickly, Louis raised his head. "That's not exactly what he said."

"Sounds like it!" Harry snapped.

"I don't know, he was going on and on about destiny… and passions- watches too much soap operas if you ask me- The point is; the list of people who know about us is growing. Champton is a small town. How long before she finds out?"

"Louis, you know we can't risk saying anything. I hate sneaking around like this too, but if this wasn't the only way we can be together I wouldn't be making you do this with me." He grabbed the top of Louis' hair and pulled him down. He wanted Louis' lips on him finishing what he started. He needed his boyfriend's warmth and kisses all over him.

Louis wanted him too but it was apparent his concentration had already wavered.

Harry kissed him trying to make it work but Louis responded with a light peck and went off on a rant.

"If she doesn't approve I'll do everything I can to change her mind. If it takes years I will do it. I will not just give up on you."

Why was Louis being so difficult? "So that's it, you are going to just ignore everything I've been telling you, and tell my mum about us?"

"We have to- Ow!" Louis yelped. Harry had shoved him off hard.

"Get the fuck off off me!"

******

**Louis' pov**

Louis parked the truck on the gravel and marched inside the empty house. They had yelled and argued the entire way home, screaming over the loud music blaring from the vehicle. Harry had tried to explain how hard it was when his mother had episodes growing up, throwing out his things, yelling, but Louis countered it saying that he'd never allow that to happen again because he wasn't going to let Harry go through it alone this time, which resulted in Harry breaking down and flat out
begging Louis to reconsider telling Anne the truth.

"I'll run away with you- I'll do anything, Louis but not that, please," Harry pleaded, following him in.

They reached the kitchen where they found a note on the refrigerator; Anne had gone out with Robin to the grocery store again.

Harry let out a long sigh, closing his eyes. He was sure Louis would have been confessing to her if she was there now, with the look in his eyes. Louis had changed since the party. Harry wasn't certain but he felt it was because of the whole misunderstanding /slap/ Grimmy thing. Like it somehow sent Louis over the edge and made him this determined to bring their affair to light out of fear of losing Harry. And he understood why, I mean, anybody who had to be a secret would be scared of being invisible in that person's life. Heck, Harry was met with that fear when Mark told him to stay out of the conversation with Louis on Sunday, and when his mother assumed it was Liam in Louis room the night before. Harry didn't want things to be this way any more than Louis did, but unlike Louis, Harry knew his mother. He knew the Anne that rampaged before Gemma went to college. The Anne that mildly existed after, the one that disappeared when Louis came to spend the holidays. He knew the Anne he never wanted to see again and definitely would if she found out that he and Louis were doing things to eachother in her dead husband's truck.

Louis crumpled the note and dumped it in the bin. "I'm done, Harry. We're telling her when she gets back."

Harry gave a tragic head shake and turned on his heels, shooting back out the kitchen door.

Louis darted after him, grabbing his arm and pulling him against the stairs.

"Harry you, and Gemma, and Anne mean so much to me. If it were different circumstances I would do it your way, but I care about her too much to be that disrespectful."

Harry swallowed hard but didn't answer. Louis didn't mind because he would make the boy understand one way or another.

"Harry we're fucking in her home behind her back-I already feel horrible about that- and now you're asking me to steal you away without so much as a goodbye let alone an explanation? Harry..." Louis shook his head.

"I know it looks selfish but I don't know what else to say." Harry eyes weld up with more hot tears. He knew the position they were in had slim chances of a good outcome. "It's either you keep this secret and be with me or you go to college and forget about me."

"Harry, I have fallen irreversibly in love with you." Louis said tearfully, clasping Harry's fingers in his. "I don't wanna go to college and forget that I love you!"

"I don't want you to!" Harry cried.

"Then-"

"No! You don't get it! We can't tell her! I keep telling you, you don't know her!"

"Harry, you're not willing to give her the benefit of a doubt!?" Louis desperately asked. Harry covered his face in anguish. Louis knew how much Harry struggled with this but it was hard for him to keep all these freaking secrets. Why won't he understand that?
"If we tell her and she's not okay with it then we can work past that," Louis tried again. "She'll realize that we can't be separated and eventually she will have to accept it."

Harry squirmed at this but Louis raised his eyebrow stoppingly.

"And if she doesn't accept, you know I'm not gonna leave you anyhow."

"Yes, you will! You're going to college!" Harry said decisively. "You're gonna meet someone-someone you can actually be with, and you are going to forget me."

Louis growled at the ceiling. He'd had it up to his nose with Harry. "That won't happen! I'll come back for you! I'm not gonna abandon you, Harry!"

Harry shook his head violently, voice breaking down. Fine. If Louis won't listen to him then there's no other option. "If you tell her I will never forgive you, I promise you that."

Louis looked at him, observing his tear filled face, and felt hurt. He had no response to that.

"So you're willing to throw me away for fear our secret comes out?" he finally dragged out.

Harry's teary eyes moved all over Louis' face and came to rest on his lips. The way Louis said it was bitter and Harry caught the slight dismayed tone of T'm back here again." And he hated that he was doing it to the boy like Liam had done before but he had to. His mother would never understand. "If we don't have a way out then I can't do this anymore. I can't take any of it anymore. I'm not changing my mind about this, so, goodbye, Louis."

Louis broke into fresh tears. "Harry, no-what are you-"

Harry shook his head, "Please-I can't do it anymore- Say goodbye, please."

"That's not an option-"

"Say it! I'm walking away whether you say it or not!"

Louis let out a long teeth gritting growl and forcibly meshed their foreheads together, pressing Harry into the side of the stairs, but Harry painfully wiggled away making to leave. Louis grabbed his hand, pulled him back. Holding both Harry's hands tight as ever to his heart, no space between them, he said indignantly; "You wanna break up with me, fine, but then what? How long till you get over me, huh? A month? A year? Or is it as soon as you run outside and close the door?"

Harry pulled as hard as he could but he wasn't strong enough to get away. Louis held his hands tight and added in a pained whisper, "Tell me how long and I will say goodbye to you."

Harry didn't answer, he just shook his head defiantly. He waited for him to break but he did not, and Louis knew he was dead serious about this. If Harry needed space Louis would give him the whole of Champton Valley if he could. But it wasn't as if the ignorant boy didn't know exactly how Louis felt. He damn well knew that this is exactly where Louis wanted to be forever. With him. Just with Harry. The pain of ever being separated from the curly haired boy was something Louis could never fathom.

Louis pressed his weight on him and stared into his eyes. "Do you know what I was doing when my mum died, Harry?" -the boy let out a large sob in response- "I was falling in love with you," Louis finished, bringing a few fingers to smooth his curls. "How am I supposed to move on from that now?"
Louis grip grew weak and he went silent. Now pulling away and crying uncontrollably with no ability to look at Louis at all, Harry made a dash, turning up the stairs and into his room, slamming the door.

It was then that Louis realized Anne and Robin had come back and were outside fumbling with the keys in the front door. He quickly charged into his room to dry his tears. He heard Anne calling him, calling Harry to help bring in the groceries, and the tears could not stop falling. If anything it made the tears fall harder thinking how she let the words flow off her tongue so effortlessly, not knowing the true undernote of their two names called together.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm proud of this. I hope to make the remaining chapters worth the while. Please tell me your views and concerns about this chapter. And please kudos.
Figuring things Out- Post Breakup

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the hold up guys. I had shit to deal with! I will be posting three chapters in the space of two days and y'all have to wait a bit for the final chapter after that! Please tell your friends about this on twitter stan. Press the kudo button below if you love reading just as much as i love sharing with you!

Here we go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was six a.m. Eating his cereal in the kitchen Louis noticed that nobody was up yet. He put the spoon to his mouth and heard the familiar steps of converse sneakers come down the stairs and abruptly come to a halt in the kitchen doorway.

The slow restarting of action, then dishes disrupting in the drainer, then the spoon drawer opening and the light clinking of spoons, followed by the fridge door opening let Louis know Harry was planning on having cereal too.

He raised a brow at the boy as he sat down opposite him and poured his milk.

"Mornin, Harry," he said with a raspy but delicate voice. Harry neglected to raise his head.

"What? You're never gonna talk to me again, is that it?" Louis kept his eyes on the boy as he ignored him.

"After all the beautiful things we did together I never thought we'd be back here." Louis spoke with pain streaked tone, remembering what Harry was like after he confessed his feelings to him two weeks before.

Harry glanced at the entrance and then at Louis. He then lowered his head and continued eating.

Slouching in and throwing a sleepy eye on the boys, Gemma started making coffee.

"Morning, guys."

Neither boy answered.

"In the truck... In my bed... In the stables," Louis continued to drone, head tilted to follow Harry's avoiding eyes. "In the cab-"

Harry stood suddenly, hitting his palm on the table and stomping out the back door, slamming it loudly.

Gemma whirled around from the counter and looked at Louis with a 'what the heck just happened?' face.
Louis saw good opportunity to capitalize. "He broke up with me. That means you have nothing to hold over my head, so cancel the jump!"

"See, that's where you are wrong, City boy. It's been, what? Three days since you've been sitting on my secret? What's mum going to think when she finds out you kept that from her for so long?"

Louis looked at her, dismantled.

"It's simple. Stay out of my way. Let me do my thing, and when it's all over she never gets to know you knew about it all along."

Louis threw a disgusted snort at her and stormed out the to the living room, and out the front door, the opposite of where Harry went.

*****

"Shit!" Harry quietly exclaimed, instantly, sorry he slammed the door. He was sure his mother would come running to see what happened.

He ran down the back stairs and dived under the little nook where he had sat with Louis the first week he came. He rest his bum down and winced; he was still sore from all the stuff they did the past few days.

Shifting to a comfortable position, he pulled out his phone and texted Louis.

'Please, Louis, you can't talk to me like that anymore. Or look at me the way you do. Let's just act normal, please, there's nothing more to happen between us. You'll go to college and forget all of it.'

****

Out by the truck, Louis lit a cigarette and kicked a wheel. He was so enraged he picked up a stone and threw it as far out down the steep hill as possible.

He felt his pocket vibrate. It was a text from Harry. He laughed dryly as he read it, and ran his hand through his hair. Nodding bitterly, he dropped the cigarette and mashed it. He jumped in the driver's seat and typed a reply.

'Harry, why are you doing this? How the fuck am I going to look at you without thinking about us?'

Tears filling his eyes, he erased it and typed 'I love you,' sending that one instead as John and Murrey arrived to continue work on the tree.

*************

The tree was sawed halfway through the middle. Any further and it was "timber!"

Luke's more casual attire today; rolled up checked sleeves, thick denim jeans, spoke to the strives he was making to sink in and be a part of things in Steve's absence.

Then Jessie, a rare face, strolled up to them.

"What's up little brother?" John greeted.

"I got the truck out front to pick up the board. Should I bring it around?"

"Yeah, good idea."

Louis watched as Jessie hit Luke another weird glare before turning back. Luke then stared at the man's back as he walked back around the front.

John glanced up. "You two hadn't seen each other in three years... since William died. Can't you end this and talk to each other."

"You know that can't happen."

"Calum's death hit him pretty bad too, Luke. He's come a long way since then. He's finally grasped that it's not his fault Calum died."

"It is!" Luke stormed around. "If he had just covered for him that day!"

"He'd be the dead one now? Is that where you're going with this?"

"What's going on? I don't follow?" Louis asked.

Harry blurted out, stealing away from the horse. "It's nothing- best stay out of it."

Luke flew around, eyes blazing into Harry. "Right! Right! That's good advice there Harry! Stay out of it since you're just as much to blame!"

Harry's mouth turned up in contempt and his cheeks went red hot. Luke moved in closer in hostility, and Louis flew to his feet.

Scotch neighed as John pulled Luke back and Harry let out a pitying laugh before walking off with Scotch to the stables.

The sound of the truck as it backed into the yard made Luke shrug John's hand off his shoulder.

Murrey glared from his father to Luke to his uncle Jessie who was now dismounting the truck and walking over unaware of the previous scene.

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"Known to many as a strong, bubbly young man with much to offer..."

The newly appointed Reverend Horan spoke, throwing dirt on the casket. His wife, a neat-haired pretty woman dressed in a thick frock stood with the crowd facing him, holding the hand of her son. The boy's feathery-blonde hair blew onto the dark checks of her clothing as he bent his neck to look at the strange people around him. They only had one Sunday service since they had moved to Champton Valley so far, and Harry got why the boy was so shy.

The sky-blue eyes fell on him and Harry jumped a little before pasting on a cordial smile.

The boy frowned at him and turned back to face front. Harry frowned too, looking up at his granddad sitting next to him. A little beyond, another blonde eyed him, this one with brown, more condemning vigor.
Harry gulped and leaned into his granddad’s side, trying to take in the service.

"AHHHHHH!!! Oh GOD! WHAT HAVE I DONE! AHHHHHHHH!!" a grievous sounding voice roared through the air.

Everyone turned around.

A rumpled up Jessie stumbled through the cemetery, drunk as a fish. A murmuring ensuing among everyone gathered around Calum’s assigned resting place...

"I'm sorry," he staggered, chin-length hair dusty and unkempt, clothes like he had slept in a coal mine. "It's all my fault!"

"It is!" Luke rumbled, eyes sunken, red, dark. "You're right. If you know what's good for you you will LEAVE MY SIGHT IMMEDIATELY!" Luke said, gradually escalating into a bellow in front of the reverend and ll the mourners, including Calum’s parents.

A large anchor-colored stetson moved up to reveal a surly William, glowering at Jessie.

Anne, who was standing on the other side of him, placed a stopping hand on his wrist knowing what he was thinking to do.

"It's alright," he said low, shifting from among the crowd.

He draped a heavy arm around Jessie, forcing on a rigid smile.

Leading the scrappy young man to the back of the crowd, he asked; "Did you know today was the service, boy?"

Jessie’s lips started quivering times ten. "I-I-I- I was-"

"Answer me, boy!" William's grip loosened on his shoulder and he brought down a heavy palm on his back.

Jessie’s head bopped wildly. He sniffled and lowered his head.

William eyed his image; eyes red and swollen and maybe infected in one of them from some kind of bar scuffle, clothes so rent they were better off thrown in the garbage than washed, one foot unshod; heck.

"Look at you, taking me back them days I had to drag you through all your teen years out the police station-" he clicked his tongue disapprovingly at the twenty-seven-yer-old. "Now I'm not gonna ask you how many years you been sober now, or how many years you been partners with Calum- don't matter anymore-" he looked at him, ashamed. "but this here is a peaceful, gathering for people who actually respect the dearly departed. And ain't nothin bout you saying 'peace' or 'respect', so get your toilet-smelling runt ass out of here before I have you thrown in jail for disrupting the service!"

A shaken up, Jessie threw a remorseful eye on the back of Luke's head as the Rev continued his speech, then he staggered away back to the road.

"Ashes to ashes..."

William made a spin around to return to the funeral, and was surprised to meet a pair of large green eyes looking up at him in awe.
He didn't have to work much to a more genuine smile this time as he placed his hand around Harry's shoulder, leading him back to the gathering. "Come on, son. Let's get this over with."

*********

Louis sped into the stables after Harry. He was shuffling reins and unsaddling Scotch. Louis heard a sniffle as his boots hit the concrete to alert the boy. He had been crying.

"Talk to me," Louis commanded.

"There's nothing to talk about," Harry blabbed out, and his eyes started watering again.

His hands were shaky with the reigns, and Louis reached out to take them. Harry jumped back.

"Stop, okay! I'm fine."

Louis' eyes grew wide with worry. "What happened back there!?"

With the tone Louis used he was half expecting the boy to lash out at him again. But with a deep breath, Harry told him all about what happened in the stables with Calum, Rapid Mane, and the rattlesnake.

"Oh my God. No wonder you two are always so tense. But that was not your fault. None of it was. You were only a little boy."

"I thought he'd let it go by now. Thought he stopped blaming everyone for what happened to Calum, but he's still as bitter as he was when it happened."

"Oh, Harry. That's why you got so mad yesterday when I told you what Luke said." He cupped his wet cheeks and ran his fingers through his hair. "He can't hurt us, Love. Being back here probably has him going through the motions."

He felt the boy ease into his grip and lean on him, and he covered him with his arms. His curly head buried in his chest, his arms hanging accustomed over his shoulders, they stood rocking on the spot, Scotch throwing them a whinny and turning away disgruntled.

"Harry, can we just talk about -"

"No, "Harry removed his head from Louis chest, and his arms from Louis' shoulders. "No, this doesn't change anything."

Louis watched him move backwards and backwards until he was five metres away and grounded.

"Harry, just let me hold you, I won't say anything again."

Harry looked at him longingly. "I can't just fall back into you like this all the time. If we stay away from each other then there is no reason to tell Mum anything."

"I'm frustrated, Harry. What else do you want me to do? You can't break up with me! I'm not gonna accept that. I missed you next to me last night. I don't even know when you came and took your blanket back."

"Look, I just want get my work done," Harry said to Louis' chest. He turned his back on him to
attend to Scotch, and said nothing further.

******

Louis pov

Three hours before nightfall, and Louis woke up from his nap to a knock on his bedroom door.

Growling like a Rottweiler, he stomped across the room and opened it. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw Harry standing there hidden behind a large dark cloak in his arms. Louis laughed quietly when he saw it to be his grandfather Emmett's Burberry jacket.

"I brought this back," he said in a low voice, holding out the jacket rather reluctantly. Louis was even more hesitant to take it but knew how hard it must have been for Harry to give it back after the memories it held.

He took it, and felt a weight in it. He felt around the pockets to find a magnifying glass in one of them. He laughed again, then frowned.

Tears started swelling in his eyes. "Grandma gave this to you."

Harry looked away. "I can't keep it. It's not right."

"It's just a glass, Harry. You can keep it." He held it out to him.

Harry shook his head vigorously. "Just take it, please. I have to feed the pigs."

"I don't want this back," Louis gestured the jacket, anger climbing up his spine. "I gave it to you. Don't you want to remember those two nights we spent there? Feels like you want to forget everything."

Harry looked into his eyes and Louis saw that they were red with hurt. "We shouldn't have happened. You were grieving and I was there. Don't make this into more than it was."

Harry might as well have been slapped in the face. Harry had looked away again after saying that. How? How can he just say that to my face and then look away!? Louis took a step back and clenched his jaw.

He wanted Harry to look at him so badly now. But as the seconds went by the bastard wouldn't. Louis took hold of the door knob, and that's when Harry looked up.

Harry pov

Harry's regretted it the second he did. The look in Louis' eyes... The disappointment. The shame. The Harry knew his words had hurt him. But he feared now that it was beyond repair as the boy's eyes burned with a film of tears over them. Louis slowly pushed the door with his right hand, his left holding the jacket, and it swung until it closed hiding him from Harry's view.

Harry didn't know if he was crying, or brooding, or hating him...he looked like he hated him...

"Louis..." Harry barely heard himself speak as his hands pressed the door. Of all the things he could have said...why did he have to say that?

Harry turned away, crying.
"What's going on?" Luke flipped his hair coming out of the kitchen.

Harry glared at him, ready to draw blood. "What's going on? You stand there and pretend like you don't know anything that's going on, but you did this!"

The middle-aged man folded his arms and cocked his ear. "I don't understand."

"Oh, my god. You really have no idea what you've done," Harry sighed. "I had something for myself something that kept me together, made everything bad that ever happened to me disappear, and you decided that you would take that from me too."

Luke seemed to be putting two and two together. "Wait. You slept in the guest room last night. Are you two...taking a break?" he inquired rather emotionless.

Harry laughed, just like Louis had a few minutes ago. "Rapid Mane was scared. He's a horse, he didn't mean to block the door. He didn't deserve to die for it. You're a curse everywhere you go. Steve would be better off without you. I hate you and that's never going to change," he enunciated coldly. "I want you to leave and never come back!"

Louis was furious. Louis was so done.

He threw the jacket on the bed and paced through the room. A sniffle escaped him. A tear let loose. And soon he was sobbing loudly.

He crawled onto the bed and held the jacket close to him. His sobs grew louder and he started coughing but he cried still.

He comforted himself with the soft material, smoothing his hands on it. His hand reached the pockets and he heard a crunch.

Dipping his fingers inside, he came across a small piece of paper. It was folded and the outside read 'I found it'.

The inside was a short poem which read; 'This is my confession, as dark as I am, I will always find the light to adore you to pieces, with all my pieces- Johnny Nguyen.'

He knew not if it was addressed to his grandfather from his grandmother or the other way around, but he knew it was another clue into his grandparents love for each other. Elouisa had helped Emmett do right by the Paynes. And in doing that she had taken away his darkness, the one that made him steal the land from Simon. This on his mind, Louis was glad his grandfather had his grandmother to complete him.

He tucked the note in the desk drawer along with his mother's letters.

Anne had just announced dinner, and Louis sat opposite Luke at the table. Harry and Cord were probably out back, and Gemma called a while ago to say she was having dinner with the Cowells/ Grimshaws.

Luke stared him down as he plated his meal, and it had him uncomfortable, like he was an alien science project or something.
Anne had just taken a seat when the backdoor opened.

"The lamb didn't make it," Cord informed sorrowful. Stetson in hand, he looked at Anne. "Harry's not coming up for dinner."

Anne's fingers took to her lips. Louis silently communicated to her that he was going down there, before making his way out the back door.

Louis fought back the anger he'd been feeling for the past three hours since Harry said what he said. His plan was to just be there and hopefully not have to talk to him.

*I'll just offer to dig a hole and bury the thing. He can't want more than that. I don't have more than that...*he thought as he tramped across the backyard to the sheep pen.

Breath heavy as he stopped by the entrance, he looked inside; Harry sat so solemnly on the dried grass, biting his lips and letting the tears flow. It was dark outside and soft light of the lantern in the pen cast a radiance on the boy that seemed to contrast his sullen mood. The tears twinkled, and his cheeks were so delicate, Louis just wanted to be close to him.

Facing the animal wrapped in a cotton sheet, he took a seat an arm's length away from Harry. "Harry, I'm so sorry."

Harry closed his eyes. "I should have been here that night to help Mum with the birth."

"No. Orange was fine all this time, skipping around with the others," Louis said in a sure tone. "She must have had a weak immune system. Wasn't your fault, Harry."

Harry snorted. "Phrase of the day, huh? Should be my new mantra."

Louis broke into a smile. He then remembered he was supposed to be angry with the boy and he decided to stay quiet for a while there next to him. Waiting in the silence, he picked up a few strands of hay and started braiding them together.

After a while, Harry raked a hand in his hair, and Louis said, "I'm going to see Grandma tomorrow."

The younger boy raised his head, and Louis saw the worry. The dread.

"I need to figure out a few things," he explained.

Harry looked at him for a minute. Then he dropped his head in a nod.

A few more minutes passed before Harry broke the silence. "I'm sorry for what I said."

Louis' eyes rolled around the room, repudiating.

"I never meant to say that." Harry was sobbing, lips red and swollen now. "I take it back."

"You can't just take that back, Harry."

"I do! I take it back. I'm sorry-"

Louis swung his head to face him angrily. "You said I fell in love with you because my mother died."

Harry shut his eyes. "I'm so sorry..."
Louis blinked hard in rage. He cooled down enough to say; "I'll be back in time for dinner tomorrow. I still have to pack for London."

He looked at Harry. Harry looked at him and wiped his tears and nose. When Louis realized he had just subconsciously said that to stop the boy from crying and it actually worked, he sighed. There was no point fighting it. He'd basically do anything to stop Harry from crying. No matter how mad he was. Even if he didn't know he was doing it.

But it still fucking hurt what he said. What he did.

The two sat in silence for another few minutes before Louis offered to bury the lamb.

"I'll dig a grave for you if you go back and eat your dinner."

"I'm not hungry."

Louis' eyebrows went up and his eyes down as he continued to play with the hay. Okay then, no grave.

A snort sounded from beside him.

"You'll dig the grave." Harry's dimples shone in the soft light.

"How are you so sure?"

"You'll do it for Orange."

Louis giggled. "I'm that predictable?"

"Umhm." Harry reached out and took the strands of hay, finishing the braid for him, and Louis was suddenly breathing in coconut shampoo.

Louis touched his hand. With a sharp intake of breath, Harry let him.

Louis' pinky hooked onto Harry's, his nose and lips dangerously close to his cheek.

Then Cord showed up and made Harry jump. And to Louis' amazement it was only then he noticed that from an arm's length distance when he had sat a while ago, they now had barely an inch of space between them.

Harry pulled away from him and got up.

Cord stayed hesitant by the door. "I, uh- was gonna start digging. Just to let you know how much time you have."

Harry fidgeted and nodded trying to act normal, but not looking at Louis; who got the message like a block of ice to the face, and jumped to his feet as well.

"I'll give you a hand with that," he said, ignoring Harry to join Cord outside.

******

Drying his skin after a shower for bed, Louis sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed the towel over the guitar necklace on his neck. He ran his fingers over the wooden guitar shape, the guitar pick still fitted inside.
His eyes fell on the coat laying at the foot of his mattress. Harry did not exactly give him the guitar pick but he wasn't ready to give it back. It somehow made him feel close to the boy. He caressed the chain that held it and lay down on the bed.

Something poked his back.

Stuffing his hand behind him, he pulled out the magnifying glass from the sheets. He played with it a bit, laughing at the memory of Harry's antics at Sophia's house.

Then, gasping as he remembered something, he held it over the pendant and read the minuscule squiggly words that formed a curve over the two pieces of it.

'All my pieces,' it read. "All my pieces..."

Scratching his head, he rest the glass back down, chanting the words mindlessly until he fell asleep.

*********

Louis got up early the next morning and drove the truck out to Doncaster. He had called his great-aunt the evening before, so he knew she was expecting him.

After a plateful of lemon bars and tea, catching up with Sophia, Louis lay out on the couch.

"Hey, Grandma, you wouldn't happen to have a copy of the deed for when Granddad Emmett bought the ranch? I just wanted to take a look at it."

Sophia blinked, waiting a sec for him to say more but he smiled at her without another word.

The woman then got up as quickly as she could and went upstairs.

"I don't suppose you have a reason for asking to see it?" Sophia said handed him the document case a few minutes later.

"Nothing really," Louis said, opening the case. "It's just that I found out a bit about my grandmother from Liam's uncle and I got curious about Granddad Emmett. You didn't tell me he bought the farm originally for William?"

Sophia cleared her throat. "Um, Emmett didn't say."

Louis examined the old copy from Emmett's transaction. It was signed to him only. Then Louis noticed a copy of the newer deed after it was transferred to William. It was signed 'William Ernest Selley.' Louis drew his eyebrows at the signature. Something about it...

"Do you mind if I hold on to this a while, Grandma?" he said, folding back the document copies.

"No," she replied, hesitant. "Go ahead."

Observing him, Sophia asked, "So, how is my boy Harry?"

Louis scratched his head. "He dumped me."

"Oh! Well I did tell you not to rush. Kids nowadays like to test out the water- many waters- before deciding on the right temperature."

Louis blinked pointedly. He definitely wouldn't survive watching Harry 'test' any amount of water let alone many.
"I'm his only source of water. He just needs to adjust to my water."

Sophia sputtered out her tea in a hacking cough. Louis grabbed a napkin. "Grandma, are you okay?"

"Dear God!" she looked at him like she had seen a crime being committed. She made the sign of the cross with one hand, holding her chest with the other as Louis rubbed her back.

She hit him a stern side-eye and he grinned bashfully.

"I know it seems cheesy, Grandma but I need him."

"All nonsense aside, Lou, it sounds to me like you don't want to do any adjusting yourself. It takes two to build relationship filled with mutual respect." She squeezed her hands shut to drive in the point." You are just like your grandfather, alright."

Louis frowned to himself, It's my fault he broke up with me!? 

"When you go back to Champton sit and talk to him. You are not both too young to work things out."

Opening his arms for a hug, he kissed her goodbye and was on his way to visit Calvin and Stan.

****

Louis flashed a grin as he spotted his friends in the cafe.

"Only been a few days but I feel like it's been a lifetime!" he said, catching his breath as he sat down.

"Great! We can hang a bit here then go back to my house and-"

Louis declined. "Stan I don't have much time-"

"Wait!" Stan ignored. "I'll go order some milkshakes. Cherry cola right?"

Louis grin-nodded.

Calvin fixed eyes on him. "So, how are you holding up? You and Harry doing okay?"

"He broke up with me."

Calvin asked to rewind.

"He's not ready to come out to his Mum. Since we've been intimate it's becoming harder to spend time alone. The other day she almost caught us in the cabin."

Calvin was surprised. "Whoah!"

"I told him again we should tell her but he's adamant not to. He gave me an ultimatum and I couldn't. I just couldn't sneak around anymore. But now we're in this limbo where we're shamelessly post-breakup-flirting."

"I told you to give him time. He's only sixteen Louis. He still has a lot to learn about himself before he can share it with other people. Not everyone has a mother like your mother," -Louis eyed him-

"I'm sorry, Louis. I am. It's just that you're going through something that we can't be there 24/7 to
help you. You decided to go to Champton, and we're glad, but we kinda put our faith in Harry to take care of you. When we visited and saw you two together that night we bunked out, it was surreal. We were so glad to see that light in your eyes. You were happy and smiling and it's like you didn't see anything but him -and yeah we talked about this, but you really need to understand that you can't move pieces faster than they're meant to go. It was only a couple weeks ago he realized he liked you and that he didn't have to hide around you. And don't forget you basically forced that out of him too. Just give him that time he needs. I don't think it's healthy for you to be so clingy."

"I get all that but I can't just let go, I mean, he gave me everything. Even the magnifying glass Grandma give him. I can't just - I mean we've been a couple for about two weeks but I still have the wrapping paper from a mint he gave me long before that. I know it's stupid but if by some weird chance he was to ask me back for that wrapper it would rip my heart out to do that! How is it so easy for him?"

Calvin laughed. Louis slapped his arm.

"Okay, did he give you back the ring?"

Louis' eyes flashed open wide. "Oh my God, no, he didn't! I totally forgot about that!"

Calvin dropped two urgent hands on his shoulders. "Then he's still yours. He still wants to be with you. As long as he has it on you know he's not really letting go."

Louis blinked and scratched his neck.

Calvin's eyes grew narrow. "Wait- this mine?" he examined the necklace around his neck. "Where did you get this middle piece from?"

"It's Harry's guitar pick. It goes with it. Fizzie said you gave it to her?" Louis said, still thinking about the minuscule writing.

"And why do you have it and not her?" Calvin answered assertive.

"I borrowed it. Why did you give it to Fizzie?"

"She saw it and liked it so I gave it to her. You shouldn't have taken it from her."

"I didn't take it. I borrowed it. Plus it is mine! And who told you it was okay to give my sister things? We have rules! None of my bros are to date my sisters!"

"Who said anything about dating?"

Louis clipped. "Glad to see you got the message."

Louis got up and slung his side bag on.

Stan rushed up to them, drinks in hand. "Leaving already!?"

"Gotta long drive back. Promised I'd be home for dinner."

"But I thought we'd have milkshakes like old times!?!"

"I'll take mine to go. We have an early flight tomorrow. Call me later?" Louis said, walking away.

"Don't forget we have college orientation next week!" Stan reminded him.
"How could I forget," Louis said, going backwards out the cafe, "when you've been texting me all week."

*****

Niall sobbed. Nobody was home when he showed up with his suitcase ready for the trip to London for the competition. But that wasn't why he was sobbing.

"They said they were going to straight to the board and get him fired!" he bumbled, head in hands.

Harry sat with his knees into the boy's side, unsure what to say.

"How could I have not seen this coming? I'm a preacher's son. I'm supposed to be more careful. I mean, we used condoms but obviously I should have remembered that her parents were strict on abstinence."

Harry's eyebrow went up in agreement. Shawna's mum was an usher in the church, and her dad was staunch as well.... Niall was reckless there.

"They said if they see my face again at their house they'll file a restraining order against me and my dad!"

A good few minutes passed before Niall stopped crying. Harry give him some hot soup and stuffed a cushion behind him, shooing Cliff from the couch.

"At least I got you and Louis," Niall sniffled, curling up on the spot Cliff just left. "When is he coming back from Doncaster? Is he meeting us at the airport tomorrow?"

"He said he'd be back for dinner. I haven't spoken to him all day."

"We're over, Niall. I can't be with him. He wants me to be this perfect boyfriend who is proud and not afraid to let everyone see who I really am. He wants me to be like him and I can't. I'm only proud and unafraid when I'm alone with him. I needed that and he just doesn't get that. He's out to everyone, to my mum, and she's cool with it. At least she acts like that. But for me it's different. Your mum is supposed to know you before you even know yourself, and love you unconditionally but that's not what I got. She doesn't approve of anything that I like. She keeps saying it without saying it; She criticizes my hair, and my clothes, and my style. Sometimes I feel like she'd rather I wear a uniform around here."

"I know, Harry. But you're relationship with her improved right? I mean, for a while now you've been wearing these to school," he took his hand and observed his purple-polished fingernails.

"Yeah, since Gemma started college she barely pays attention to me. Over these past few weeks that Louis' been here is the most she's spoken to me since then. I'm trying not to think about what it'll be like when he leaves for college to."

"Maybe that's the real reason you broke up with him. You're putting up those walls early because if you do come out to your mother over the summer and Louis and Gemma go back to Doncaster college when it's over then you're gonna be left alone with her again and it's going to be awkward. Louis isn't gonna be here to face with you the early stages of how she copes. I think a breather for you two may be the best thing but you're not gonna like what I have to say next."

Just as Niall was about to explain, the front door opened.

*****
Louis walked into the house and was surprised to see Niall on the couch talking to Harry. They both looked at him. Niall's eyes were swollen and red.

"Niall, Harry? What's wrong?"

"I messed up," Niall's voice was high and low, in and out, and his fingers shook wiping his mouth.

"Shawna's parents told Rev. Horan to keep Niall away from her."

Louis slid next to him. "Oh, no! What happened?"

Niall scratched his scalp. "They found out we were having sex."

"Shawna's parents are strict. Pretty avid in church. They were really angry."

"They basically told my dad he was a blasphemer. Said they'd sue the church if I come within a mile of her."

"That's ridiculous. Didn't you explain to them that-"

Harry laughed. "That's your problem, Louis. You live in a fantasy world where just a simple explanation can fix everything. It doesn't work that way here. There are serious repercussions for this sort of thing in Champton. If Niall had known this would happen I'm sure he would have done things differently."

"Are you saying I shouldn't have dated her?"

"I'm saying that if her parents didn't find out, you two'd be in the clear."

"Are we still talking about me and Shawna here?"

"No, we are not," Louis answered under his breath.

Niall buried his head.

"I'm sorry about you and Shawna," Louis rubbed his back. "After Gemma's competition I will help you get her back."

Harry puffed. "Did you hear anything we just said? His Dad's job is at stake!"

Niall braced his shoulder. "It's fine. Look, let's discuss the competition tomorrow. I can use the distraction."

"Well, Gemma left a few hours ago. She has to be there early for last preparations."

Louis looked at him. *Shoot! Was hoping to catch Gemma before, he thought.*

Niall let out a big sigh and nodded carelessly. He was already spacing out.

"You okay?" Louis asked.

"Better. I know she's okay. I just wish she was still able to use her phone."

Louis was shocked. He looked from Niall to Harry. "They took it from her? -That bad?"

"Yeah." Niall looked at Harry. "I'm a little hungry now. That soup Anne made was delicious but I could use something more solid."
Harry nodded and started to the door. "I'll make some sandwiches."

As soon as Harry left the room, Niall rounded on Louis.

"You've been gawking at him since you got in the door!"

Louis shrugged. "So?"

"I think you should give Harry some time to figure his shit out."

Louis looked in his direction.

"I know you want him to be this self-assured person who can deal with anything concerning who he is, but he has things that he needs to deal with, fears he needs to overcome. On his own. I'm glad he called a time out on things. I don't want what happened to me and Shawna to be your story too."

"So, what are you saying? That Harry and I are better off broken up?"

"Not by a long shot! You and Harry belong together. He's different since he met you. At the game... the entire bus ride I was going on about Shawna, and he was just...in a trance. He didn't hear a word I was saying. I didn't know what it was at the time but later when I found out you two had a thing I put it together; He was in love with you since that game. That's not something you just throw away. What I am saying is that no matter how much you want everything to flow effortlessly with the Styles family, they don't work that way. Harry and his mother have a lot issues they need to settle that aren't going to just go away the minute he tells her the two of you are dating. What you need to do, Louis, is give him time and let him talk to his mother on his own."

"Is that what he said he wants?" Louis was surprised.

"No. Of course he isn't going to say that, but I know Harry. He is never going to truly be free unless he talks to her one-on-one. And he needs to do that without added pressure from you or anybody else."

"You know, I thought I was going to make a good psychiatrist but you and Calvin are pretty impressive. 'could be life coaches."

"Ha. Ha. A social worker isn't too far from a psychiatrist. Maybe one day we can both work together in Champton. It'd be fun."

"I'd like that," Louis replied as Harry returned with the sandwiches on a tray.

"Do you think she's gonna ever be allowed to talk to me again?"

"One hundred percent."

*****

After a cool jam session and casual throwing around of song ideas, Niall headed upstairs, and Louis and Harry were left alone.

Slow motion took hold of the scene and they both stood there. A moment. A moment alone where they would have otherwise stolen a kiss or two with a quick groping. Louis hated those stolen moments, he always rather drag it out with longer lovemaking. But here they were alone, and five feet apart, with no response to the excruciating pull that had always governed them even long before they had started acting on it, and Louis wanted to kiss. He was aching for one grope. A deep
breath was to bring Louis out of it, but he caught a interrupting whiff of coconut shampoo and flower perfume, and was rendered subdued.

Harry made the first move to leave.

"Wait." Louis felt a sharp nerve grab around his heart, squeezing. Harry moving away from the pull was too much to bear. "Can we talk?" he said, looking at his knuckles now rubbing together. "It's late now, but tomorrow? After the jump? There are some things I need to say- That we should discuss."

He raised his head, and Harry's eyes were already on him, wide with curiosity. He looked like he was about to say something, ask something, but he decided against it and went with "Okay."

Chapter End Notes

How was that? Comments? Views? opinions? Kudos? Ready for more? Okay on to the next!
The Jump

Chapter Notes

Let's continue the pace and see what happens here. Moment of truth! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three-quarters up the ramp, Cord ahead of him, Louis turned back when he heard an particularly amused Robin ask from below, "Why is he blindfolded!?"

"He freaked out when we arrived and gave him his ticket." Anne explained to the man who then laughed like he had been tickled out of nowhere.

Harry pulled off the blindfold growling. "Niall! I told you this wasn't going to-"

"Oh, for God's sake!" Luke hacked out, pushing his sunglasses into his nose bridge and walking past the scene.

Eyebrows twisted, Louis trot back down to them. "There's nothing to be scared about. Come on." He gestured for him to walk.

"Sweetie," Anne cut in, concerned. "Do you think you can get on the plane with Louis?"

"NO!" Harry shouted. "I'M NOT GOING!"

"Sweetie?" Anne metered. "Behavior is uncalled for."

Louis put his hand on his shoulder.

"I can't!" Harry's eyes welled up. "Please, don't make me!"

Niall tried. "Listen, if you don't want to go I'll drive you."

"We're not going to make it in time," Louis piped up. "By plane it's half the time."

"Then I can't go!"

Anne's eyebrows shot up with an idea. She pulled out her cellphone and dialed Gemma.

The girl was hysterical. "Harry, I need you here! I won't be able to jump without you! You know that! You can't do this now!"

"Gem, I'm sorry!" Harry said defiantly.

She asked to speak to Louis.

"Get him on that plane!" she bellowed into the receiver as soon as she heard him respond.

Pulling the phone away from his ringing ear, Louis urged the adults along. "You guys can go up.
I'll talk to him."

He gave Anne and Robin a look to let them know he had it under control. He looked at Harry, who was clasping onto Niall's arm like an eagle.

"Harry, um, do you remember when you told me you wanted to see the world outside Champton?"

Harry folded his arms, his coat lapping over his forearms. "But that's different. That's something I'm not sure will ever get to happen."

Louis smiled. "But it's today! You get to see London for the first time. It'll be awesome. You'll get to see a huge state of the art arena, and then after we could go sightseeing." He grinned widely at the thought of touring London with Harry.

In excitement, Louis' pinky involuntarily fiddled and hooked into Harry's bracelet. Harry backed away from the gesture. "Mum's watching through that window."

Louis nodded, grin fading. "Okay, I'm sorry."

Niall blew hard. "Look, it's only gonna be an hour. They have a TV, food and the chairs can recline."

Harry bit his lip and looked them square in the eyes.

"Okay but uh- I'm gonna have put the blindfold back on." He looked at Louis with fright one last time before slapping the thing on.

Louis took an arm, Niall took the other, and they carefully headed up the ramp.

Up inside, Niall sent Harry in first by the window and took the end seat.

Louis pointed a casual thumb to the seat on the other side of the aisle opposite them, where Cord was already by the window. "I'm going to be right over here."

As the lady in the speaker spoke, Louis kept his attention on Harry while Niall argued with him about stupid nonsense. Louis burst out a silent laugh when Niall turned and hit him some secret eyebrows as Harry bickered back oblivious. Louis was grateful Harry had a good friend in Niall to distract the boy from the take off.

A few minutes after the plane took off he saw Niall nodding and muttering in urgency before darting out of his seat. Then just before he passed him he shot Louis a look with a eye roll in Harry's direction and Louis read it as him signalling to take his seat.

One look at Harry and he figured Niall was right in his actions; Harry eyes kept flickering nervously in Louis' direction. He looked like he was about to throw up. He sank into his himself for a second before looking at Louis again. It was clear that Harry needed him right now but didn't know how to ask.

Louis was in the seat next to him before he himself even realized it.

If Harry was already nervous before he sat down then he was now off the scale as his hands were shaking now. He turned to Louis who took his hands and gripped it good.

"How are you feeling? Do you want some water?"

"I-" Harry could not finish, he choked up. Louis eyes fell to his lips. They were dry, quivering, and
parted, doing all the breathing for him as his nostrils were red and stuffed up.

"I'm not sure if I can do this."

"I know this is scary. Just breath deep, okay?" Harry's idea of a deep breath was a longer series of even shorter ones than what he was doing. Worried, Louis left hand ended up in his hair again and it wasn't until Harry flinched that he realized it.

"I'm sorry." Louis found himself apologizing a lot lately.

Harry squeezed his right hand. Just stop apologizing. He whispered. "Just- tell me something distracting- like you always do."

Louis smiled, as Harry let go of his hand and bent over in dismay. He rest a comforting hand on his back and gestured for him to sit up.

"Close your eyes," he took his hands again. "Imagine you're ... at the lake. You're sitting on the log playing your guitar."

"Baby I- I wanna know what you think when you're alone. Is it me, yeah. Are you thinking of me, yeah... " Louis sang softly for only them to hear.

The tension in Harry's hand eased, and his breathing steadied.

Harry's brows merged over his shut lids. "What are you singing?"

"Something me and Zayn wrote."

Harry smirked. "Oh."

He opened his eyes. "I can't believe I'm in the air."

"Look we are almost there!" Louis said, trying to get Harry to take a look out the window.

Harry made a ninety degree angle from facing Louis and stopped before he could look outside. "And you are pushing your luck," he laughed.

"Okay, you caught me," Louis giggled.

They started giggling and there went Louis' hand again but Harry didn't flinch this time. He was smiling and laughing and if Louis wasn't mistaken he was even slightly leaning towards him.

In other words he wasn't resisting the pull, he was giving into it.

He opened Louis' palm and fiddled with it making little circles in it. He did not know how much he was already slowly killing Louis with his shampoo scent paired with the yearning to hold him close until his breathing slowed and he was okay with being so high up in the air. He just got caught up in Louis' distraction, which was exactly what Louis wanted. And Louis was just about to lean closer to the boy as well, except he started hearing a voice in his head; Calvin's voice telling him - reminding him- that Harry needed space. That he broke up with him for space. So he shifted in his seat retracting his hand from Harry's domain to scratch his head. Then he heard Niall's voice telling him why he should give him that time. And it made sense to him that he should listen, heck they had convinced him on the spot and he had made up his mind that he would do it. So he forced a smile at the boy and pried himself from the seat in a clean break, and stopped in front of Niall, who was now in Louis' previous seat chatting with Cord. Resisting and ultimately ignoring the pull.
Maybe I just gotta wait, maybe this is a mistake. I'm a fool, yeah, baby I'm just a fool, yeah...

He started muttering about getting his seat back, locking eyes with Niall who immediately got the message without having to even ask why. The blonde just grabbed up his music and switched seats.

Louis stole a glance at him as he got settled, and Harry's face appeared, head cocked to bring Louis' face into vision behind Niall. He stared, big eyes full of questions. And Louis smiled the biggest, sincerest one he could muster through the pain of being apart. And Harry responded with a puzzled but rejected expression and eventually turned away with an eye-roll.

******

Harry huddled over and threw up in his vomit bag. In the corner of his eyes as he flew over to him, Louis saw Anne stand in her seat two rows behind Harry's and Niall's.

"Harry! Is my son okay!?” she boomed.

"Harry," Louis said softer tone, "Are you okay?"

"Anne where are you going? Sit back down!” Robin's voice said. "He will be fine."

"What was I thinking to bring my son out here!"

The flight attendant strutted down the aisle towards Louis. "I'm sorry sir, you have to take your seat."

Louis hit her a silencing glance before focusing back to Harry.

Then, Louis heard someone throw up without warning.

Niall was rubbing Harry's back, so Louis stood up and looked for the other panicker. He made his way over to Anne who was crouched over a vomit bag with Robin holding her hair back. The burly man looked at him with a huge grin on his face.

With a highly raised eyebrow, Louis waited until she was breathing stably before commanding eye contact. The woman did look at him then at Robin then him again, and the three burst into laughter.

"The last time I've flown was when I was much younger than Gemma's age on my way to compete a very similar competition," Anne laughed.

"Am I the only one who's ever been on a plane here?" Louis teased.

"You wish," Niall voiced. "I go with my parents to conventions all the time."

Louis folded his arms teasingly, then Harry hurled again, and he was darting back to him. Louis knelt by the seat with a hand outstretched across Niall to touch Harry's shoulder.

"Sir, don't let me have to tell you again, you must get back to your seat and remain there-" she put her hands in an urgent manner on him but he ignored her.
"Sir, don't let me warn you again."

"Are you kidding me!? He's sick! You need to get him some water!" Louis shouted as Harry hurled uncontrollably even though nothing was coming up.

"Sir, we will help him just get back in your seat."

With a large sigh and forehead rub, Louis found his seat again.

He waited for the attendant to leave before he stretched his hand across the aisle and mouthed to Niall, "Let me sit with him."

Niall lifted his butt. Harry grabbed his elbow.

"Don't let him sit here!" He said in a hoarse whisper, unintentionally in air-shot of Louis. "He's disgusted by me!"

Louis' eyes were maddened. "That couldn't be further from the truth!"

Everyone heard that and looked his way.

"Get a hold of yourself!" Cord muttered for Louis alone to hear. "Anne's right there. You want to explain to her why you have this desperate need to be by his side right now!?"

Eyes glued to the unheard conversation, Harry swallowed, and Louis watched as Luke finally jumped out of his seat and marched over to Niall and Harry, sitting on the hand rest. With a big sigh he started typing something on his iPad and manipulating the TV in front of Harry. A video popped up on the screen and a guy started talking in a low voice. Louis tried to see without getting out of his seat, as the flight attendant's eyes were still on him.

Both Niall and Harry looked at Luke quizzically.

"What? This helps," the man said defensively. "Just stop vomiting for a sec and listen."

Harry did listen, and a look crept up on his face that made Louis want to laugh. It was as if saying 'What kind of weirdo are you!?'

As the guy's voice in the video swooned out instructions on how to stay calm, Harry caught Louis' eyes. Visibly a lot better, his eyebrow went up with a bright smile as he mouthed 'Would you like to buy an 'o".

Louis broke into a sob. He surprised himself since he was expecting a laugh to emit from his lips, but okay, a hefty sob he had to cover with his hand. He closed his eyes and turned away from Harry, who was shocked by the sudden tears.

Turning to face Cord so no one would see, Louis stiflingly let it out in his jacket, and Cord looked at Harry sternly who returned a remorseful look and sank back into his backrest.

*****

In the athletes area, behind the curtains of the arena, they all poured in to find Gemma and the others preparing for the show. It was an outside setting with tents scattered across the grass like a circus camp, strong smell of horse poo, people barking orders. Louis even spotted Liam's uncles working to saddle up a horse not far away. At the arena entrance crowds were still piling in even though the show had commenced an hour ago. But most of that was the children's leg, and
Gemma's jump was coming up soon. Louis' insides shook with fear. He had to make sure he talked to her before she goes out there.

"Louis! Niall! Great, you guys are here! We can go have lunch," Zayn said to them as Harry wandered off with his mother to look for his sister, and Luke split away to find Steve.

He and Liam led them to a tent where they sat on a bench.

Zayn handed them sandwich bags. "Bought you guys Subway."

Niall rubbed his palms. "I'm glad Liam brought you."

Zayn bit in, shaking his head. "We're not together."

Liam licked his finger. "He broke up with me."

Louis looked up. "You're kidding."

Liam took a bite before adding. "Had a huge fight on the plane."

"He told me to go fuck myself," Zayn explained.

"Only after you called me an Islamophobe!"

"What?" Louis was shocked. He really was.

"I did not! I said my family's faith will never accept a gay person so I can't come out, and you said it's a dumb faith! You can't just call my family's faith dumb. It's not dumb!"

"I never said it was. I just said the idea that I can't be introduced to your family as your boyfriend is dumb."

Louis questioned what he was witnessing. He and Niall exchanged looks.

"I think this all your fault," Niall said, matter of fact.

"My fault?" Louis asked, laughing.

"You're causing a ripple! You and Harry broke up on Tuesday, then me and Shawna, now Zayn and Liam," Niall counted on the fingers of his left hand, sandwich in his right. "It's you."

"I thought it was a good idea to give him space?" Louis shot back his words at him.

"It is. But the Ripple is still there. Hope this all smooths out before more of your coupled friends start breaking up."

"Wait-You and Harry broke up!?" Zayn and Liam said in unison, fully alert, both pairs of eyes beaming on him.

Louis held that thought; Harry entered the tent that exact moment. Everyone went quiet trying to act normal but the rose red on his cheeks told he already heard them.

Liam and Zayn are so loud.

"Hey," he said to Zayn and Liam. He looked at Louis to say; "I can't find my sister. They said this is her tent."
"Yeah, she's next door; Cowell tent," Liam informed. He held up a bag. "Have a Subway."

"Thanks, but my stomach isn't food friendly at the moment."

Louis looked straight down at his stomach. He wanted to pull him into a belly rub and try to feed him little pieces of food, but fat chance.

Harry ducked under the railing where Hind Fire was being kept, and proceeded to pet the horse and talk to it while darting glances at Louis the whole time.

*****

"Greta!? Make sure no one comes in here," Simon yelled to his secretary from his little makeshift desk in a corner of the tent. "I'm going to make a few final bets before our leg of the competition starts!"

Legs crossed highly, he stuck his pipe in his teeth and dialed on his cell.

A figure swiftly came to stand in front of him. His pipe dropped a hundred and eighty degrees as he grimaced.

"What are you doing here, Anne!? Come to beat me up like your ruffian boys did my nephews?"

Anne answered calmly, "I'm just here on the note of wrapping up final business." She bent and stamped her hands down on the desk in front him, "Now let me make this very clear for you, Simon; My daughter is going to make the highest jump today and walk out of here with her prize money. And you... You will not be getting so much as a pebble from my father's ranch! You can take your deal and go to hell!"

******

"I can't do it, Gemma! I can't face him." Aiden was sweating in his fringed western shirt like a block of ice in the sun. "What am I gonna say? Screw you and your legacy? He'll only kick me out!"

Gemma held his shoulders and looked down into his eyes, her boots grounded. "I know your daddy used to be one of the baddest bronc riders back in the day," she said smiling. The smile faded as she continued. "So was my daddy. They left this here legacy for us. They are the ones we want to honor here. And I'm not saying Simon doesn't count-he does - but Aiden, you need to make your own legacy for your kid one day. When he or she gets old enough you wanna have something positive that they'll look up to and want to emulate. Don't let them see you being afraid of Simon, because they'll just mimic that. Kids learn by example. You don't want your kid being scared of him. You wanna be your own man? Get in there and tell your uncle Simon what's what."

****

"What's wrong with Scotch?" William growled at a young Gavin practicing for his big ride.

"Scotch is a trail horse! He can't buck!" the boy pleaded with him.

William gritted his teeth over a bare match stick, hands on his hips. "Then take my horse."
Gavin laughed dryly. "Rapid Mane has been training with me for weeks. I got him calm plus he knows the ring. I need the best horse for that ride."

William pulled the match out. "And I'm saying Winter is the better choice right now."

"But Rapid Mane-"

William held up a dismissive hand. "Horse ain't ready."

"I'm telling you, that horse is ready! Emmett-"

"-He's been dead for three months!" William barked around to face the young man. "Some of us still need time before we can look at a ring again without seeing him in there! You wanna ride for Emmett, ride for Emmett! But leave his horse alone!"

"I trained that horse. There's no way I'm riding without it!"

A fiery-browed William rounded on him. His gaze down on him. "You listen to me! This is my ranch! My business! I call the shots around here now! If you have a problem with that go back to get back in school, get a degree and then come talk to me!"

A humiliated Gavin was left standing confused and disgruntled as William walked away. He kicked the dirt and made his way over to his wife.

" Fucking man's getting on my nerves now. He saw me train that horse! Why can't I ride it now?"

"You know why, Gavin." Anne said, bouncing the baby a bit before resting him in his pram.

"He still hates me for what we did," he said knowingly, eyes on Gemma riding and singing on a small pony.

"That's not true," Anne denied. "It's because he doesn't want anyone around Emmett's things right now. He's grieving."

"Yeah but what's that got to do with me? I've been here for three and a half years! Emmett's been like a father to me! This is my first big bronc and I want to do it in his honor with his horse! Will can't get that through his thick skull?"

"Maybe if you explained it like that, officer..." Anne said, hands in the air.

Gavin laughed, calming down.

"Dad! Look! I'm not falling off!"

Gavin grinned and squeezed his wife's hand. "That's it, Baby girl! Steady- No, don't pull the-"]\n
Gemma flew off the pony and landed on her bum, but not for long, as Gavin was already now scooping her up.

"AHHH, WAHHH!!" the baby started crying in the pram.

Anne pulled him back out and sat to breast feed.

"Soon you'll be big and strong like your sister so Mum can get back to training," Gavin said to his son, who was looking up from his mother's nipple at his father. He then said to his wife, "Our kids are gonna grow up to be champions just like their mum."
Harry's hand went up in the air, reaching for Gavin.

"Just like their Dad," Anne rebutted.

Gavin kissed his son's tiny hand. "Like both their parents."

****

Aiden and Gemma drummed in like two guards, Gemma in militant stance with her hands together, Aiden looking on a mission.

"I'm a busy man, Aiden! Make it quick, she's up next!" the seedy man flayed his manicured arm at Gemma.

With an exchanged look at Gemma, Aiden nodded to himself, grabbed a chair, spun it the other way and sat on it in front of the man.

"I'm only gonna say this once," he said with a serious expression, folding his arms on the chair back. "You see that girl standing there? She's pregnant with my kid. Now we ain't gonna lie anymore and pretend to be a couple. But we're friends and I'll be damned if I let my friend who is carrying my baby risk a jump that high, or any jump for that matter. Now you are my uncle and my only father but I'm done with your manipulating. You never listen to Trey, you treat Nick like crap. Now I'm fine with you never believing in me as an athlete and as my own person but I'm not going to let you do that to my kid. Now, you either let me jump or I walk."

Simon pulled the pipe out of his mouth with a expression resembling a sleeping pug that just had its cushion pulled out from under it.

****

Fed up of serial-glancing Louis and Liam while waiting for Gemma to return to her tent, Harry took a step outside to get some fresh air. Slight breeze including itself in the predominantly sunny day, it would have been impossible to tell from inside the ill-lit tent.

Harry had to rub his eyes to adjust to the change but he was sure there was a lean, tall silhouette lurking outside Simon's and Gemma's tent. Harry thought he'd seen a ghost.

Harry put his hand over his eyes to block the sun.

"Perrie?"

The silhouette faced him.

She looked exactly the same as Harry remembered her; flowing natural-blond hair, worn but pleasant equestrian attire, light air-brushed makeup... a country-themed barbie doll.

She took a second to gather. "Well, I'll be damned! Harry!" She hopped over and grabbed him close, almost lifting him off the grass. "Wow! You're far from little anymore!"

"Selfie?" Harry got out his phone and navigated.

Perrie smiled the brightest smile, and threw her bony arms around him for the picture.

Just then Gemma, Aiden, and Murrey walked out of The Cowell tent and ended up in his shot.
They walked on to Gemma's tent unaware of the two.

Harry lowered his phone, turning his neck to look after them, and Perrie broke up the hug. "It's so good to see you, Harry. I can't wait to see Gemma make that jump."

"Me neither," Harry grinned at his granddad's old girlfriend. "Gemma asked me to check Hind Fire out, make sure she's fit for the jump."

"I'm glad to hear you're helping your sister win. You were always pretty spectacular with horses. Listen, if you ever want to come work with me- after school, holidays - that offer I made you after Will died, it's still available."

She patted him on the back and marched away.

"Hey Nick!" he shouted, spotting the boy passing with his horse. He had on an oversized stetson and full cowboy gear he looked uncomfortable and awkward in.

Nick's demeanor was a startling contrast from his usual annoyingly jolly one whenever Harry came in orbit of him. He only spared a side-eyed glance and slouched toward the horse he was harnessing in a super defensive way like he was trying to make himself smaller.

Harry approached with caution. "I wanted to come sooner and apologize but..."

"It's fine," the boy muttered. "Good thing you didn't. Uncle Simon grounded me. Can't have anyone over."

"Grounded? I thought he'd want to press charges again or something by now."

Nick laughed. "Press charges? He's practically glad I got beat up. He says it serves me right for messing with his plans and igniting Anne's rage. He told me to stay away from you and golden boy. Shouldn't be seen talking to you."

Harry understood. "Louis really is sorry. He'd tell you himself but he's helping Gemma prepare for the jump."

"Save it. The fact that it's you here apologizing for him says it all. He's not sorry. Like I said, uncle Simon doesn't want me talking to you anymore, so..."

"He didn't send me, if your implying that. We actually aren't really on the best terms right now."

Nick backed up so suddenly the horse almost choked on the reigns. "Well, I can't blame you," he said, head cocked. The guy's clearly a basket case. How long before he starts to take out his rage on you?"

"He's not like that!" Harry snapped.

Nick moved backwards pointedly raising his eyebrow and emphasizing the battered left side of his face. "Whatever, Harry." All interest in conversation exhausted, the boy strolled away with the horse leaving Harry to ponder why Simon was such an asshole to Nick.

"Nick, wait!"

Grimmy stopped and turned.

"Is your uncle around?"
"All you Styles are crawling out the woodwork today aren't you!?" Simon rambled as a determined Harry charged in his tent, a pale-faced Nick nervously hanging behind.

"I'm just here to say that Nick doesn't deserve to be grounded. He wasn't looking for trouble at my Mum's party. Look, all he wants is to have grades that hit the sky and make you proud. And so far he's achieved the former, so, what are you waiting for to give him the break he needs? He's even competing in trail course today. Shouldn't that tell you something?"

Simon sat with a bemused grin. "As a matter of fact it does. I'll tell you something; I always liked Gavin. His two mutts came out just like him. If my nephews,"- he threw a contempted eye at Nick-" had half the resilience you and your sister have I'd be in good business!"

Was that a compliment? Harry squinted his eyes. Just a few weeks ago he was telling his mother she didn't have good business brains.

Simon then glanced annoyedly at Nick. "We'll talk about your curfew after your performance later."

"Thank you for what you did back there," Nick said once the two boys ducked outside the tent. "No one's ever stood up for me to my uncle before."

"That's what friends are for," Harry said, meaningfully.

Grimmy smiled and leaned a bit closer, then his face changed. "There's something you should know."

Harry shook up his head in question.

"It's about your sister...See, I was lolling around the mansion the other day and I kinda overheard uncle Simon talking on the phone...If I tell you this you have to do something for me!"

"Hurry up Nick, I'll be late for my sister's jump!"

"Have dinner with me- sometime before school opens." Nick looked so hopeful and desperate, he was about to say yes on the spot for fear the boy would start crying. "-As friends. I swear. Just let me thank you for what you just did!"

Harry was losing patience. "Okay okay! What about my sister?"

Nick took a moment to breathe. "The other day, I over trained for the competition and was late for work so I ran down to uncle Simon's study to tell him I'd read him 'The Jungle' another time," -Harry's brows furrowed at this useless information- "but before I knocked on the door I overheard him tell someone on the phone that Gemma was pregnant but they had to keep it a secret from the rodeo association because he has a lot of money on that jump."

Harry's eyes were like ping pong balls. "My sister's pregnant!!?"

"Naturally I figured she must be keeping it from you guys. I mean, it's gotta be Cord's, right? She and Aiden had a fight about him a few days ago. Uncle Simon didn't sound too concerned about the whole thing, but I thought maybe you should know. That's a high jump she's making."

Harry's belly filled with a rage he had never felt before. He could take a guess as to who Simon was talking to over the phone.
"You said this happened the other day," Harry measured. "And you're telling me this now!? What is wrong with you!??" He hit him and darted out the tent.

"Don't forget you promised me a date!" Grimmy yelled, dashing after him.

*****

"Heck no!" Murrey exclaimed, stomping toward his father, who was nosing around the Hind Fire. "I don't want you anywhere near this, dad!"

A startled John turned around. "Son, what exactly is this all about?"

"Are you kidding me? I heard you the other day! A-a-a-about how-you lamed that horse and put William's ranch out of business!"

"I didn't put the ranch out of business."

"Mr. Cartwright stopped competing! And the horse you lamed, the star horse, stopped bringing in profits! What you and Aunt Larissa did...Now you're here in Gemma's ride? You are not gonna ruin this for her! She waited her whole life for this!"

John didn't try to deny. "I'm here to make sure everything goes off without interference from Simon. I don't trust the guy."

******

Harry spotted his target on a phone call, and barged over to him.

"You told me that Steve's career wasn't a joke," he said to Luke, people around. "Well, I have a question for you! Is my sister's life a joke to you?"

Luke hung up, sighing wearily. "What are you yapping about now?"

Harry grabbed his jacket collar and yanked him out of his smug demeanor. "I don't know what game you and Simon are on here but you listen to me! You get my sister off that horse right now or I swear I'll post that pic of you and Steve on every social media in existence!"

Steve showed up and hurried over. "Harry! What the hell has gotten into you!"

"He's insane!" Luke shouted.

Harry turned to Steve. "My sister is pregnant and Simon is making her jump! Luke's the one in charge of the paperwork for the deal! You tell me if he doesn't look guilty!"

'CHAMPION COWELL RANCH HORSE SINCE 1992, HIND FIRE!' The announcer started calling Hind Fire's name on the speaker as Harry was talking.

Nick slapped his arm to alert him, and they exchanged a dreading look. Harry shot Luke a deadly last-warning glare, and all four of them went dashing towards the arena.

They met with John, Murrey, Zayn, and Niall in front the ring.

"Where's Louis?" Zayn asked Harry.

"I thought he was with you?"
"What the hell?" Luke cursed, looking to the arena roundpen.

They followed his gaze and were all shocked to see the person atop Hind Fire, warming up.

Harry dashed to Gemma's tent, the gang close behind.

****

[Same time frame in Gemma's tent- ]

Louis skidded in and released a burdened sigh.

"Thank god I caught you! You can't do this! I wanna help you! I can help you open the old ranch again. You don't need to do this! I have a college trust fund! I don't care, you can have it! All of it! It's more than even the prize money."

Gemma lowered her eyebrows in confusion. "Calm down! You wanna give me your Daddy's money he saved for your education? Noble but stupid." She folded her arms.

"Gemma, please. You're making a big mistake," Louis pleaded.

"Louis..."

"You may regret it and never forgive yourself if you do this and hurt the baby, Gemma."

"Louis..."

Louis wasn't listening. "No! I'm not gonna stand here and listen to you make an excuse to jump at a dangerous height and risk crashing to the ground!"

"She's not."

Louis whirled around. Aiden was standing there, fully geared up for competition.

"I'm doing the jump for her." That was all the boy said, and he was on his way.

Gemma took off her helmet just then and put it on the table, giving it a little pat.

Louis blinked. She smiled. He grinned.

"Simon is allowing him to jump for me. We told him about the baby. Bastard still prefers if I do it but Aiden made it clear it's not gonna happen."

'CHAMPION COWELL RANCH HORSE SINCE 1992, HIND FIRE!' The announcer started calling Hind Fire's name on the speaker as Gemma was talking.

"Gemma?" Cord stuck his head in the tent, eyebrows knitted. "Why is Aiden on Hind Fire."

"I'm done with all these secrets. You have to tell him." Louis said wearily.

She nodded permission, and Louis said, "She's pregnant."

Cord blinked and stood in silence for a half minute. "Is it...?"

"If it was your baby I'd tell you, Cord. And I wouldn't do this without discussing it with you first."

Anger rising in a look Louis knew was only reserved for Aiden, Cord tried to dash away, but Louis
stopped him.

"Aiden is making the jump," Louis informed. "Just talked to him."

"And if he didn't? Cord directed at the brown-haired girl, "Then what? Were you gonna jump then? Gemma.. What did you think? I'd let you do it if it isn't mine? It doesn't matter! I know how bad you want the horse ranch back, but Gem?"

Gemma started emitting uncontrollable sobs, and she covered her face in shame. "I was lost. Having a Grimshaw baby by accident with no ranch? I didn't see a way out. I'm sorry I let you down."

Cord took her in his burly arms. "We'll figure this out. You and me, okay?"

Louis folded his arms and started thinking about Harry and the talk they were supposed to have later.

Then Luke came stamping over to them urgently, the whole gang behind him. "Why is Aiden on that horse? Why aren't you jumping?"

"Simon gave his permission for Aiden to do it." Gemma eyed the man.

"Why in the bloody hell is that?"

"She's pregnant!" Louis, Cord, and Harry shouted. The three exchanged questioning looks and Cord was eye-sawing Harry like 'You knew about this!?'

Luke's air was snatched from his throat. "You really are pregnant." His large eyes searched her in realization.

"Your friend Simon knew that and still goaded her to jump to fill his pockets!" Harry yelled at him. "Whose to say you didn't know all about it?"

"I would have never agreed to her jumping had I known she was with child. I'm not a monster!"

Louis eyeballed Harry. "You knew about the baby?"

"Nick just told me," Harry said, eyeing Louis curiously.

Louis threw a testy look at Nick.

"Simon still agrees to do the deal even with Aiden jumping," Gemma cut in. "So we're getting the ranch back after all."

"Gemma you can't be serious right now! Harry raised his voice. "You're gonna sign away your birthright to a man who insisted you put your baby in danger?"

"I can't sign the deed," Luke answered Gemma. "I was never going to sign it. I can't believe I almost let you jump in this condition." Luke paced, still having a hard time processing it. "I can't keep this in anymore... was going to wait but that was before I knew you were pregnant. I would never put a child in danger for revenge..."

"Revenge?" Louis was confused.

"You. Your signature..." Luke breathed out in hyperventilation. "My signature isn't the only one needed to sign the farm papers. Yours. William left you... He left his grandchildren..."
Gemma recoiled. "Louis? What does Louis have to do with-"

"The only way Simon can get a share of the farm is if Louis agrees with you and Harry," Luke's stare was urgent, calculating. "I knew that would never happen," he fixed his stare on Louis. "He's William's grandson through and through," he loosened his tie, fixed his jacket, suddenly warm. "I wanted to see the look on Simon's face when he saw he got screwed over."

Louis was perplexed. "I don't follow."

Luke sent an affirmative nod. "William was Johannah's biological father, not Emmett. That makes you William's biological grandson."

Louis lost his breath and gait, and Zayn had to prop him up.

Harry staggered and froze on the spot behind Luke. His face was excruciatingly contorting into excruciation.

"What?" he said, not even loud enough to be a whisper, and nobody except Louis heard it but only because he was looking at him.

Louis didn't even know what to ask. "That can't be right..."

Gemma took over the questioning. "Tell us what the hell is going on here!"

"We should start at the beginning," a voice interrupted.

Everyone turned. Larissa stood there in a leather jacket over a light flowing dress, with a brown stetson on her loose waves. Flanked by John, Murrey, and Liam, she bore a determination reserved for the the fearless.

John cleared his throat unsurely. "We should, uh, wait for Anne."

Larissa ignored her older brother. "The property- just a piece of land then - was my grandfather's. Then Dean Cowell stole it from him. Then Emmett came and stole it back as revenge for taking over William's father's company. When William didn't show interest in building the ranch, Emmett was set to turn it over to the original owners, us. But somewhere in between, he built a successful ranch, married his lawyer, and had Johannah. The ranch was mine and hers naturally to inherit until we all found out that Jay was William's daughter not Emmett's."


"What about Anne?" Louis tried to keep up. "You mentioned you and my mother but not Anne."

Larissa turned up her nose. "William's father left him a sizeable inheritance that Anne and Jay stood to inherit. Neither of them ever cared about the ranch that stood on my grandfather's land! Jay left and Anne sent herself crazy! And that awful man William was left to waste the ranch away to nothing!"

"That's enough Larissa!" John mediated. He turned to them to explain his sister's behavior. "When Emmett died he left the ranch to William, Jay and Anne. Larissa got a monthly check based on profits." He looked at his son- "That year when Larissa took the blame for what happened with Rapid Mane he disinfected her unknowingly."

"Yeah, but you're the one who sabotaged that horse!" Cord lashed out at John. "You both did!" he pointed at Luke as well. Cord looked at Larissa last. "William disinherited you unknowingly but
you knowingly took the blame! You covered it up on purpose!"

Shocked that Cord knew this, John looked at Murrey who muttered, "He's my best friend. I had to
tell him, Dad."

"You-" Harry croaked out to John. "So you did that to Rapid Mane? My mother trusted you. My
granddad trusted you."

Liam was a ghost. "Mum? Is this true?"

Choosing not to reply her son, Larissa glowered down at Louis. "You may be that horrible man's
blood but you are Emmett's grandson. At least to me. I cannot see you any other way otherwise I
wouldn't have let you get so close to my son."

Louis was still processing but somehow talking to her was easier than looking at Harry or Luke
right now.

"You said you didn't know me." That was a lie... he suddenly realized. Of course Liam's mother
would know him. They had been friends for three years.

"I last saw you proper diving out Liam's window in the mornings. But I looked at the music tapes
lots of times. Johannah warned me to keep Liam away from you. But after you broke up you
remained such good friends."

Louis wanted to run. Die. Throw up.

"I can't believe what I am hearing," Liam spoke up, disgust in his tone. "How dare you say that
about Louis' mother!? She wasn't like that! I met her lots of times and she was nothing but kind to
me! Who are you? You are not my mother!"

Larissa sad-eyed her son. "Well, of course She wouldn't directed it at you. She reserved all the rage
for me whenever we saw eachother," she looked at Louis then. "Your mother didn't want you to
know us," she gestured around the room, "Any of us."

Tears covering a face he couldn't feel, Louis pictured the whole world crashing down on him. He
didn't know what made him turn around just then, but he did, and saw Harry standing there
petrified and looking only at Luke. That look on Harry's face, in his eyes, was what had done it.
Was all it took for Louis to completely break down.

"Gemma?" -No one knew how long Anne had been standing there. She stood a distance away
fumbling with her palms. She spoke in a hurt expression; "You didn't tell me you were pregnant."

**********

Zayn put his hand on Louis' shoulder and he flinched. He made a run for it straight out of the tent
and into the arena.

The crowd erupted in cheer as he made his way over to the round pen barrier.

'AIDEN GRIMSHAW! BEAT THAT, COMPETITORS! OUR NEW HIGH JUMP CHAMPION!'

Popcorn, balloons, and all sorts of other items went flying in the air as the arena jumped to their
He did it. He really did it. He made the jump, and secured Gemma's deal, at least that's what he and Simon think.

Louis felt someone brush against his side and turned to see Zayn, Gemma, Cord.

Gemma's face was grievous as she stared at the round pen. Louis saw each and every dream of hers that would have been made reality by Aiden's win shatter in her eyes. Just as the look in Harry's eyes was cemented in his mind.

Harry was on his far left talking to Nick, who Louis heard asking the boy if he was staying to see his leg of the competition. Louis saw Harry look his way, and they made brief eye-contact before returning his gaze to Nick to shake his head and say. "Mum is really mad. She wants us all at the hotel immediately."

At the hotel, he looked over and saw Cord standing on the wall, and Harry sitting, hands clasped between his knees on the low seating of the lounge. Next to the boy was the only available seat among them, and he wanted to sit, but he could not bring himself to go near him. He thought of just going to the room and cry but Harry and Cord were booked to share it with him, so uh, same difference.

Luke jumped up from the couch where he was crying into Steve's shoulder, ready to reach out to Louis and spew more disgusting stories, and Louis' arms flew in front of him defensively.

He was out the door faster than it took to flick on a switch.

Cord came running out after him, grabbing his shoulder.

"Did you see the way he looked at me?"

"Luke?"

"No. Harry. He never looked at me that way before. I can't deal with that right now."

Cord took in his surroundings. "Louis, this is a shock for all of us. Only time is gonna tell where things end up for you two. But now we need to hear the whole truth."

The young man gripped Louis' shoulders, and lead him back inside.

"Is this true?" Robin was saying when they came in, furious. He paced the laminate flooring of the hotel lounge, eyebrows wild. "I spent months in that hospital unable to walk!"

Luke lowered his head in shame. "I was waiting to reveal all this when Simon came to sign the ownership documents. I wanted to see the look on his face when he saw Louis' name in the will and know that I had lied to his father all those years ago about the ranch being only left to Harry and Gemma. Dean Cowell thought I was on his side. I told him at the time that Gemma and Harry were his only hope of getting this property back after Emmett stole it from him. Then Dean died and left his son, Simon to pick up where he left off. That's why he recruited you, Gemma. It's why he used Aiden to reel you in. You played right into his hands, but, I had the one card he didn't know about; Louis. See, Simon doesn't know that Louis is William's Grandson. He thinks he's Emmett's, and therefore unimportant. I wanted to look Simon in the eye and tell him it was over, he wasn't going to own a square inch of that property.
Louis was dumbstruck. Without even knowing it he had been reduced—or was it promoted—to merely a card in someone's revenge quest.

Bitterly, he gestured towards Luke. "So far I'm only hearing all these stories about sabotage and revenge...What I need to know is how Emmett is not my grandfather." He said it loudly and harshly. Harry was somewhere out of his sight range but he felt his eyes on him, and heard him shift curiously.

Luke was taken aback, and he looked at Anne, who gave him a stern look. "William had some kind of affair with Elouisa." he explained. "It resulted in Jay's birth. Emmett didn't know about it until after Elouisa died."

Louis started pacing, grabbing at his hair. He took a glance at Harry and saw the boy's eyes dim in his thoughts; it seemed like he was inwardly trying to come to terms with what Luke just said. Louis sighed heavily, focusing on Anne as she spoke up.

"That's partially why he asked Dad to move into the house when we were kids," she said. "William wanted to be closer to his daughter, get to know her. But Johannah was so fragile and Emmett got cold feet about telling her who her real father was. He was the only father she knew and he didn't want to break her heart so soon after she lost her mother."

Luke reentered the conversation. "When Jay finally learned the truth about her father she left Champton and never came back. But when Emmett died Larissa and I did try to get her to come back. But our motivations were selfish, they had little to do with wanting her reunited with her biological father, and more to do with what was in it for us. Larissa wanted the ranch, I wanted revenge. It was a power struggle of great proportion. Emmett must have been turning in his grave to see what we became. When Will was dying and he decided he just wanted to leave everything to the children, I went to see Jay and tell her that Louis was now the rightful owner of the farm along with Harry and Gemma but she made it clear she wanted nothing to do with the ranch."

Louis thought about that last part. William died three years ago...when he was fifteen.

He glared into Luke's eyes. "You said you were selling blenders."

"Pardon?"

"I knew I recognized you from somewhere but I didn't remember. I came home from my football practice and you were in our living room and Mum said you were a salesman."

Luke drew out a low nod. Cord shook his head and looked at Harry grimly.

"You were talking to her about this?"- Louis twirled his finger generally around the room. He had been in his living room drinking his mother's lemonade and talking about all these things Louis had only just now found out. All that time.

Ring Ring! Gemma unlocked her phone screen.

"No, Aiden. This isn't a good time - Really? Okay give me a sec."

She looked at her brother while talking. "Aiden has a party set up at the pub down the road. Says he's sending a limousine for us."

"I already arranged dinner at a restaurant for the family," Steve jumped in. "I thought we'd have a reason to celebrate," he said, alluding to the prospect of Gemma winning her jump before.
Anne tucked away her hair. "Well, dinner sounds like just what we need right now. Tell Aiden you won't be able to make it."

"I lost my appetite," Louis said, cold, hollow. Leaning more towards the pub party.

"Well, I suppose if you want to-" Anne conjuncted.

Louis didn't wait another second. He flew up and walked out to get ready in his hotel room. He'd have to endure going to a party hosted by a guy he can't stand, but it sounded a whole lot better than dinner with the liars. Betrayers.

"Mum...?" he heard Harry start to beg over his shoulder.

"No, Harry. You and Gemma will go to dinner with us as planned," he heard Anne sternly reply over his shoulder, and for the first time he agreed with that decision.

*********

No Vacancy-OneRepublic, Sunflower- Post Malone.

Flashing blue and red lights over an otherwise dark pub interior, beats thumping through the speaker, cackling people, all around Aiden's age from the looks of them, Liam and Zayn each grabbed an arm of Louis' and yanked him in opposite directions.

"Ow! Guys! There are two sets of twins in my family and I'm not one of them! Only one of me!"

The statement only made things tense as Liam and Zayn were now serving eachother dark looks.

Uncomfortable now, Louis moved to the bar, and the boys followed. Niall ordered a coca cola on ice, which was expected, but when came Liam's turn to order he went with "Snakebite."

Louis went berserk. "I'm sorry Liam, is this supposed to be a joke? Is all of this funny to you?"

Liam laughed, dreamy-eyed. "I'm sorry, Louis. I just can't wrap my head around my mother and uncle right now. Everything leads back to snakebites right now."

"He's already fucking drunk, I can tell," Zayn snarled.

Louis shook it off and ordered a "Headless horseman."

Liam stared at him.

"Well I guess if you're really trying to be funny," Louis explained in a dead-pan.

Niall boomed out a super contagious laugh sending Louis and Liam into a frenzy.

"Zayn scoffed. You're both fucking drunk!"

Aiden appeared and tapped Aiden's shoulder. "It's a private party, church boy. Order a real drink. No one's gonna snitch on you." He patted his shoulder again and sauntered away.

Louis was tossing the bloke some frowny eyebrows when Niall pulled out his vibrating phone.

"Okay!" he heard Niall shouted into the device. The boy pat his shoulder, shoving it back in his
jeans. "Harry's on his way. Dinner didn't go well."

And the air around Louis stifled.

Come on, Liam took Louis' wrist. "We're dancing."

Zayn stopped him. "Can't believe you are in the mood to dance after what just happened with your mum."

"I'm not gonna let her ruin my friendship with Louis," Liam stammered, all defensive.

How are you holding up, though? You barely talked at the hotel."

Liam looked Zayn up and down before taking a sip of his drink. "The Islamophobe is doing fine."

Zayn folded his arms and pouted in irritation.

Louis massaged his forehead, and grabbed both boys' hands, leading them on the floor.

No Vacancy by One Republic played in the background and Niall followed, busting a move.

The lights flashed and Louis started swaying his hips. He didn't want to dance, but he really didn't want to witness Zayn and Liam bickering over nothing either.

Taking Niall's dance lead, Louis leaned into Liam's ear. "It's hard for me to have an opinion about your mother just yet. I'm having a hard time processing everything as is. But I can't let you hate her, Liam. She's your mum."

Zayn's chin rested on Louis' shoulder, his arms wrapped around his waist. "You are not gonna think about any of that now."

"I just don't know what to do. I don't know what I'm gonna say to Harry. It's like we're stuck in a ditch," Louis said, looking blindly at all the people behind Liam.

Zayn pulled out his iPhone and wrapped Louis collarbone in his arm for a selfie. Liam moved in and Zayn grinned, Louis did a smoldering eyes thing opting not to smile. He was grateful for Zayn's distraction. Otherwise all he had was his tears in a room.

Zayn snapped the camera and someone flashed by. Looking at the picture they realized the person had photo bombed a devil ears with their fingers behind Louis' head.

Louis scoped his environs and spotted Aiden in the disco lights surrounded by cackling girls. The guy scanted across the dance floor, arse working on a scimpy-clad girl's front, head completely light.

Shrugging it off, the four danced, sipping drinks and taking more selfies, and soon Harry appeared.

His eyes hit Harry's navy-blue button-up and he wanted to bury his drunk head in it.

"I was coming sooner but," - A spluttering cough jumped out of Louis. Drive me crazy, will you?

Harry made to rub his back but Louis jerked away.

A taken aback Harry moved to sit on the stool. "Nick wanted to show me around a bit before we joined you guys." He sounded so bubbly. But, seriously? He picked himself up and went sightseeing with Nick?
He wanted Harry to go hang with Niall and the others. He wished he walked away. Anything to kill the tension. Louis just sat there turning the ice in his own drink, not looking at Harry.

"Harry!" Nick appeared with a nice umbrella drink in hand and a large grin on his face. "Pina Colada. Aiden just made it for me in the kitchen."

Louis just sat there turning the ice in his own drink, not looking at the nauseating scene.

"Wow. You guys can go back there?"

"Uncle Si is friends with the owners."

Louis let out an Oh-for-fucks-sake sigh. Harry giggled and took a sip. Louis was ready to explode. Punch out the stupid grin from Nick's face. Then Harry giggled again. Nick had said something stupid Louis did not catch.

Harry turned, his big green eyes peering at Louis, his teeth wide.

He never thought he'd be so mad about seeing Harry's smile. He hated Nick and there was literally nothing he could do, because Harry was laughing. Despite everything, Harry was happy and enjoying himself.

Hitting a side-eye he took the last drink and hopped off the stool.

"He saw her hickey, and demanded she tell him the whole truth," he heard Niall babble over his coke, as he left everyone inside to light a smoke.

He stretched his arms out on the banister overlooking the city lights.

A breeze blew and a figure came into his side-view. He didn't have to look to see who it was near him.

"So, my sister's pregnant..." Harry said, trying to make an exciting conversation. Trying too hard to Louis.

He didn't look away from the view. He just took in his voice as he spoke.

"Nick said he heard Simon talking about it to someone," Harry said evenly. Unslurred unlike everyone else at this dumb party. Grounded. Louis could kiss him, hard. "Must've been his employee or something, but I thought it was Luke and I got mad and said some things. I'm going to be in a lot of trouble later. Only a matter of time before he tells Mum."

Louis wanted to talk back to him but his tongue got stuck. What to say? That he had known since Sunday and never told him? And give him more reason to lean towards Nick?

"Aren't you gonna ask what I said?"

Louis closed his eyes. Harry waited. He looked at him finally. Harry had a sheet of tears not yet fallen in his eyes unblinkingly staring at him. He had the urge to kiss him and wipe them away, but... was that even allowed?

Louis parted his lips but Harry didn't wait. "I threatened to post a photo of him and Steve if he let her compete like that. And it's weird because I feel guilty now he swears he didn't know."

Louis swallowed. Now for sure he was not going to tell Harry he had known a whole week about it. Harry was so fiercely protective of his older sister, and Louis admired that, but he knew he'd never
forgive him if he told him now. So yeah, one for Nick.

"How long has Nick known?" He had to find out if there was the slightest chance he could score and one-up Nick.

"Tuesday, I think?"

Bingo. "And you're still talking to him?"

"He was afraid of his uncle. You don't know what Simon's like."

Yeah, and your sister threatened me with you...

But Louis knew that was no excuse. He should have told Harry that very same morning Gemma told him. So, okay, the bad uncle wins over the desperate hell-bent sister.

"You said you wanted to talk after...Maybe we should go somewhere...?"

Okay, this is it. This is where I tell him the truth and hope he forgives me and doesn't shove me into a deeper friend zone.

Louis moved to the concrete seating only a meter in front of them. He waited for the boy to sit before he spoke. "Harry, do you remember the last time we were at the lake and you promised not to hate me no matter what?"

Harry made a deep intake of breath, his face red. He moved his hand away from Louis to fold it with the other. Louis could only read that body language as a negative one. Harry didn't want to talk about that night. That night they first had sex.

"Louis, I don't hate you. How could I? You're- your mum is- We shouldn't-" Louis saw the struggle to comprehend. To accept what Luke said.

"Harry! You gotta try this with me!" Nick appeared and sat next to them with two jello shots in hand.

"We served this at my Mum's party," Harry said with what Louis would like to believe was a little annoyance at the interruption. "You didn't take any?"

"I would have if I didn't have to get rushed to the emergency room," Nick replied, an eyebrow up. Louis rolled his eyes. Harry bit his lip and took the cup.

"I didn't try it either. Louis, did you?" Harry said, trying to lighten up the air.

Louis hit him a scornful glare in response and turned his head the other way. He wanted to talk. He had planned to tell him the truth about his knowledge of the pregnancy, and tell him about what Niall and Calvin said about giving him time to heal his relationship with Anne. He wanted to tell him he loved him and he would wait as long as it took for Harry to be comfortable enough to come out to his mother. But okay, stupid jello shots.

"Come on. On three. This is gonna be my first time. You might have to escort me back to my suite," Grimmy joked and Harry snorted. Louis' knuckles crunched into a tense ball.

On the count of three, the two took the shots. Grimmy squirmed, holding his neck while easing the sting with the lighter pina colada. Harry cleared his throat strongly, and Louis had to look at his baby, fighting back his smile all the while.
He glanced up at Zayn over by the railing facing them, and noted his eye-squint at the boys laughing at their new feat.

"Yeah. Are you sure you don't wanna stay with me?" Grimmy said to Harry, making Louis' blood boil. "I'm in this huge suite all by myself with a gorgeous view, a snack cabinet and room service."

"I can't."

The answer was not immediate but not too slow in coming either. Louis was still trying to decide whether the hesitation was valid when Grimmy pressed on,

"Completely platonic. We can play video games, there's a king-size bed..." he laid it out appealingly. "-That you can totally have all to yourself!" he added on when Harry expressed discomfort.

There was definite hesitation now as Harry looked down at his feet. I'm sitting right here for fucks sake! Louis' brain shouted inside his head.

Harry mumbled something about needing to use the bathroom first and jumped up. Then as soon as Harry was out of sight Louis rounded on Nick.

"I see right through you. You had no intention of saying anything. You just told him as leverage to get a date. In your sick mind you gave Harry a chance to save his sister and her unborn baby in exchange for dinner. I hope you're proud."

Nicked eyeballed him, sipping away at his goddamn umbrella drink.

"You have some nerve asking him to spend the night with you!" Louis scorched. "He doesn't want you. He'll never look at you the way he looks at me!"

"Oh, you mean the way he looks at his...cousin?" Nick said, voice calm with a scornful smirk. "I'd think not. He's beaten up about that new piece of information since you two already went far. But as you can see I'm on a roll for him to forget fast! And it's working, so if you care about him, you'll let him move on."

The boy then proceeded to call the limo around, with a proud assertive arm-fold.

Harry came back and sort of hung by the exit, and as soon as Nick was done with the call he joined him and they were soon climbing in the luxury vehicle and driving off.

Nick had to be crazy if he thought Harry was remotely into him. I mean, look at him, he-he-he... Who was Louis kidding? He took Harry sightseeing and lavished him with umbrella drinks and quirky entertainment. That's exactly the shit Harry was into. That's exactly the shit Louis wanted with him.

"Don't let him get to you, Lou," Zayn said from on the banister, looking at someone behind Louis with baited breath. He turned around, and there practically undressing Zayn with his eyes was Liam sipping his drink

Louis responded by downing the remaining half of his drink in one go.

*****

Echoes. Whispers. His head spun around and around. Everyone spoke in echoed whispers the whole limo ride back to the hotel. Well, the kissing in-between the little hushed arguments too.
Louis never met another couple who could argue and make out at the same time like his friends Zayn and Liam.

"You're drunk! You're going straight to bed when we get there!-hmmmm"- *smootch smootch*- "stop it!"- *smooch.*

"And taking you with me-" *slirpy smootch.*

"You better sober the fuck up because your mum may have ruined your trust but Louis' life is turned upside down- Again. He's going to need all of us!"- *smootch.*

Funny thing about being drunk, you can hear even the slightest whispers. The couple did nothing but make him miss Harry more.

At least he had Niall to brush his hair like a kitten as he lay head on his lap.

At the hotel the boys staggered up to Liam's room, and Louis fell belly-first on the bed dioganolly.

Loud crying sounding from the mattress.

"He's not technically related to you, Lou..." Zayn said, softly, pityingly.

"Shut the fuck up, Zayn," Louis stopped sobbing only to say, not in a harsh barky way, but in a sad, jaded, surrendered way.

Niall, Zayn, and Liam sighed looks at eachother and looked for alternative nooks in the room to sleep.

Zayn and Niall deciding to settle on either side of the boy, and Liam on the couch, they listened until his sobs died down, and they all fell asleep.

*****

Plane ride back to Doncaster was awkward and quiet.

"Ughhhhhh bluhhhhh!!!!!" Harry hurled.

"He's fine! I got him!" Niall said quick on the dot to the whole carriage, but Louis- already alert in his seat two rows behind- knew it was really *him* he was talking to.

Zayn gave him a reassuring face as he relaxed in his seat next to him. Louis closed his eyes. He hadn't slept in twenty-four hours. He doubted anyone else from the ranch had either.

*****

Arrived in Doncaster, Liam latched on to Zayn, saying his goodbyes while Louis rolled his suitcase to the car Steve hired to take the family home.

On seeing the head of brown curls he stopped dead in front of it.

"I'm sorry. I can't go."

Anne looked at him from her seat. "Louis, don't be ridiculous, we're going home. Come on."

"I-, I think I'm going to stay in Doncaster."
He focused on Harry's chest, and saw it rise and hold.

Anne wanted to flip. She unbuckled and flew out of the car like a mad woman. "Louis, no. I know this is a lot. I promise I will explain everything when we get back. You have to come home. Don't-Come home with us."

Louis started sobbing. He didn't want to go back and face Harry with Nick and all of it. "I've known about the pregnancy for about a week," he said shamefully, hoping she would walk away and let him do this.

She stopped for a few seconds, searching his face thinking. Then... "Get in the car."

Louis saw Harry's held breath release. But he didn't want it.

Niall came up to them and rest his hand on Louis' shoulder. "It's okay. He'll take the bus with us."

After some thought, Anne nodded and the two boys started to the bus.

As his mother hopped in the car, Harry dragged his luggage behind the boys.

"I wanna go with you guys?"

Niall stopped. Face only turning to his side then focusing back front, Louis kept on walking.

"It's best if you go with your mother," Niall said, taking control. "He's not in a good place right now."

Niall started walking back to the bus, and Harry started crying.

"He hates me, doesn't he Niall? Doesn't he?"

"No," Niall threw his arm around his shoulder. "He just found out some pretty heavy stuff that added to his plate with his Mum and all. He just needs a sec, Harry. Go home with your family, I'll make sure he gets back to the ranch safely."

***

Chapter End Notes

Please help my story by pressing the kudos button and leaving comments. i answer comments!
Fall For You

Chapter Notes

Chapter is inspired by and named after the song Fall for you by by Secondhand Serenade. Other songs listened to while writing this chapter are:- Uninvited- Alanis Morissette, Makin Love out of nothing-Air Supply, Let's Hurt Tonight-OneRepublic, Let her cry- Hootie and the Blowfish, Falls on Me- Fuel.

PS- I know nothing about deeds, wills etc. so forgive me if that stuff doesn't make sense to you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

FLASHBACK-

"I know you were angry with me about some of my decisions. The way I treated Gavin before the ride. And I also know the guilt you feel about what happened. It wasn't your fault he died. You were only trying to help him and me both. Stop blaming yourself, and just be there for them kids. They'll need you now more than ever."

"I'm sorry Daddy," Anne cried.

"You forgave me. You came home. There's nothing in the world I wouldn't do for you guys, you know that. I have my daughter home. But you have to understand why I'm doing this. Why I can't leave the ranch to you. I have to leave it for those kids."

"I didn't want anything to do with this place, you know that. I'm actually glad you chose to leave the ranch to the kids."

"She ever comes home, promise me you'll tell her for me how much I love her. I love her more than a thousand fathers could ever love their daughters. And I love you the same way."

*******

"Four times!" Louis blasted into the phone as he slammed the truck door. He went walking toward the lake, not knowing where he was really going or what he was going to do.

"What's wrong, Lou bear?" Sophia said on the other end, voice laced with worry.

"That's how many times we were intimate! Four of which we actually penetrated, but I'll never cheapen the other times where we either just kissed or touched each other," Louis cried into the phone.
"Oh, Louis... Anne told you, didn't she?"


He was so furious he didn't know what moved him to call Sophia in such a state. But who else was number one on his list of betrayers?

"Harry; the way he looked at me... He doesn't want me anymore, Grandma," Louis cried in a strained hurt voice, "How could you keep this from me? I still had hope he'd change his mind but now there's none. I told you he broke up with me, why didn't you tell me then?"

"Louis, I'm so sorry, dear. Your mother made me promise never to tell you of such things!"

"What things? It's just one thing! One important detail you kept from me my whole life and the entire time I was in Champton!"

"Calm down, Darling. What did Anne say? Did she explain anything to you about it?"

"I don't know. I didn't stick around," he answered honestly. As soon as he had gotten back he grabbed the truck keys and fled while no one was looking.

"Go home, Louis. Go back to the ranch and talk it out. Because I can't tell you, sweetheart. Your mother's not here anymore but she made me promise for you kids. I can't tell you, but your aunt can!"

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Louis walked in. The house was warm and he smelled bread and peas cooking in the kitchen. He spotted Anne busying herself in there. Her movements were agitated.

Cliff and Harry were lying cuddled on the couch, Harry's feet stretched out and crossed. Louis hadn't noticed the soles of them before; they were smooth and easy to see the long shape of them. His fingers moved slow and loving through the dog's big fur.

Boy, if he had the chance to be Cliff right now he'd fucking take it.

His eyes traveled up to his face where their eyes met; he had this look something like his mother used to give Dan when he was late for dinner or when he forgot to mow the lawn.

But Harry had been looking at him awkwardly since London, so he sighed and started removing his jacket.

Harry stared, toes clenching. His eyebrows moved downward and his Adam's apple bopped as Louis chest pushed forward to get his arms out. The look was so intense.

Louis' brain started interpreting versions what it said, like; 'Really Louis? You're just gonna take my dads truck and sneak out and act like it's okay?' and 'Who do you think you are taking my granddad and my father's truck?'

He hooked the jacket and the keys back, and headed back out the front door.

He made his way around the house and sat on the boulder in the backyard where he and Harry had
had their first proper conversation, and he lit a cigarette. Tears stung at the back of his cornea and
his shoes were suddenly too tight but he puffed, in the quiet back yard with chirping of milk birds
and pigs grunting the only sounds he heard.

Until he heard sneakers approaching. Harry's sneakers. He didn't even look up, he just knew they
were his. Harry came to stand a few feet on his right, arms folded, Louis only from his line of
vision, he still didn't look up. Harry kept shifting up as he looked at the round pen, looked to the
stables, to the workers quarters, himself unable to just simply look at Louis.

It was a while before he said anything but he did initialize the conversation eventually.
"It's good that we know the truth. Now we don't have to question whether we made the right
decision in breaking up. I know we already went too far but if I could take it all back I would."

Harry finally looked at Louis and instantly regretted it. The older boy's face was egg-white.
"Do you really mean that? Because if you do then get the fuck out of here and leave me alone."
"I'm trying to make the best out the situation. You don't have to be a jackass about it."

"'Situation,'" Louis mocked in nasty tone.

Harry's jaw shut.
"Did you go back with him?" The way he said him with such despise.

"No! I went back to the hotel and slept in our room. Cord took the couch. I waited up all night but
you crashed with Zayn and Liam!"

Louis bit down on his lip hard. He was flirting with you. Touching you… and just let him?
"If all you're gonna do is yell at me, then I'm going."

He made to leave but sighed sharply, indecisively turning back. "I'm here for you if you need like,
a friend-"

"I want to fuck you," Louis interrupted with a low laugh. "I don't wanna be friends. If I had come
back to the hotel room with you I would've thrown Cord out on his ass and fucked you all night
long."

There was a significant pause. Harry was heavily panting, caught off guard.
"You're standing there looking like that, and smelling like that-" Louis continued in a super low
voice that cradled emotion. "And I want to fuck you, not be your fucking friend, so leave me the
fuck alone!"

Harry had never been so insulted or mad or hurt or freakin turned on in his entire life before. This
Louis was so ignorant, and harsh. This Louis was so sexy but this Louis couldn't even look at
Harry for more than three seconds now.

With all the energy it took from him not to rush over and hold Louis, Harry turned and marched
back to the house in tears.

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Harry mulled over what was happening.
No way around it, he was losing Louis forever. And their story had barely begun. Yes, he broke up with him but that was before when there still could have been a chance, where Harry hoped there'd be a chance. but now? Now he and Louis were some weird adoptive cousins or something. William was the only father his mother knew so to Harry that man was his grandfather but now that he knew Louis' mum was William's actual daughter it made things a whole lot more complicated. There was no blood relation but Harry wasn't about to deny that there was something there that shouldn't be sexual at all.

_I had sex with him. I fucking fell in love with my adoptive cousin!_

Harry dragged his hand down his face and felt the burn of his rings bruising his skin. He checked for blood- no blood - but stopped breathing when he realized he was still wearing Louis' promise ring. The thought hadn't even occurred to him to give it back when they had broken up, and come to think of it he didn't think he would have before but now that everything was changed he had to.

Squeezing his eyes shut to cry one more time over the memory of what the ring meant to him, he dragged it off of his finger and wiped his tears, determined to get the whole thing over with.

****

Louis wandered into the stables and leaned his head into his mother's horse. He never forgot a word Harry spoke to him since he came to Champton. How in his eyes Louis had seen a burning much like his own that branded pain of loss on him and declared him and Louis the same. But now he didn't have that. Because that same burning that brought them together saw it fit that they be separated. And now that he needed his mother more than anything all he could think about was talking to her horse now like Harry had once advised.

"I know what she'd say," he told Phoebe the horse. "She'd say this was an unhealthy attachment to someone too soon after losing someone. but how am I supposed to let go now?"

Scotch tipped his head to Louis as he made to leave the barn, and he smoothed his mane too.” Harry talks to you a lot. Tell me, does he love me too or does he think I'm just latching on to cure my grief? And is he just not willing to risk anything for something so fleeting?” Louis knew his feelings weren't so small but he wondered still.

"But even with everything if I had a chance go back in the past knowing what I know, I'd fall for him all over again."

****

_Hands to Heaven-Breathe, Let's hurt tonight- OneRepublic._

Harry found him in the stable.

"Hey," he said softly not to startle the boy. Louis turned his head to face him and Harry saw the saline shine under his eyes. He drew a deep breath, knowing he was going to do something even more painful for both of them. But this had to be done.

"I can't keep this anymore."

Louis took one look at it and his face fell. "Harry, no. No...Don't…"

"Please, I need you to take it back-"
The edges of his face sharp and his deep red, Louis looked like he was trying hard not to crumble.

"I can't wear it-"

"Then don't wear it! Just keep it!" Louis spat, tears running down about his neck.

"I know you're mad at me now but in time you'll see it's for the-"

"I'm not mad at you. I'm in love with you. That doesn't just go away because you gave back all the stuff I gave you," Louis reasoned. And your love for me isn't gonna disappear if you spend time with someone else."

Harry fumbled with the ring, almost sliding it back on but caught himself in time. "Isn't it weird for you?"

Louis nodded at Scotch. "It is. But I know we're not biologically related. I can't believe you told Nick that you regretted sleeping with me?" Louis was hurt.

Harry had not the courage to try deny it. Or even speak on the subject of Nick. This had nothing to do with him right now. At least not to Harry.

He breathed a doleful laugh. "I feel so strange. Like I've been living your life all along or something. Like everything; this farm, the house is really yours, and I'm an impostor."

"That's funny because my life got so much easier when you walked into my house that day. It hurt like hell when you broke up with me. And then for Luke to say all that and turn everything upside down... I feel alone again, like I did before I came to Champton. I felt like you were the only person who knew what I was going through. You lost a parent too and I felt that here," -he touched his heart- "I feel that with you. You're a part of me. And I know I'm not making sense, but loving you made everything stop hurting so much. And now that I'm suddenly not who I thought I was, I'm hurt and confused and I don't have you this time. I don't have you to make me smile or just distract me. Now we're at this place where there's a wall between us that we didn't have before, even when you didn't want to come out to me, and even when we fought over telling your mum that we loved eachother."

Harry knew exactly what Louis was feeling. They felt it together, but Harry knew he couldn't be as blunt as Louis was about their relationship so he chose his answer carefully.

"But you don't have to lose me. I'm still here. We can get past this as friends."

Laughing, Louis turned around and started walking out of the stables. "I told you, I can't be friends."

"Louis!" Harry cried out, breaking down and following him. The older boy kept walking and a hopeless Harry turned and propped his elbows on the fence that blocked the field, his hand pressed on his forehead. He felt the hard cold object on his skin and realized in the rush of chasing Louis the promise ring had ended up back on his finger. His shoulders convulsed as he cried, and he felt Louis turning back and coming close to him.

"I don't wanna be friends either," he cried, turning to face him. "My whole life I've felt like I was in a box. Mum was really sick when I was little. I don't know how she even took care of me after my dad died. When I was about three it was so bad we were hungry and she wouldn't- Harry had to stop talking. "She wouldn't get off the couch for days. This one time I remember me and Gemma were fighting for breakfast- a bowl of ramen noodles- I yelled at her for taking the bigger portion and she'd yell that she was the bigger one."
"We'd yell at Mum for help but she'd just grumble at us and mope around. So Gemma and I learned to get along. We cleaned up the house and I cooked. I did all the laundry- Gemma still mixes colors- but it was never enough to make her come out of her room and be our Mum. Nothing me and Gemma did was enough. Granddad helped us, all of us and she got back on her feet and she became a nurse -actual nurse who takes care of other people, go figure - and we thrived."

"And then we moved in here to take care of granddad and he got sicker and sicker, and Mum was really strong by then and she ran the farm but she still wasn't able to be our Mum."

"She'd yell at Gemma for no reason until she gave up and started giving her real reasons. Mum always had something to say about my hair, my clothes, my nails, she made me feel like I wasn't good enough and I don't know why. loved my mum, so I tried hard not to be who I was. But my sister-you know how my sister is- she was like the little devil on my shoulder saying to 'hell with Mum.' And then she went away to college and everything went quiet. A sick quiet that you know shouldn't be there. We barely communicated, just about stuff around the farm. And then you came and she was so different from before. You don't know her, Louis. That Mum you got know over the holidays isn't the same Mum I know." Harry broke down further just then.

"I stopped- I stopped giving a damn about what she thought of me the minute you told me,"- he stopped to swallow-"I invigorated you."

Tears welling up, Louis moved forward then but Harry raised a stopping hand.

"No- You were everything to me. My Granddad was everything to me. Now everything I cared about is in question. He's not my granddad, he's yours."

"I don't- I'm not claiming him," Louis growled moving in again.

Harry was a wreck, shivering to Louis' touch. "He loved you, he left things for you."

Harry enclosed himself from Louis' embrace, forcing him to withdraw.

Harry lifted both hands to his mouth, locked open from crying. "I'm trying so hard to make this normal. Less awkward! You have to let me! Friendship is all we're allowed to have now!"

The contents of Louis' ribcage hurt like they were sent through a grinder, restraining himself from holding Harry.

"I loved you before all of this, before London and Nick. I don't think I've ever loved anything this much. I can't just…"

He left off and there was no reply for eight whole seconds, then-

Harry lunged at Louis, forehead ramming into his collarbone, hands digging into the back of his shoulders. "Louis, if you love me you will try this with me. Because being just friends with you, for me, is better than nothing. Because I can't live without you."

Louis shoved him off a bit and cupped his face. "Fuck that. Let's tell her. Tonight. If she reacts as bad as you say, you can stay with me at my house and I'll go to college and you can be closer to your sister. Or you can come to Australia with me if you want."

*What is he talking about Australia all of a sudden?* Harry looked at him quizzically.

Louis pressed his forehead into his. "Please, Harry. Please say yes."
"No!" Harry shook his head vigorous. He could smell the cigarette in his shaky breath, and feel the fear in his voice. "If we thought that she was going to take it badly before she sure as hell isn't gonna let us be together now!"

But Louis wasn't listening. He was rubbing his palm over Harry's lips and cheek forcefully.

"Then, let's say goodbye proper," Louis' glassy eyes were mad with desperation, desolation. The urgency and weight of the grip on Harry's arm told him he wasn't just talking about saying the goodbye. "Then I'll never bring it up again, I promise. I love you so much." He pulled him back into the stable and shoved him on the wall, trying to kiss him, but Harry kept swinging his head away.

Louis wanted to die the way he avoided his lips.

Giving up, he pulled away, embarrassed, and moved to leave but a hand on his wrist stopped him. He met Harry's eyes and they were expressionless. Then suddenly the boy was coming towards him, planting a deep, worked kiss in his mouth.

Louis felt everything in that kiss. He was dumbfounded as to how Harry did it, how he made love to him in hours worth with just one kiss.

After the heated moment, they detached and on opening his eyes, Harry set them on Louis.

"You're gonna walk with me back to the house." Hands firmly on Louis' chest, Harry sounded every bit as headstrong as his sister did when Louis picked her up from the side of the road. "And by the time we get there I want us to put everything in the past and be no more than friends. Promise me."

Sadness engulfing him, Louis gave a weak nod. How could he deny Harry anything? Even if it was the most painful thing for them both?

Harry eased off and turned out the door. He turned back for Louis and the older boy took his outstretched hand, noticing it was just as sweaty as his. They started walking up the path to the house without looking at each other. Every step Louis took, as he felt Harry's movement beside him, hurt like a slow, painful death.

Halfway there, he stopped abruptly, all of the feelings he had for Harry flooding through him painfully cold. It was impossible to offer anything less than what he truly felt for him. "I can't. I can't do it. I'm sorry," he cried, letting go and bringing the back of his hand to his face. He started staggering blindly backward, covering his crying mouth with both hands now.

He watched Harry clench his jaw and glance back at the house before looking back at him with watery but angry eyes.

Then suddenly Louis was being shoved from where he was, all the way back to where they were by the fence next to the stables and cow pen. Harry slammed him into it, hands clutching his shirt so tightly Louis' skin pinched. He bore into his eyes, a look of blazing anger penetrating.

Louis gave a tiny squeak as he realized he was hard, they both were.

He squeaked louder again to signal how bad he wanted Harry to kiss him. The boy did kiss him, rough. So rough his back grazed the fence and arched over it. Harry's hands were all through his hair as he kissed forcefully, rutting into him.
Then the boy pulled back a few inches to look Louis in the eyes and say, "You want it your way? Fine. I'll give you a proper goodbye, but I swear by the time it's over I won't even be your friend anymore. I won't be anything to you anymore."

Knowing Harry didn't mean a word of it, Louis took his fingers to the boy's mouth, rubbing his lips shakily. "I can't be just friends with you, Love. If this is it then so be it."

Reacting to Louis' words, Harry backed off remove his shoes and pull away his T-shirt and baggy jeans.

Louis quickly unbuckled his pants and tossed his shirt off to catch up with Harry who was now coming at him again with full force.

Harry took his hand and placed it on his dick. Louis grew ever harder feeling the wet tip.

"This better be worth losing me forever," Harry said, as Louis jerked him. "Worth never speaking to me again..."

The next thing Louis knew, Harry was ducking between the fence bars and kneeling down on the warm sandy patch between the spokes of grass.

Louis followed Harry and stood in front of him. It was dark, but they had a slight ray of light from the cow pen's flood light. The boy looked up at him with an expression Louis saw only one time before; when he had walked away from him on the porch two weeks before. Then it had been a second long flicker of a look. Now it was full determination, surety and anger. Louis knew Harry was inwardly fighting with himself over his feelings for him.

Harry never removed his gaze from him as he took his dick in his mouth. He sucked and looked up at Louis like a doll with eyes that couldn't close. His mouth slowly sank over him until Louis could not see the shaft at all, and Louis moaned with the sweet feeling, but Harry still stared up at him with the same expression.

He's shutting himself out, Louis thought pulling out of his mouth. He sank down to kneel on the ground with him. He wanted to blow him back, blow his emotions back into him, but Harry pushed his bare arse on the ground and climbed on top of him.

Louis grabbed him into a kiss and tasted his own pre-come in the boy's mouth, but it seemed like Harry wasn't willing to share it. He was sucking Louis' tongue down dry.

"I want you..." Louis managed to croak out, prodding at the younger boy's arse hole.

Harry responded by making spit in his hand and massaging it all over Louis' dick without looking him in the eyes.

Louis followed suit and spread some of his own saliva on Harry's hole for good measure. The last thing he wanted was for Harry to have a bad memory of their last encounter.

Harry clenched at the feel and groaned out hungrier. There was a painful "ooh!" as he sank down quick without being adequately made loose; his desire and desperateness declared there was no time.

Louis grew teary at the tightness and fell weak as the boy worked his way to a looser hole on his dick.

He rode him purposefully; the moon absent, the still warm sand grinding under his arse cheeks as
Louis propped himself up to manage Harry's stamina. Harry grabbed the wooden stick of the fence behind him in an effort to guide his head lest he fell back and hit it in the wake of the thrusts.

Louis gently raked his hair aside and added to the movements he made, bucking into him. Harry groaned at it and started moving faster. He bit down into Louis' neck, and he figured he was in orgasm. When he came back up Louis dipped his tongue and started sucking his nipples erotically... licking and nibbling.

"You can never touch me like this again, Louis," Harry groaned at the ecstasy. "Can never fuck me like this ever again."

Louis heard the pain in his voice and it hurt him instantly. "There is nothing in the world that can keep me from you. This isn't the end, Harry. I won't let it be."

A wave of tears appeared in Harry's eyes and he sniffled as he thrust. He then put a moist thumb to Louis' bottom lip, looking at it through crying eyes. "I told you I couldn't be with you. Why didn't you listen to me?"

Those words hurt Louis like he was being washed in larva. They let him know that Harry too was thinking of their conversation on the porch two weeks ago. He answered by gripping Harry's arse with both his hands and pressing himself in. He couldn't really go any deeper but he did it again and again trying to drive in how much he loved the boy and wasn't giving up on them.

Harry groaned deep and sweet, shuddering in Louis' arms as he rubbed his tip on his prostate.

Louis raised his lips to Harry's, drinking him in. All he experienced, all he was, was the beautiful friction of their bodies meshing.

Louis felt an urge to penetrate with added vigor and embraced a new wave of heat inside the boy as he fucked upward.

"AAAAHHH!!" Harry went. "Uh! Ohhhhh!!!! Looouiiiiis!!!!"

"I know, baby, I know. I know," Louis soothed him through it. "It's okay, you don't have to say anything. I know."

Louis didn't know how the fuck they were gonna get through this. But he'd be damned if he let this be the end.

*****

"I don't want Anne to know I'm leaving it to the kids. I want them all together again. I need Harry and Gemma to stick around long enough to meet their cousins and take care of their mothers with the money. Anne will never take it out of loyalty to me. Jay won't take it because she hates me. My grandkids deserve a better chance. Do this for me Luke. Bring my family back together."

*****

The walk back to the house was sounded only by swishing grass as their sneakers tramped it. The thunder rumbled heralding the night of rain. Harry's arms were wrapped around himself and he chose not to look in Louis' direction. He had grabbed Louis' hand while the boy was dressing and shoved the ring on his finger. He didn't know which one but the ring was now back in Louis' possession. He was now free to give it to someone else now. Someone who could actually be in it with him like he deserved. Because Harry knew even without this bomb Luke just dropped, he still wasn't able to give Louis that.
Louis dashed forward and opened the back door holding it for Harry who went in to see the kitchen full.

Anne, Gemma, Cord Luke and Steve were all seating around the table. They looked up as the boys entered and Harry knew they were waiting for them.

Anne spoke first. "Luke has more to discuss regarding William's will."

Subconsciously, and much to Harry's dread, Louis pulled a chair out for him and proceeded to take his own seat a few heads away. When he realized what he had done he doubted anyone noticed since they were all had their heads low in personal thoughts.

Elbows on the table, Louis brought his clasped hands to his face and inhaled. The musty smell from fondling Harry's privates during their lovemaking were doing nothing short of making him want to skip this whole discussion and take the boy back to room to cuddle him to sleep.

He looked at the boy, who was now glaring at Luke. His eyes were puffy from all the crying and, Louis' mind wandered to the knowledge of his arse currently filled with his cum, and the white cotton panties he used to wipe his own from Louis' torso before putting them back on. He wanted his hands back in those wet panties so bad his eyes watered.

He blinked out of it and caught Anne staring at his hands.

Glaring back at Harry, Luke cleared his throat. "Louis, your entitled to ask any questions that come to mind."

Louis' eyes moved around the room and came to rest on Anne.

In response, Louis spoke to Anne. "Why did William leave Luke in charge and not you?"

Her lips parted with a shaky breath and she was visibly sorting an answer but Harry replied for her.

"Because he didn't trust her," he turned to his mother where she was already looking at him. "That rodeo show, when Rapid Mane fell; you dragged us out of there and you stopped Gemma from competing. I was fine being outside the ring but Gemma was born for it. Competing was everything to her, and Granddad knew that. He saw how you broke her heart when she wasn't even allowed to celebrate her win, and he knew that if he put you in charge you would sell the ranch without a second thought."

Anne looked down at the table and nodded once, scandalized.

Harry had no intention of shutting up. "He rather leave Luke of all people, knowing he'd kill Rapid Mane. And a bunch of toddlers, than leave her in charge. It's why Gemma did what she did with the Cowells." Harry then folded his arms, avoiding everyone's gaze.

Luke cut the silence with, "Louis, is there anything you want to know again? I'm willing to answer anything."

"I have a question?" Harry dove in again, eyes fiery. "My Dad rode that horse... Did you and John...?"

"Harry!" Anne interrupted this time.

"No! Let him finish!" Luke said heatedly. "Did me and John what!?"
Steve cleared his throat and Luke swallowed, sinking back in his chair.

"Did you do something to hurt my father?"

Hearing how tiny but infuriated he sounded, Louis' mouth fell agape. He wanted badly to grab Harry into his arms and squeeze the pain out of his voice.

"Your father had a brain tumor, Harry," Anne pierced, the last two words not even loud enough to be called a whisper. Louis heard the magnificent effort it took for her to say the words, and for some reason under all the resentment, he wanted to squeeze her too.

"I wasn't even at the arena—or even in Champton when your father died."

"I don't know that," Harry retorted.

"Harry, that is enough!" Anne screeched. "This is not about your father!"

Luke lurched out of his chair. "You wanna talk about who's wrong and right? Why don't we talk about how you tried to blackmail me!"

"What are you talking about!?" Anne asked.

Louis remembered Anne wasn't told yet.

Luke grinned slyly, almost impressed with Harry's scheme. "He took a picture of me and Steve... and threatened release it."

"Is this true?"

Harry sat defiant. "I have nothing to be sorry about. I did for my sister."

"What do you mean by that?" Anne cross-examined.

Harry then told her about what Nick said. Her jaw clenched.

Gemma's mouth fell open. Her eyes met Louis' and he wasted no time in communicating the 'I told you so' stare.

"I knew that man was the devil!" Anne looked at Robin, saying of Simon. She frowned at Harry. "Delete whatever picture he's talking about right now young man!" Anne barked. "I'll deal with both of you in a while. Right now this is about my Dad and his will."

Harry pulled out his phone and pressed a few buttons. "There. Done."

They all went silent for a few minutes, only broken by the sound of Gemma lighting the stove for tea.

"How much money is it?" Louis said spicily, out of the blue. "William's inheritance. The one his father left him that had nothing to do with the farm?"

Everyone looked at Luke, except Anne, who already knew the answer.

Luke's eyes expanded as he braced himself for the reactions. "Two million dollars."

"You've been sitting on two million dollars this entire time!" Gemma screamed. Anne recoiled and looked at her.

"Daddy didn't want anything to do with that money," she said.

Luke sighed and focused on Louis. "He left it to Jay and Anne but they both refused so on his deathbed he told me that if Jay didn't come home by the time Harry and Fizzie both had turned eighteen then I was to find a way to get you, Fizzie, Harry, and Gemma in one room and split the ranch as well as the Selley fortune among the four of you according to his last will and testament. He wanted all of you together again for the reading of the will."

Anne looked at him. She definitely wasn't aware of that part.

"So you were just planning to spring this on them just-"

Harry cut her off with a glare. "And you were just never going to tell us at all?" he said bitterly, and Louis heard the undertone that was meant for only him to understand. The one that said; 'And here Louis and I were worrying and arguing and breaking up because he felt bad about keeping a secret from the likes of you.'

"So what happens now? Harry's not eighteen for another year and a half," Gemma timely interrupted, taking a seat next to Cord, whose arm immediately found its way on her lower back. Louis caught Anne's eyes fixed on them and suddenly remembered that she knew about the pregnancy now.

Luke leaned back. "Well, you kids know now, just like William wanted. No need to delay proceedings now. When you told me over the phone that Louis and his sisters were in Champton I saw opportunity to carry out my cousin's wishes and nail Simon in the process."

"Why is it just us?" Louis asked. "Why aren't Lottie and the twins in the will?"

"They are," Luke said, quickly digging into his suitcase. "William didn't want you to wait that long until Phoebe and Daisy came of age, so he put the deadline at Fizzie's birthday. I would have liked for her to be here for this but unfortunately… You can fill her in later."

Luke handed Louis the will, and he looked at it.

The inheritance money was split four ways, but not equally. The document stated that William's last will was for Louis, his first born grandson upon turning eighteen to manage his, Lottie's and the twins shares, which were significantly less than his, Harry's, Fizzie's and Gemma's shares. Which meant that Louis was entrusted with the largest portion of the inheritance until Lottie and the twins came of age to cash in on theirs. His, Gemma's, Harry's, and Fizzie's shares, were as Luke said, to only be distributed after the 16 August on Fizzie's eighteenth birthday, which will be only a few months after Harry's eighteenth birthday. Which was, like Gemma stated, year and a half away.

Luke flared his hands. "Since you three are here now and you know everything there is no reason to delay the carrying out of the will. I can't tell you how glad I am I don't have to keep this secret anymore."

Deep in thought, nobody answered. But everyone heard the subtle snort that escaped Steve when Luke had said it and looking around the room Louis knew it was lost on no one just how much trouble Luke was in with him.
"You could have told me. We could have worked something out to help the ranch. Plus, you've been sitting on all that money all these years while the ranch basically suffered?"

Steve was mad. They were now alone in the kitchen, Luke washing the dishes, Steve drying.

"Anne didn't want the money!"

"So you use it! Steve smarted. You use it to help the ranch yourself!"

"This isn't my legacy."

"Oh, really? What is your legacy, Luke? Enlighten me!"

"What Dean took from my family!" he spurted, letting the echo fade out. "Emmett... He built this ranch, this legacy, thinking it might solve all William's problems but in reality he just made things more complicated. Mine and my cousins legacy -the one our grandfather built was taken from us and that is the one I am concerned with. Steve, I don't care who or what I have to crumble to take it back. This ranch's prosperity stood in the way of my revenge."

"Who are you? This isn't the person I married."

"This is exactly the person you married," Luke's eyes were red and his voice wavering. "Steve when I met you I was so angry, and you made me better. You make me better. I shut everything away and focused on being happy with you but I realized I can't run from this. This has been burning in me my whole life. What that man did to my family, he's dead now but his son is going to have to pay for it now."

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"I don't want Anne to know I'm leaving it to the kids. I want them all together again. I need Harry and Gemma to stick around long enough to meet their cousins and take care of their mothers with the money. Anne will never take it out of loyalty to me. Jay won't take it because she hates me. My grandkids deserve a better chance. Do this for me Luke. Bring my family back together."

*****

Louis pov

The rain was ceaseless on the dark countryside. Everyone quietly listened to the pitter-patter on the roof from their individual places in the living room; Cord leaning on the kitchen door frame with folded arms, Luke on the love seat and Steve all the way over on the single chair, Harry sitting on the stairs three steps up, Gemma standing next to him, Louis on the arm of the couch facing the stairs, and Anne standing in the middle of everyone ready to address things.

Her eyes started on Harry and he put on a dreary demeanor in preparation. She paced, casting looks at Gemma too. To Louis it looked as though she was unaware as to who she should yell at first.

"I thought you two would be great company for Louis in his time of grief," I thought you two would be the perfect example of the country life and why it's better for his and his sisters' healing process. When I thought this family was something Louis could be proud to be a part of."
She paced, hands on her hips, large grabber in her semi-kept hair.

"Harry, you were a good boy," -Louis stole a glance and Harry looked down at his fingers with a rude eyebrow at the woman. Louis sighed softly at the tone in her voice- "Good grades, good record. I never had to worry about you doing drugs or staying out late. None of the things Gemma did..." She let that sink in for what seemed to Louis like a lifetime before continuing. "Framing a fully grown man? Who is also a family member!? I have never been more disappointed in you!"

Steve tried to help. "It's okay. It's not his fault."


Anne ignored the two men. She then turned her attention to her daughter.

"And then there's you." Her head shook disappointed. "Gemma, not telling your own family that you're pregnant? You pushed your brother to blackmail! By not saying anything! Agreeing to make a two and a half meter jump pregnant? That's exactly how your father died!"

"He wasn't jumping over a simple obstacle, mother Gemma blasted out without control. "It was a saddle bronc and he had a tumor. He was going to die anyway!"

Anne looked like a different creature on hearing her daughter speak like that but Gemma didn't stop.

"Harry wouldn't blackmail anyone, I would. That's what I'm good at. I did it to Aiden, it's what I've been doing to Louis for a week to keep him saying anything...that's right mother, louis lied to you too. You know you can be disappointed in me, you can be disappointed in harry. But he only said that to Luke to protect me! And you know that. But that's not your real problem with him, is it? It's funny because you treat Louis like a king while your own son suffered at your hands for having the very same flaw, mother! How is that okay!? You talk about him not being a good example to your precious Louis, but who does he spend the most time with? You think you're a better example? Louis can't relate to you! Harry is the one he's closest to because they're both gay! They might as well be fucking each other in your house and you wouldn't know!"

Louis' eyes widened as his mind raced. Flaw? Harry is far from flawed. Oh no, Anne is gonna ask what Gemma used to blackmail me! How the heck does Gemma expect me to tell her I've been sleeping with Harry behind her back? Oh god, Harry has got be mad at me for not telling him about the baby!

Harry's eyes widened with three words on his mind. Gemma, what the fuck? Cord covered his shocked face in his hands.

POWW !!!

The sound of the slap seemed to echo like a boom box as the thunder rolled outside.

"Don't you dare speak to me like that! You'll have respect in my house!!!"

Louis remained motionless as he didn't know what to do at the moment, at all. He looked over at Harry and saw something he had never seen before. Something that he wasn't sure was even happening with the speed at which it took place; Gemma and Harry, together, so accurately and on point turned their bodies at the same time in perfect sync, and sprinted up the stairs to their rooms, shutting the doors behind them. Louis' eyebrows darkened as he turned to Cord who gave him a look that said he knew exactly what that was all about.
Anne covered her lower face and gasped out a loud, sharp wail.

Louis wanted to reach out but he wasn't sure it was a good idea since Gemma basically just outed him and Harry. Steve was the one who came over and rubbed the sides of her arm. Luke didn't seem to happy about that, and he stomped up the stairs.

Steve then excused himself and went up after his husband.

Then there was that sickening silence; Cord blowing a sigh and massaging his neck, Anne still standing there sniffing, Louis still perched on the couch arm not knowing what move to make.

"You lied to me," came Anne's voice after a while, and it took Louis a few takes to realize who she was addressing.

"You should have told me you knew about what John did." She did not look at Cord. "He's been a friend for years! You sat on that information for days."

Cord paced his head, about to try balance out the conversation. Then-

"You're fired. I want your things packed and out of the cabin by the morning."

Cords eyes went dead and his face fell.

Louis spoke up. "No, Anne. Don't fire him. He probably didn't know how to tell you."

"Oh, is that your excuse? For keeping vital information from me and then have the audacity to tell me what to do in my own house? Do you wanna run the farm as well, Louis. I bet Luke already told you as much."

Louis was hurt at that. "No! I'd never- I hate that I kept that from you! I should have said something from the beginning."

"Supposing she had made the jump and fell on her ass? Would you have waited then to share the news that could make a difference between life and death of my daughter and her child?"

Louis let out a quiet sigh; he had before assumed she was speaking about him and Harry. "You're right. I messed up…But you aren't in the clear. What Luke said about William …I've been here for weeks. You could have told me the truth. Luke's only been here, what? A week? And you let him be the first one to be honest with me?"

Louis faintly heard a door open upstairs just then but it was at the back of his mind now.

"I was planning to tell you William was your biological grandfather before you left for college, but fine if you want to compare that to the fact that my daughter could've ended up in the hospital because of you," she shrugged coldly. "I thought you cared about this family!"

Louis froze, and Cord's mouth flew open to say something but someone else beat him to it.

"Don't you dare talk to him like that!" Harry yelled from the top of the stairs. "Louis is the only one who gives a damn about what you think about anything!"

He started treading down the staircase. "Are you going to hit him too? Since he came here he looked up to you and you've done nothing but lie to him. To all of us!"

The thunder started rolling and lightning flashed casting flickers of light through the window and over Harry's tear-stricken features.
"You're blaming everything on everyone but you know all of this is your fault!" he said above the thunder. "You only loved Dad and when he died you sent all of it with him and left NOTHING FOR US! I don't care if you're disappointed in me, because you made me this way! Cord and Louis kept those things from you because they were scared, cause that's what you do, you scare everyone!"

Harry was growing dreadfully hoarse now, and Louis was getting worried but he stood still as Harry let her have years up pent up rage. "Cord loves you like his mum and cuz he doesn't know his mum and somehow you managed to measure up for him. He's been here for me and Gemma through all your shit and if he goes I go!"

"And Louis," Harry paused and held his chest, momentarily shutting his eyes as he caught his breath. Louis started wondering if he should stop him before he exasperates. "He just lost his mother so anything he does is forfeit. And plus you brought him here. And I know you love him and you want him to be a part our family, Mum, and I do too but not like that! Not like a brother! Not like a cousin! I don't love him like that!" -Louis saw the difficulty in his breathing- "I love him...I love him... the way you loved DAD!" the last five words came out like a pitiful roar, with Harry coughing after he said it and wallowing in sobs.

Louis then watched Harry tense up with fear at what he had just said. Then the boy was running out into the rain, leaving the front door open.

Louis made a quick glance at a flabbergasted Anne, and darted after the boy.

*****

Falls on me- fuel

Harry ran. He ran until the panting grew too much but too little to refill his blood with oxygen on time. But he kept on running, parallel to the road, towards edge of the steep, downward hill in the direction of the cabin. The heavy cold rain hitting him everywhere wasn't a help either.

He wanted to outrun the thoughts. He fought hard not to think of how his granddad lied to him all along, and how he needed him now but everything he believed in was a lie.

~~~~~~

William's dreary eyes landed on Harry by the door.

Pointing in the boy's direction, he tried to speak, and let out another cough.

Noticing where he was pointing, Luke cleared his throat.

"I'll leave you two alone." He eased off the bench and gestured for Harry to sit.

"Harry, my boy. My little eyeball," William said, voice wheezing, as Harry sat in Luke's stead. "I don't want you to think I'm abandoning you. I'm not. I'm just shaking off the old tired body. I'm never leaving you, son. I'll look out for you. Know this: you have been so important to me. A blessing to my life and I've learned so much from just being your granddad."
A hacking cough took over from words, and Harry fed him a sip of water to relieve it. The man drank a difficult mouthful and forced himself to continue speaking.

"Harry? I know you. I know what burns deep down in your soul. And if one day that burning calls you in a way that you can't ignore it, there's one thing I beg of you..."

~~~~~

He couldn't see a thing in the dark.

"Whaaaaawwwwww!" He tripped on a rock and fell face first down the hill.

He rolled and rolled.

~~~

'Bruce, why did you let Harry near that edge!? William barked at the little brown dog. "What if he had fallen? You want his mother to have my neck!?’

A tiny Harry giggled and pointed at William. "He wasn't leading me there. He was telling me not to go there!"

"He was, was he?" William looked at the boy quizzically.

"He said- you would be mad."

A smile came over William, and he picked up the boy. "Even Bruce knows damn well you can't be replaced, Harry."

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He stopped rolling. Body huddled in a heap, gasping for air.

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Louis pov

The entire front porch was soaked and still being showered, providing no kind of shelter in the busy windy rain.

"Harry!" The rain blew in every direction, sending bulleting shots onto Louis that drenched him as he dashed after Harry. He couldn't see a thing. Only the beat splashed outline of Harry flashing across yard toward the back yard.

"Harry, Baby!? Come back! HARRY!!"

He ran until he saw the the splashes grew lower and finally stopped.
He panicked as he realized the boy had disappeared. He stood at the edge of the hill and saw a soaking green sweater doubled over on the ground. He dived down and grabbed the boy up in arms, scooping him up one hand under his knees and the other around his waist. He heard loud botched up gasping coming from him and knew what was happening.

He rushed back with him to the house and rest him on the porch. Red gushed down the boy's face from his hairline. "No no no no!"

Heart *flabbing* away like a boxing bag, Louis tapped around his soaking pockets for the inhaler while holding the boy upright. His features were fast becoming paler against the red blood, and he kept squeezing Louis' chest and shoulders, choking now.

"Harry, please! You're gonna be okay! Just breathe, Love, please-INHALER!!! WHERE'S THE FUCKING INHALER!" Louis screamed with the thunder to the warm light of the house as the boy's grip lightened and his hand fell away limp along with his head.

***

Chapter End Notes

Are you freaking out? Believe me I am too!! Kudos please? Comments please I wanna hear from ALL of you! Final chapter upload in a couple weeks!
Stay Forever, With Me

Chapter Notes

A/N:- Here it is, the final Chapter. Last year around this time I posted the first chapter and now I am both proud and relieved to finally complete it. Please enjoy and leave kudos on the chapter. Comments will also be greatly appreciated.

**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Now at the lake, sitting on the evergreen bank listening to strums of Harry's guitar and laughter - genuine laughter -, singing along to the melody and curling his fingers in his cloud-soft hair, Louis was interrupted by a tap on his shoulder and turned around, but no one was there.

The guitar stopped and he looked back at the boy, but Harry had disappeared.

Louis jumped up out of his sleep. "Harry!?!"

He looked up at Anne who had come and sat beside him and was nudging him awake. His face squinted in the new Sunday morning sunrise coming in from a nearby window, and as he processed again where he was, his eyes hit Luke on the opposite bench slung under the warm sleeve of his husband's, and everything soured again.

On the cold hospital bench, feeling the Sunday morning chill, drool dripping on his arm, Louis had been there for hours. After they had rushed Harry in and the doctors disappeared with him, he had paced the hallways and only left a couple times to take a smoke. Only, he couldn't bring himself to light the cigarette knowing Harry was there because of his lungs. He just ended up stomping them in the gravel beneath his feet. The doctor had only come out once to let them know he was going to be fine before leaving again to take care of the gash over his left eye.

"Sweetheart?" Anne whispered now. "The doctor says we can see him now."

Louis dragged himself up groggily and saw Anne rested her hand on Luke's shoulder to ask if he was coming. The man shook his head. "You guys go ahead."

Louis figured Luke decided not to tag along out of some sort of shame.

He dragged himself up and followed Anne to Harry's hospital room.

IV machine next to the bed and an oxygen mask over his pale but lanky features, Harry lay comfortable.

After twenty minutes of sickening silence in which Louis sat holding his hand so tight hoping he'd feel it and wake up, Anne cleared her throat.

"We need to get home and get some rest and come back tomorrow," she said, more to him than herself included.

Louis glanced at her and shook his head, gripping Harry's limp hand in both his hands now. He
kissed it and felt Anne's eyes hawking over him, but he didn't care. He rested his head next to Harry's hip, slinging the boy's limp arm on top of his hair, and closed his eyes.

******

The chirping of evening birds ready to get in their nests for the night sounded from outside the window calling the patient inside awake. Situated on the edge of the countryside, this was not a strange occurrence to Champton Valley hospital.

As his rigid eyes opened, Harry unconsciously ran a weak hand through a moist mat of hair where it lay by his side. His eyes fluttered open enough to see it belonged to a sleeping Louis.

Breathing in deep, his hand mangled in the thick brunette hair. Closing his eyes in relief and joy at the warmth of him, he smiled as he exhaled weakly.

It was then his newly opened eyes noticed a movement in the near distance. Sitting on the chair on the adjacent wall, under a blanket, his mother's face came into focus. She sat slightly forward as though she had thought twice about taking actions to get up. She was staring at him, staring at his hand in Louis' hair.

Harry froze. If he moved his hand it would look obvious. If he kept it there it would also be obvious. He was in a sticky situation. And the woman wouldn't stop staring with a shocked expression. Suddenly it all came flooding back to him. All the yelling and confessions, and he realized he didn't really care what she saw him do now. His head hurt and he was just glad Louis was there.

Catching herself, Anne shifted out of the chair and hurried to press her hand on his forehead.

"You're awake!" she said to him, his eyes protruding at the coldness of her touch. "I'll go get the doctor."

Before Harry knew it, a doctor and a couple nurses were flooding in. Louis was woken up by one of them, and when he quickly assessed that Harry was awake his sleepy eyes were wide open.

After tests and advice to monitor Harry for the day, the medical staff exited the room, and Gemma came followed by Niall.

Throat dry, Harry scanned the people around him. "What day is it?"

"It's Sunday evening. Sunset," Gemma said softly, head tilted in attendance.

"So I've been here all day?"

"Don't talk too much, Sweetie." Anne frowned at his hoarseness. "I'm gonna go get you something to drink," she said, dashing off.

"You fell down the hill and busted your head open," Louis tried to say lightly, pointing to the stitches on Harry’s forehead but ended up cracking his voice.

Gemma took over. "Cord got you into the truck and we all drove you straight here."

"Dad came and said some prayers while you were sleeping," Niall put in.

Louis kissed the back of his hand and kept it there. The sensation warmed his entire anatomy.

Gemma climbed on the bed in her track pants and t-shirt. "Doctor said we got here just in time. I
was so scared. Mum got paranoid and made an appointment for my first ultrasound while they were stitching you up."

Harry stared confusedly, and Louis was about to tell her she was upsetting him, but then the boy smiled, memory flooding back. "Really? I can't wait to see the picture."

"Me too. I just don't know how I'll deal with Aiden and Cord both wanting to be in the room when I get gelled up."


He then sighed tiredly, leaning back into the pillows. "We'll all get through it together, Gem. As always."

*****

Louis' pov

It was Monday afternoon when the doctors agreed to release Harry. Louis was the only one there since everyone else had important business to attend to that day; Anne on the farm, Gemma with the Cowell ranch. So he helped Harry change into his normal clothes and walked him to the truck.

Slowly, Harry climbed in and leaned on his side, facing the driver's seat. The door was shut behind him and Louis ran around the front, jumping in as well. The engine firing up, he looked at Harry, Harry looked at him. He noticed the blankness in his swollen eyes and tiny beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Are you sure you don't want to take a rest on the back seat?" he asked. To him, Harry was now delicate china and needed to lay on a soft cushion to brace from the bumpy road. He had Gemma bring the boy's favorite blanket - now his too - to his hospital room. The thing now sat in a duffel bag ready to be pulled out if Harry decided to take the backseat.

"I'm fine," Harry said, eyes moving admiringly around his face.

"Okay." Louis blushed at the gesture as he leaned in to pull the seat belt over the boy with a tiny smile.

Louis wheeled down the road looking straight ahead but was vividly aware of Harry's eyes on him. They had reached the main road when the boy spoke up.

"Um, Louis?"

Alert to whatever he needed, Louis' head flashed in short serials from Harry to the road as he drove. "Yes, Love?"

"I need you to take me somewhere."

****

The warm wind sailing over his neck and face, Harry sat on the grass on top of his granddad's grave, having left Louis talking to Gemma on the phone in the truck. Hands weakly moving over the cool grass, he gazed at the weathered headstone.

"How could you not tell me, Granddad? When you said you loved all us kids, did you mean Louis and his sisters too? Did you plan for him to be in my life all along? Why didn't you tell me about
them?"

He ran his fingers over the worn stone. "I bet you didn't think we would fall in love. I reckon you just meant for us to be a family."

Harry went silent for a minute and a half. "But I did fall in love. Or maybe you meant for that to happen too..."

~~~~~~

Flashback-

"I need you to do this for me, son," the weak man whispered to a tear-stricken Harry at his bedside. "Promise me you'll stay with your mother."

"How do you expect me to do this without you? She hates it here, Granddad. If you die she'll move us all back into our old house. I don't wanna go back. Please, you can't die. I'll do anything. Please, Granddad, I can't handle her alone." The boy's heartbreak was visible as he clutched the edge of the sheets.

"I already talked to her. She won't leave the ranch. Your mother isn't a bad person. She's been through a lot, and I know it's gonna be hard. There'll be times when you just wanna run away, but my boy, there is nothing out there," -coughs- "more solid than a family that loves you. And this family is already too broken up to be divided any more. So Harry, please promise you won't go..."

~~~~~~

Harry shifted when he heard grass ruffling behind him in a manner that had not the light swish of breeze.

He made a three-o’clock turn as Louis came to stand beside him. "He made me promise not to leave." He wiped his tears away. "Then you came and made me want to do just that," Louis said nothing as he waited for him to finish. "I wanted to run away with you and leave Mum. But you kept telling me we couldn't."

"If you think that's best-

Harry knew Louis wasn't going to fight him on it anymore. Not after that night. If he wanted to leave and never look back he knew Louis was going to accept it and go with him. Whatever Harry wanted he'd now make it happen without objection after he almost died. Harry knew that but he would never allow it now.

"You don't understand," Harry cut him off. "You belong here. And you knew we couldn't just walk away into the sunset and forget this place. That I couldn't just take you away from your home when you just got here. Granddad somehow made it so I wouldn't be able to leave." Harry gave a brief laugh through his tears, then cried all over again.

Looking at Louis as he knelt to his side, his heart pouring all over him, he cupped his cheeks. "I'll never ask you to choose again. I'll never force you to run away from Champton with me. Whatever happens, we stay and we face it."

Nodding into his grip, Louis helped him up and they slowly walked back to the truck.

*****
"Are you mad at me for not telling you about Gemma's pregnancy?" Louis asked, buckling Harry's seat belt back in the truck.

"What? No!" Harry said forehead creased, scanning his features. "That's just Gemma. She does this all the time."

"Get pregnant?" Louis said, lame attempt at a joke.

Harry laughed anyway. "No! Growing up the way we did, we just learned to be super defensive and secretive. Gemma was always scared to get in trouble. She thinks if she does then she shouldn't go down alone."

It wasn't hard for Louis to grasp this concept. He and his sisters pointed blame at each other countless times when in trouble with their mother.

"You could have told me, you know," he said softer now, the pinch of an offense not lost on Louis.

I know- I was irresponsible-I-"

He was stopped by Harry's warm fingers on his lips. They paused there for a moment, both breathing shakily looking at each other's lips. Louis could almost taste the beauty in the boy's eyes, smell the color of his hair. He kissed the fingers on his lips.

"I forgive you," Harry said before looking away, his fingers reluctantly following.

Louis turned and started the engine. He changed the gears, determined to get the boy home where he could rest in the comfort of his own bed and finish recover from that awful night.

Harry's hand came back and covered his as he made to turn the steering wheel.

"How do you feel about me now?" He stared at him, and all Louis wanted to do was stare back into those forest-colored eyes. "Do you want to be friends or...?"

He was already fighting back tears. And at the sound of the word 'friends', he couldn't hold it in any longer. A sob escaped as he shook his head at Harry.

"No. No, Harry. Not that." He dropped his head to the steering wheel, rubbing his forehead on Harry's hand.

"Then we'll be whatever we want. We'll do it how you wanted it. We'll sit down and tell her everything and then we'll be together no matter what happens." Harry was breathing heavily after saying all that in one go but he continued slower. "I'm not gonna leave us like this. Not after you saved my life...a second time."

"Second time?"

Harry nodded. "Yep. The first was when you came over and talked to me at your house."

Proud, Louis raked his fingers through Harry's curly hair. "I fell in love with you...literally fell and busted my knee when first saw you."

Louis' hand smoothed over the boy's face, relishing the skin on his nose and cheeks.

"I was ready to run to you. Make sure you were in one piece," Harry said, melting into his touch.
"And I didn't even know you. Of course, it didn't help when I dropped the plate on your foot after."

Overwhelmed with the love and pride taking up space in his chest, Louis reached and kissed his forehead. Harry was in one piece. That's all he cared about.

But, alas, he did hear the frightened choppy tone in the boy's declaration, sounding a bit more than weakness from being in the hospital bed from his asthma attack.

And despite the bitter finding, he loved him all the more for saying it. All the reasons he fought to hold on to Harry were the reasons he had to take a step back and let him figure things out on his own, and he understood that now.

"What you said to your mother was brave," he said. "It touched me here," - he covered his heart - "To know how deeply you felt about me, and that you got the strength to finally say it to your Mum. And to think I almost lost you for it?" He took the hand and intertwined their fingers, relocating them to his lap where his other hand caressed them. He noted the twitch in Harry's bony fingers. "You're still so weak. When you get stronger we'll think about all of that. Just focus on getting better for now, okay?"

Harry eased in his grip, the words taking shape in his head. He gave Louis a furtive nod, seeming to understand- Louis hoped he understood- that they couldn't just pretend like he didn't almost die in his arms because of all this stress about Anne and their relationship.

*********

Halfway into the next day, and the house was unbearably quiet. Harry was super bored Louis had college orientation and had left for Doncaster that morning. But everyone else was at home, so Harry was baffled as to what oriented this crazy silence.

Even throwing Cliff a ball, which the dog ignored, he ground his teeth and sought out his sister for company.

She was a bit down today with her morning sickness but equally bored, so she was happy for a chat with her baby brother.

The siblings were sitting on the stairs discussing imminent childcare when Anne passed them to get to the kitchen.

Gemma dropped her shoulders. The second day since Harry had been home, and their mother still hadn't spoken to any of them concerning that night. Cord had packed his things and gone to stay with Murrey, but still devoted his daytime to helping with the horses on the farm, and hanging around with Gemma. Anne ignored him too.

"It's happening again, I can feel it," Harry said once she was out of earshot. "The silent treatment, the ignorance, and I don't think I have the strength or patience to deal with that again. Granddad made me promise not to leave, but it's hard. He must have known it would get this hard."

"We dealt with Mum's behavior before," Gemma tried, remembering when they got through the worst.

"Yeah, but Granddad's not here to protect us this time." Harry played with the drawstring in his hoodie. "He's not there to help Mum either. I can't help but be scared. And I'm still angry with him for not saying anything about Louis and his Mum. Maybe if he did we'd know them sooner."

There was a knock on the door cutting in the conversation. Gemma proceeded to open it and Niall
flooded in.

*****

"While we were in the waiting room at the hospital Louis filled me on what happened." Niall pasted mayonnaise in the salami sandwiches he was making for him and Harry. "I told you, you need to talk to your mum, not snap at her."

"She was going berserk, throwing out Cord, yelling at Louis... I had to stop her before she made him leave too." Harry pulled out the orange juice from the fridge.

Niall talked with a full mouth. "Just take it easy. This is a gradual process. All this stuff about Luke and Simon and Liam's mom is a lot for everyone to handle. And for God's sake don't do anything like you did that night. I don't wanna lose my best friend!"

******

Louis pov

After sunset, Louis walked in tired from his orientation. Making his way to the kitchen he saw Luke turning a pot, and Harry standing next to Anne with his apron on, grating something. Gemma sat with her feet up drinking milk and going through her phone.

Louis was super hungry but dead afraid to cross the threshold.

Gemma saw him and called out. "So you're back!"- Harry's head snapped up - "Tell us; How was it?"

"It was cool. I liked the aesthetics of the place. I had to practically drag Stan out of there in the end," Louis said, finally moving forward, eyes on the carrots slicing thinly at the speed of light in Anne's charge.

Stomach growling, he chatted with Gemma while dishing himself some leftover lunch, but there was still a significant amount of tension in the room. Harry kept glancing at him and looking away when he looked which, he did a great deal of looking. He knew Niall had been over and told Harry he should try to personally work out his differences with his mother.

Anne kept on slicing carrots but her stance was clearly saying she wanted to duck and run for cover. Understandably she'd need time to let the concept of Louis and Harry sink in. But the tension was unbearable. Harry was right. Maybe they shouldn't wait to explain their side of things. Just tell the woman they're in love and- for heaven's sake, didn't Harry already do that? Didn't he almost die for it? Shouldn't even be an issue anymore!

Louis wished he could touch or sit next to Harry, or something to speed up the process because this game they were all playing wasn't healthy for any of them. Everyone was basically ignoring the fact that Harry had declared his love for Louis before running out and almost dying. Heck, it was because he declared it that he ran out and almost died.

Louis was fighting with himself about how to fix this.

******

Tiptoeing around Anne all day the next day, the boys equally tried to avoid each other. Louis took overall Harry's work on the farm, and Harry stuck to kitchen duty and taking care of Cliff. Louis made up his mind to give him space and time to get better and sort things out with his mother. But
that didn't mean he didn't miss him terribly.

That evening, watching the sunset on the front porch, Louis looked out into the meadows beyond the horizontal road. In the corner of his eye, a silhouette appeared in the doorway. It was from Harry. He was hesitantly loitering by the door.

Louis smiled softly, inviting him out.

Eyes droopy and face pale, Harry exhaled. "I don't know if I can do this."

Louis heard everything in that one sentence. The fear. The giving up. He made an agitated turn to the boy, hand strong on the banister. "Do what? Explain to her?"

"Yes, and..." Harry's voice faded to nothing.

"And what?" Louis was afraid to hear the answer.

"We should take a step back from-"

"From what!?! Louis croaked. "From us? I can't just un-feel what I've felt for the past five weeks!"

"And I'm not asking you to," Harry stressed. "But you have college soon, and I'm just unneeded drama -"

Louis raised his eyebrows. "You know, I was so scared that night when I held you and you weren't responding. I thought you were dead! If you need time to figure it all out, then take it. I'm giving you time. But I'm not giving up on us."

"I know. And I want to be with you, Louis," Harry said, pacing. "I wanna be in it with you...but," His right leg shook nervously. It was difficult to ignore the fact that Harry was so tired.

Louis nodded at his shoes. This William being his grandfather was awkward for everyone but especially for Harry. "I know. We have to be realistic. You need time to talk to your Mum, and I have to keep my distance. I get it."

"I don't even wanna talk to her anymore. I said all I had to say. And she hasn't responded. Hasn't even come to ask about us. She's just cooking, and chasing the hens."

"It'll all resolve in time. She can't ignore us forever."

Harry blinked in frustration. "But until she does, I can't parade my feelings for you. We have to give it a rest."

Harry shut his eyes tightly. Fresh tears squeezed out and ran straight down his jawline. Louis lifted his hand to wipe it away but caught himself mid-action. He knew damn well touching Harry in any way now could reverse the whole point of this conversation. And no matter how bad he wanted to toss it and hold him until he stopped hurting he knew Harry needed this. He knew he needed to figure stuff out with his mother and sister, and he had to give him space to do it.

"I'll wait for you, Harry. If you need me I'll be right here," Louis said through the excruciating pain of all the sharp splinters in his chest that punctured when Harry had said 'We have to give it a rest.'

"Are you okay, though?" Harry said into the strained silence, making Louis blink at his concern.

Then Louis smiled. "I'm fine. Just thinking about everything. And you. How you never cease to surprise and amaze me."
He looked him, the porch light on his face highlighted the dark circles telling of the past few days-
and one kiss, Louis needed one kiss to get him through the long drought that was; no Harry in his
bed or stealing kisses in the stables and worker's quarters, for however long it takes for Harry and
Anne to come to an understanding.

"Well, I think we have enough surprises to last a lifetime." Harry offered a grin and leaned closer
as if knowing exactly what was on Louis' mind and happy to participate in the last kiss.

_Beep Beep. BeepBeep!!_

 Barely touching lips, Louis and Harry looked up.

Trying to navigate its way into the yard, was a freaking limousine.

"What's this?" Louis asked, face hard.

Harry grabbed his hands. "I - sort of- promised- Nick we'd hang out?"

Louis tightened the grip. "What?" Hot bubbles crept up in his blood. "Well, you can't go now? He
used your sister's pregnancy to get a date. You can't give in to that!"

"I already promised-" Harry stuttered. "It's not a romantic thing- Just as friends- I love you, okay?"

Louis frowned, just noticing Harry was wearing the shirt he sang at the fundraiser concert in.
Why'd he have to wear that shirt? It was too cute for a date with Grimmy.

"Okay. Call me if you need me," Louis said, seriously contemplating following them and parking
up in the truck outside the restaurant.

**********

After Harry left, Louis walked into the living room, arms folded. Anne was quietly reading what
seemed like another letter.

"I'm not gonna walk away from him," was the first thing that flew out of his mouth. He didn't plan
on it but he was now quickly making it a plan on the spot.

Caught unawares, Anne's paper fell limp in her hand as her eyes beamed at him for a second.
Seemingly opting to ignore him, she ruffled it back straight and continued reading.

"Harry just left with Nick. For a friendly date," he blurted out way colder than intended. He didn't
know what was driving him to speak this way. Or maybe he did. Maybe he should have sooner.

It was the first time he had spoken about his relationship with her son to her. He had played over
the scenarios in his head countless times, none easier than the last. Everything Harry said about her
in the past, everything Niall said about Harry and his Mum needing to sort it out alone, none of it
was any help in stopping him from saying it now. He was done tiptoeing and sliding behind doors
trying not to be what he was; hopelessly in love with her sixteen-year-old son.

He knew he had sworn just a few mere minutes earlier to give Harry time to talk to Anne on his
own, but one look at the fancy vehicle in the yard and every ounce of Louis' patience was out the
window. Harry was not there to stop him. If he was, Louis would never tell him the plan. For the
boy's own good. Louis was never one to wait around and he saw this as one of those times he had
to take the bull by the horns and initiate some kind of truce.
Anne, skin alert on her bones, looked up once more from her spectacles, fixing him with a peculiar look. She motioned for him to sit across from her. He took the love seat and started playing with his stubby fingers, focusing on that.

Anne gazed at him some more from over her spectacles - intimidated, he started rethinking the confrontation - then she quickly took them off.

"I'm not stupid," she said. "I know what's been going on in my own house since you stepped foot in it," - small pause- "Maybe even before that."

In shock, Louis eyeballed her, head still low.

"The looks, the sneaking around, the footsie under the table. The way you acted on the plane... The petty fights between you two- I reckoned those would sort themselves out. No need meddling in teenagers' business. Besides, I'm the last person Harry would want to talk to about it- He and Gemma were always like that, they never tell me anything."

Louis' mouth opened to speak, but Anne held up her index. "It's important that you let me finish." The statement came out somewhat like a question.

"I planned on telling you about your birthright since day one... But every time I saw my son smile and blush around you- I... I couldn't do that to him. Then I noticed it got more serious and you asked to stay another week, and I told myself 'okay I'll tell him now.' But, Louis, I've never seen Harry so happy since his granddad was alive. When you went to Wales I stayed quiet hoping whatever it was between you two would help prompt you to come back and to stay long enough for me to tell you the truth. And I was right. You came back, only you didn't find out the way I hoped," she sighed.

Louis blinked thinking about how Luke turned everything upside down. His eyes welled up with tears. "I wanted to tell you about us. I tried."

Anne slapped her knees. "I know you'd been struggling inside, not being able to tell me. But I recognized the blossoming stages of young love, Louis. I've been there." Her face grew hard. "Harry didn't say he was going out with Nick tonight. Had I known, I'd have already chased that little weasel out of here with a shotgun."

"You, on the other hand," she started with a higher tone. "You've made my Harry happy. But don't think I wasn't seeing him cry more times in a month than he had in years because of you. I figured instead of getting all 'mama bear' I'd try to see you through her eyes," -she picked up his mother's letter- "And I see an exceptional young man. I couldn't have chosen better for my son. I know who you are, what you stand for." She smiled at Louis, "I wouldn't let Harry get involved with just anybody."

"Harry makes me so happy," Louis whispered. "I don't think I could have coped if I hadn't met him when I did. He makes everything bearable. I kept telling him we had to be honest with you. But he's so scared. He told me I'd never understood why it was so hard for him to tell you about us."

Anne understood. "Harry resents me. I know he does."

"He said you were homophobic. I don't think that's the case otherwise you wouldn't have been so welcoming to me, but I know he has a reason for thinking so."

Anne burst out laughing. "Wow!" she said before dissolving into tears. "The way I acted... It had nothing to do with the way Harry was..." she drifted off the sentence into her own thoughts. "I
wanted to protect him. I know now I went about it the wrong way."

An inquisitive demeanor taking over his face, Louis dug in his pocket. "It's okay. I think I know why you acted that way with Harry."

Anne watched as he pulled out William's will and the Burberry note. He clutched the guitar necklace hanging from his neck, removing that too and placing it with the other items on the coffee table.

A decisive look in her eye, Anne quickened to the corner table and pulled out a stack of papers from the drawer. Sniffling wildly as Louis had never seen her before, she shoved them in his hands.

He took a peek. They were more of his mother's letters.

"These are the ones you told me were missing. I hid them because they all mention this exact topic," she said, pointing to the items Louis just showed her. She grew serious as she added, "I need to ask you a huge favor."

Louis gave a shaky nod. Anne copied it.

"These letters, they contain information that refers to mine and your mother's childhood. Things that I'm not ready to share with my children. Things that have the potential to change everything you thought you knew about yourself and your parents, your grandparents, and me. I have to talk to my kids, I don't know how long that will take and if I'll ever be ready to talk about some of this, but you deserve to read your mother's letters. Your mother's story. You're good at keeping secrets. Can you keep whatever you read about me to yourself until I'm ready to tell them?"

Laced with concern, curiosity, and fear, Louis said, "How about you lock them away until you're ready to talk?" He was scared of whatever the letters would say. Of how they would change his perspective of his mother? He didn't want that. The items on the table alone were already telling a mind-blowing tale to him, and he wondered how Harry would absorb all of it.

Anne agreed. "That would be best. You are so thoughtful. You've been a blessing to us. You will always be welcomed here, Louis. I know I need to talk to Harry. I may need your help to make things right. I don't think I'm ready yet, but until then will you make sure he's okay?"

Louis took her hands and squeezed them. "Of course."

*****

"I just wanna say, I enjoyed the time we spent together in London." Nick tucked his napkin in his collar. They sat at the middle table in Ed's Diner. They were the only ones there, and the place was romantically dim seeming like Nick had reserved it for their date. "I'm hoping we can do it again sometime."

"Um- Nick. I can't go out with you like that. I don't want you to think it's because of you or anything. It's just that I have this thing with Louis that I can't really ignore."

Nick's eyes dimmed and he released a drained shrug. "I get it. You two are already sickening to watch actually. You can skip the details."

Harry smiled. "In preschool when you kept hitting and pinching me I'd never have thought one day you'd be so understanding."

Grimmy laughed. "I can't remember that far back. Are you certain it was me?"
"Who else brought soggy sausage sandwiches to school and refused to share his Game Boy with anyone?"


"In London, you told me you were reading *The Jungle* to your uncle Simon? I googled it and it doesn't seem like the kind of book that Simon would be interested in?"

"Actually it was my idea to read it to him. I was trying to worm some workers' rights ethics into him under the guise that he could gain insight into bad farm practices."

"Bad farm practices?"

"He wants to take your farm, remember? He's interested in anything to that end. Even an old novel that has nothing to do with your mother's ranch."

Harry laughed. "It sounds interesting actually. I think I'll give it a read. You were kinda right at the rodeo-well, wrong about my mother's farm- but right about the double standards of the animal world in general. Although I'm strongly involved with making show horse lives matter to the equine industry, taking a step back I can appreciate your point that all animals deserve a say. I mean, I'm not gonna stop eating beef stew but..." Harry's dimples emerged as he dug into his plate.

Grimmy laughed.

They ate and laughed and talked about primary school days, and then Harry reached for his soda, and Grimmy covered his hand. Harry was so taken aback by it that he was sure his face was all weird but he wasn't processing that now. He was focused on Grimmy's face as he sported all seriousness.

"I get that you're taken," he said, releasing his hold on his hand and taking his own cup. "I can live with that as long as he's good to you. But I'm still your friend. That won't change, Harry Styles. I'm here for you whenever you need me."

A grin swelled on Harry's face. This was turning out better than he'd expected. He nodded at the boy as they went back to eating.

Then he remembered something.

"Actually...There is something I wanted to ask of you..."

******

Louis stretched his limbs on the bed, a restless eye on his phone. Half-past nine. Harry should be-

The front door squeaked. Louis exhaled. The sound of footsteps he knew was Harry's carried up the stairs, and he relaxed finally.

He closed his eyes to sleep.

He didn't know how long he had dozed off when a knock on his door woke him again.

With a sleepy sigh, he got up and opened it.

*Harry.*

Hair askew from pulling on his sleepwear, hands full of bedding, he looked in dire need of a
"I can't do any of this without you," he said in a desperate drawl. "I don't wanna break up anymore."

"Come here, Babe," Louis took his blanket and pillow and tossed them on the bed. He let him go in first and crawled in behind him, spreading the blanket over them. Harry's smell. Hmm.

Louis was trying his fucking best not to grow too heated but it was proving downright impossible the way Harry had just backed into him to get comfortable.

"Do you wanna have sex?" The curly-haired boy asked, just like that. Out of the blue.

"No, Harry, we shouldn't," Louis said in a whisper. Against every cell in his body. He was still scared silly from that night he almost lost Harry, and still fresh from his conversation with Anne. He felt Harry's confidence fall away from a notch. "Do you want me to go?"

Louis' throat frogged and tears pushed their way through his eyes. "No. Please don't go. Stay."

*Stay forever, with me.*

********

The next morning, Anne walked up to the Payne residence. The beaded curtain jingled under the cool shed leading to the living room, potpourri smells coming from somewhere inside.

Larissa came out from watering her plants and spotted Anne on the threshold. "Oh! This is a surprise. Is Harry alright? How is he doing? Murrey told us what happened!"

Anne nodded. Of course, Cord would have told his best friend about that night.

"He's better. Just a scar over his eye and a little weak, but overall he's okay."

"Thank God. I was wondering whether I should come to see you, clear things up about what happened in London. But you beat me to it. Come inside! Have a seat!"

The living room was darker than most with sticks of burning essence making it more difficult to see. For someone who loved greenery, the room only had one snake plant on the side table in contrast to the outside. And though Anne had been there before it still felt strange to have such a close view of the woman's habitat.

Making sure to look before she sat in the dim room she took a seat and waited for Larissa to reappear.

"I'm sorry it all went down the way it did, Anne. But Luke spilled first. I told you to sit Louis down and explain everything to him. Why didn't you listen?"

"I told you I was waiting for the perfect time. But once the truth came out everything unraveled so quickly it was beyond my control."

"Are you here to throw blame at me? Because it's far from my fault."
Anne's lips pursed. "I'm actually here to settle things with John. Where is he?"

"Outback. He and Jessie are fixing an engine." Larissa flew to her feet and made movements to go get him, but hesitated, "My brother was wrong, I know. But he regrets taking that road. For what it's worth, so do I."

Contemplating creases gathered in Anne's forehead, and she nodded in acceptance.

As Larissa turned once again, the back door opened, throwing light into the room and immediately changing the atmosphere. John sauntered in, eyes cautiously on Anne. She looked up and gave a pursed-lipped, rigid smile, eyes then falling on Jessie close behind him.

"First of all, I'd like to say I'm sorry for what I did, Anne. With Rapid Mane. Harry worked hard on that horse for the competition. I regretted every day he was sad taking care of him and trying to nurse him back to health. I did wrong."

"What you did was Betrayal. At least that's how I saw it until I almost lost my son. You know about loss, John. Losing a child. Losing your wife. I can't help but wonder if my actions all those years ago drove you to betray my father."

"Had nothing to do with that, Anne. You were a teenager, and you and I both know you weren't the orchestrator of all that. Besides, Miriam had Murrey. She didn't have to disappear and leave her son behind," John ended the topic, moving on. "The rubber snake thing... Dean manipulated me into it. Was swimming in debt. It's how I got the money to keep the hardware afloat."

"You were doing what you thought was best for your family," Anne answered. "It's common knowledge the Cowells manipulate people to get what they want."

"Yeah, they seem to be at the culm of every tragedy in this town. Don't they?" Jessie said. "Even unintentionally."

Anne knew he was referring to the day Calum died. Her eyes were empathetic as she recalled. "You were supposed to work the day Calum died. But the Cowells had that big birthday party for little Trey and wanted to rent the chairs. You couldn't miss out on that opportunity for your new business. Nobody blamed you for that."

Larissa joined in. "But then William needed a hand on the ranch and Callum didn't want to let him down by choosing to help Jessie with the rental chairs over helping him. So he went to work at the ranch that day. I always blamed William. If he had let Calum see about his own business instead of his, he'd be alive and Jessie wouldn't have blamed himself for so long."

"But you'd been blaming the wrong one, Sis," John put in. "Death. Death is the one to blame. Not just Calum's, but Uncle Em's. It's when he died that horse went haywire. I just wish I had done differently with Rapid Mane. I'll regret that for the rest of my life."

Anne nodded.

"I was so angry at both of you. But I eventually I got to see you were only looking out for our family, big sis. And I forgave you too, big brother," Jessie said. "And it's all because of Uncle William. After I told him what you and Luke did, and he told me he'd take it from there I watched as he dealt with it his way. He taught me a lot about being a man. He showed me how life ain't always what we think it is. I remember he told me once that Jessie's death ain't more my fault than the shower he took before he went to work that day. After years of beating myself up, I just sat in church one day and made peace with it."
"Daddy would have been so proud to see you recover from that guilt." Anne rubbed his shoulder. Jessie moved his eyes to fall steady on hers. "Both of us, Anne. You have come a long way too." He then turned to his sister. "I just wish you and Uncle had sort out your differences before he passed too. You're still bitter about his decision to stop your checks."

Larissa nodded faintly. "We're all still trying to recover from our upbringings. It wasn't easy for Mama after the Cowells stripped her father's land from under him and shoved us all in the poor house. I just hope Liam knows everything I did was to prevent him from ever knowing that kind of life. I don't know how we would have made it without uncle Em. We're all grown up and it's still not the same without him. I miss him every day. William didn't get us as he did. 'Didn't understand.'

Anne nodded in total agreement. "Daddy understood. Simon destroyed his family legacy too. But remember he was always the hard-headed one. Sometimes I wonder how he and uncle Em would've handled all this with Gemma the Cowells, and Louis finally coming home to all the drama Johannah left behind. They had two completely different strategies for dealing with problems."

Larissa laughed eyebrows past her temples. "They were too busy creating their own drama and fighting with each other most of the time."

Anne's shoulders convulsed in laughs.

John gave a long nod, watching the two women. "Now there's something they'd be proud of right there."

*****

General pov

"Gemma?" Anne knocked on the bedroom door that afternoon.

Harry was in his room and heard it. He inched toward the door to hear Gemma say "Come in," and he opened his door. Sneaking out to eavesdrop on the conversation, his eyes met Louis' as the boy had stopped on his way up the stairs. He looked at Harry with eyes that read every emotion he must have been feeling at the moment.

"As a teen, I did things that I was not proud of," they heard Anne say as she smoothed her daughter's hair. "Know that I wanted nothing more than a better life for you."

Harry stood by the door and Louis on the top stair behind him. Anne's words turned to distant mumbling as Harry focused on Louis' blue eyes. The boy reacted by moving toward him, but Harry jumped back with a quick head-shake to stop him coming further, and he hung back, kept his distance.

There was mumbling coming from the room. Then loud sniffles. Then full-on crying.

"There, there. Everything's going to be okay, my Gemmy. Mummy's going to take care of everything."

Faint footsteps to the door sent Harry's shoulder a few inches back into the wall and holding his breath.

Anne caught eyes with him and stopped, startled, but quickly regained her stance. Harry and Louis
were half expecting her to talk to them too but she didn't. She continued walking past them and glided down the staircase.

Harry couldn't fight back the tears if he tried. Louis knew he was hoping for her to talk to him. To tell him it was going to be alright. But he also knew Anne was still in the process of building up the right words to say for all the years of pain Harry let out that night after London.

Louis was at his aid and guiding him back first into his room where he shut the door and pressed him into it. He tried to fight him off but Louis held him down firmly.

Whatever he wanted to say had not the ability to fix the mess they were both in or Harry's purely broken spirit but Louis, on the other hand, wasn't going to hold back any words.

"I love you so much," he kissed the top of his head. "My brave, brave, beautiful Harry."

Harry's vocals banged on the doors of his tongue but they went ignored as he fought to decide whether to try to breathe or talk.

"She loves you, Harry. She just needs time. She will talk to you when the time is right. I love you, please."

Harry was in a state stiff and unresponsive. His eyes unfocused seeing straight through Louis, who would give anything to fix it.

"Whatever happened with your grandfather doesn't change us. Please don't give up, Harry."

It was not an easy situation. Harry needed to talk to his mother soon before he ended up in the hospital again.

**********

Everyone's plates worked, spoons in hand. Harry cooked dinner; beef stew again with baby potatoes and fresh greens. No one spoke for a long while as they ate, and it was strange without Cord there scooping up the biggest portion and taking seconds.

Louis was enjoying the meal though, feeling a sense of nostalgia like the last time the meal was served a few weeks prior.

"I'm relieved I don't have to keep this secret anymore and that Louis knows about his birthright now," Luke said rather chirpy as he cut in his food.

Throat clearing, Robin shifted uncomfortably. Harry noticed it and threw a deadly glare at the blonde-haired man. 'Relieved' was the last thing he should be allowed to feel or joke about now.

"I'm sorry, why does he get to sit and gloat here after everything he did?" he asked.

Robin made an agreeing noise from his mug.

Luke's spoon hit the ceramic surface in a loud clang. "Why do you get to breathe after what you did?!"

Dropping his spoon as well, Harry flew up. "I was eight!! That was an accident! I was trying to help him!!" - "Excuses, excuses," Luke talked at the same time as Harry said; "But what you did? What you did was deliberate and psychotic!!"

"Why do you keep defending that horse!?" Luke screeched just as Cliff barked out from below
"It was mad and needed to be put down!"

"You are so delusional!"

"WHOOF!"

"I do not regret that!"

"WHOOF!! WHOOF!!!!!"

Louis was developing a headache. Cord tried to silence the dog. Anne sighed and hesitated to eat. The stern look on Steve's face calmed Luke's storm.

"Don't you have any remorse!?" he continued, voice normal range again.

Harry huffed. "For what!?"

"For being there! For getting between the snake and the horse and making him push you out of the way!"

"No!" Harry said hotly. "I don't! I used to. I did for a while but then I didn't. You wanna know why? Because Granddad wouldn't let me. He told me every day that it wasn't my fault until I finally got it."

The room went silent. The barking stopped leaving only the sounds of the dog whining now. Louis batted his eyes at his plate in response to the added information about William.

Breaking the silence, Anne leaned towards Luke. "When are you going to stop being angry with Harry for that?"

The table looked at her.

"This didn't start when Calum died. That horse had been acting that way ever since Uncle Emmett died." Her face was serenely serious, only looking at Luke. "Rapid Mane loved him. All those animals loved him. He held things up around here. After all that training Gavin gave him, Rapid Mane went back to square one when he died too. And it's heartbreaking that the same thing happened with Calum. That horse kept losing people. And Harry was sorry about what happened, he was. Harry worked with that horse every single day to get you to forgive him! And you thanked him by laming the horse and then putting him down. You broke my son's heart as collateral damage in your quest for revenge."

She turned to Robin without looking at him. "I know that horse almost ended your career. Believe me, I know what having that horse around cost! What Luke did is hard to wrap my head around too."

She swung back to Luke's direction. "Luke, you sit at my table because I let you. My son has prepared many a meal here and sat here since he was three years old, and I do believe it's time you give him the respect due to him! Harry may not be your blood but he's your family!"

Harry and Louis stared at Anne and her at Harry.

"Now can we go back to dinner!?" she said at Luke again.

Sulking, Luke grew engrossed in his meal. He suddenly jerked to the side, making the cutler shake like an earthquake. He shot Steve a wounded stare of which the man stared back steely.
A bothered sigh emitted from Luke followed by a clearing of the throat.

"The stew is good," he said to Harry, whose neck moved back like a duck. "Did you add the bay leaves in the potatoes?"

Harry went to speak but couldn't so he nodded instead.

Anne said, "Uncle Emmett was a good cook. But Daddy only knew to make this dish. He never learned to cook anything from Emmett, but he ended up teaching Emmett the recipe." She laughed. "He taught Harry it too."

"Uncle Brick taught William that Selley family recipe," Luke said brightly. "I do some cooking myself but never tried this one. Everybody in the family cooked it but me!"

Steve smiled, visibly relieved his husband was softening. "Maybe Harry can teach you sometime."

Louis' attention heightened. Everybody in the family...?

"Harry's stew tastes much like my mum's," he said to Anne, looking for the answer he was sure would come.

Anne nodded knowingly but Luke took the opportunity. "Well, who do you think taught her? Emmett practically took my uncle's recipe for his own!" He laughed with Anne at the memory of the man.

Louis didn't get trouble catching Harry's caring eyes as they rested on him. The silent understanding between them that this whole William thing was bigger than they thought.

As they all finished the meal Louis pondered on his mother and what her childhood must have been like with William around, not knowing he was her father all that time. And what it must have felt like when he and Emmett both died without her reconciliation. He hoped - no, he knew they must be up there now catching up on years spent apart, never to be parted again. He had to believe that for her sake, and his own.

********

Louis couldn't sleep a wink later that night. He wobbled out of bed, out to the living room and put the television on. Water running in the kitchen sink letting him know he wasn't the only one up, he curled up to watch the food channel. He figured it was Anne with the graceful sounding steps and light humming.

As he lifted the remote to adjust the volume, thumping from a different direction than the kitchen caused him to tilt his head up towards the stairs.

Quiet feet under airplane pajamas landed from step to step until they reached the middle one.

Louis welcomed instant happiness he didn't notice was absent until then. But not without the worry that accompanied it.

He watched as Harry sank on the stairs and leaned into the railing. He looked tired and hungry. Louis wanted to go over and hold him, kiss him. He was so fragile. His lungs needed to recover from what had happened and Louis worried every day.

Harry stared back at him long and hard, and Louis started to feel like they were touching, kissing, even from a few feet away.
The strange thing was almost becoming unbearable when Harry suddenly got up and went inside the kitchen.

Louis tried to go back to the show. His eyes were closing in on him, and he propped his chin up, elbow on the armrest.

He was just deciding to call it a night when Harry emerged with a plate of hot pockets from the kitchen. The thing smelled glorious, and Louis was suddenly awake.

Harry handed him the plate and sat next to him, smiling. Louis took one, and as he ate, Harry dipped his body and rest his head on his lap. His feet rose onto the couch and he shifted to get comfortable. Louis was shocked he would do this with Anne awake and in the kitchen. Wasn't he aware she could walk in any second?

He tried not to be nervous about it and held the food to Harry's mouth. The boy bit into it and propped his hands under the side of his head, taking in the show himself.

Louis gently examined the scar over his eye in the television light. It was still soft but fusing together at a well enough rate.

Harry grabbed his hand and placed it on his torso, and started playing with his fingers.

Then Anne came back into the room. Louis' heart started beating a drum. Not because he was scared of her reaction but because he was scared of Harry's reaction.

Sure enough, his body tensed in Louis' arms, but surprisingly he didn't move. Louis tried to read his thoughts and figured because they were not in her direct line of eyesight tucked away in the corner, and it was relatively dark, Harry must not be thinking too much of it. But then that didn't seem like Harry at all, he's always aware, always cautious.

*Harry must be sleepwalking or something*, he thought, noticing his eyes were steady like a solemn candle flame.

For the next few minutes, Louis fed him the rest of the hot pocket and watched the television. Anne's eyes kept swinging in their direction at short intervals, and whenever they caught with Louis he kept getting the sense she was waiting for the right moment to tell him something. He quickly assessed that the time had come for the talk.

Harry grew uncomfortable on him now, and he noticed him frowning at his mother. Louis started inwardly panicking over whether now was the right time for them to smooth things over. It was late and Harry needed rest. He was about to signal Anne to let her know as much, When Harry just whipped out of the chair!

The boy staggered as he had gone dizzy getting up so quickly, and Louis made to stabilize him. Harry yanked away and walked to the stairs.

Anne flew out of her seat and tailed him. She reached out and took his arm. He turned to her.

"Harry, can we talk?"

"Can we!?" Harry reiterated sarcastically. "You barely looked at me since that day!"

"I know I should have told you that Johannah was William's daughter. We just got Louis back and I got scared he was going to leave as Johannah did all those years ago, so I kept it to myself!" Anne explained, water in her eyes. "And then he did leave for Wales. And I thought that was it, but then
Sophia called and told me he was planning to give you a ring."- Harry and Louis exchanged looks - "and I freaked out and just decided to bury the whole thing and let you be happy. Then Luke showed up, and Gemma's deal with Simon and the topic of Daddy's will came up, and I knew time was running out."

"He just lost his mother," Harry cried. "It's something you should have said from the beginning."

"I know. But I didn't wanna add to his plate."

"From the beginning when we went to their house, you could have told all of us. Before-" Harry really couldn't finish the sentence. His mother seemed to understand where he was going, and she squeezed his shoulders.

"Harry, I want you to be happy," Anne said. "William was your granddad and nobody is taking that away from you, but I was adopted. That leaves you free of any relation to Louis. There is no reason to feel guilty."

"Everyone keeps telling me that but Granddad lied to me. You lied to me. How long were you going to ignore that you had a sister, and"- he stopped to swallow- "nieces and nephews a few miles away?"

Louis' heart sank. Harry was still struggling with the fact that William was Johannah's biological father.

He closed his eyes in the decision. Harry had to know now.

"Emmett and William were in love with each other," he said clearly. "That's why Mum didn't want to come back. She couldn't come to terms with it."

Harry shot his eyebrows up in shock and confusion.

Not expecting Louis to throw it all out there so soon, Anne shook her head to try to control Harry's reaction. "I was waiting for the right time to tell you," she then turned to Louis "They kept it from her all her childhood and she took too long to forgive them for that."

Harry went up a stair backward. "You know, you both are making zero sense right? Why-wh-why would he cheat and have a child with Emmett's wife if he was in love with him?"

"It's was because he loved him why he did it," a voice mediated from behind Harry.

The three looked as Luke tiptoed down and stopped halfway.

Harry dry-laughed. "You're all nuts! Granddad wasn't gay!"

"He was," Louis said, assurance on his lips. He then turned and ducked inside his room, coming back a few minutes later with the guitar pick, the letters, and the other items in his hands. "William and Emmett weren't just friends, Harry. They were in love."

He held up the Burberry note to the boy. "I found this in the Burberry jacket when you gave it back to me. I thought it was Grandma Elouisa who wrote it, but then I saw William's signature on the land documents and his will and it's the same handwriting. I added that to guitar pick and Fizzie's pendant. There's no doubt they had something special. How else do explain you ending up with the pick and me with the pendant?"

"But the tree," Harry pointed via kitchen door to the back yard. "If Emmett didn't love your
grandmother why would he engrave their initials in it?"

Louis quickly grabbed up William's will and pointed to his signature. "E for Ernest, not Elouisa. Ernie...? My Mum named my brother after him."

Anne grew a proud look. "I know. When I noticed it I knew it was a sign of how far she came with forgiveness. Daddy would have been proud of her."

Harry's brows moved in deep thought as he examined the little poem.

"The note was in Emmett's jacket," Louis said, trying to convince Harry. "William must have given it to him."

Anne took the note. "...the strength to adore you to pieces... Oh, I know what this is! They loved to play these games with us kids; they'd read a line of poetry then send us on a wild goose chase through the bookshelf to find the poem it belonged to. It would take us weeks to find it and we'd get a prize. This is them playing it with each other."

She drew out a nod, pointedly holding up the note. "One of the reasons I was waiting to talk to both of you is because of this. I couldn't tell you one part of the story and leave out the other, and I fear I wasn't ready to tell the whole thing."

"Granddad never said anything to me..." Harry started, confused and let down.

Louis cut across him. "Harry, you remember when you told me your granddad told you he wanted to be like you? And how you always felt like he knew you?"

Harry fixed his eyes on him, contemplating. Louis hoped he was getting through.

Luke quickly added, "William was gay. He and Emmett were very much a thing."

Harry riled up, grabbing his hair. "But that's the part I'm confused about. If he was in love with Emmett then why did he sleep with his wife and have a baby!?!"

"There's no way of knowing how far someone would go for love," Luke said, shrugging. "Emmett and William had a complicated relationship and they couldn't really be together in those times. Emmett wanted a child more than anything and he couldn't have any with his wife so William did it for him."

"It's a long story for another time," Anne said, just above a timid whisper, arms folded. She gazed at her son, eyes searching for appropriate words.

"I felt awful keeping this secret from you after seeing you two bond," she started, glimpsing to Louis and back. "It was like I was back there as a child witnessing William and Emmett again. I was the only one who knew what they had all along. Johannah found out later. Of course, Sophia knew. Emmett would have told his sister. She didn't like Daddy much though. He said she was friends with Elouisa."

Louis reached out and Harry moved back.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "It's just - I don't get any of this. Why would Granddad kept something like that from me?"

Louis got all he was saying. If he had told Harry about him and Emmett it would have made a huge difference in the way Harry saw himself. It would have helped him cope.
Flashback

Aesthetic song: Sturgill Simpson- The Promise.

"Since the last time Luke was here they were sneaking around the ranch like a pair of little mice. They never told anyone, and since Luke came back he's been ignoring Calum. He's exactly like you, Will. You Selley's are all the same, stubborn as darn mules!"

William put the cup down on the banister and leaned to his left, brushing his biceps-hard from a day's work of chopping wood to rebuild a fence- on the fine cotton of the slimmer man's Burberry coat. His lips found their way a quarter inch from his ear and as his slow breath tickled him, Emmett's eyes fell closed, panting. He then brought a shaky hand to his ear, covering it without making eye contact.

"I can't do this again. This isn't right! You have to leave!" he said hoarsely.

William let out a breathy laugh. "Where is this coming from?"

Emmett sighed, a look of pure doom masking his face. "I've waited my whole life to marry you. But I can't do it without her. As long as she's mad at me you can't be living in this house."

"She's still in shock. She'll come around eventually. That doesn't mean we can't get married as we planned. It's only next week."

Emmett pulled his hand away. "I want our daughter to attend our wedding. I can't marry you until she forgives me."

William stared at him, crease emerging between his brows.

"Emmett, we've done this so many times before, I lost count." His hands moved to his neck and he took his necklace off. Emmett swallowed hard and tried not to cry. "If you want me to go, I'll go."

William took the necessary steps to reach him, and he placed the necklace around his neck.

Emmett opened his eyes and looked down to William's open palm to see the guitar pick. William picked it up with his other hand and held it up pointedly.

"But I'll keep a piece of you with me. And when everything is perfect and you're finally ready to marry me, it'll all fit right back into place."

Emmett cried harder, and William held his face to kiss him. They had been through this so many times he could recite everything going through Emmett's mind.

"I made my decision," Emmett broke away and took a few steps back as he looked deep into his eyes, the space between them filling up with the increasing linear bonfire and smoke.

Harry dropped down and sat on the stairs. His face covered in confusion and resentment. "Granddad didn't just tell one lie. And this one makes everything worse. How could he lie there on his deathbed and still not tell me? How could he be so okay with that? If he loved your grandmother that would be one thing, but Emmett? I really can't be with you now, can I?"

A creaking sounded and Gemma was standing in the front doorway with Cord. From the
expression on her face, Louis could tell she heard everything. "It doesn't have to be like that, Harr -" she started.

Louis shrugged, the papers still in his hands.

"No. Look, it wasn't just your granddad that lied," he said, looking at Harry's chest. "It was my mother. She kept this place from me my whole life. Looking at the circumstances of her finding out, I can't blame her for being way too angry to come home. But now that I know the truth," he looked at Anne, "The whole truth, it doesn't make me sick or disgusted or even want to leave. In fact, ironically it makes me want to be here even more. And it makes me want to be a part of things, a part of the ranch and everybody's lives."

There was a hugely significant pause as his gaze fell to Harry's hand wrapped around his other arm, and the promise ring that shone from it. "But you... Harry... it makes me want to be with you even more. I told you before that I've never loved anything so much. And I mean that with all my heart, but this gives it so much more meaning. To me, and as far as I'm concerned it makes our love even more beautiful. If this is weird for you, I respect that. Just don't expect me to act like we never happened. And don't expect me to pretend that you don't still mean something to me."

With that, Louis went into his room and closed the door.

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Horses quietly neighing, in for the night, teenagers scampered away to different destinations leaving the fire to smoke down in the gentle night air,

Emmett closed the bedroom door behind him. A folded note between his index and middle finger. You didn't tell me you found it. I just found this.

William nodded decidedly. "I found it a while ago. I dug through all your books while you were out with the horses," He laughed. Emmett smiled. "I um, I was going to read it at our wedding, surprise you. But then I saw how determined you were to get Johannah to come home, and somehow deep inside I knew the results of you going to Sophia's would be to put a hold on our big day. So I put the poem in your pocket hoping you'd see it and still go forward with our wedding plans."

Emmett started sobbing. William turned and unzipped his suitcase on the bed.

"You can still read it," the man drawled out desperately. "I still want to marry you."

William whirled around on hearing that, urgent. "Ask me to stay."

"No," Emmett cried.

William's big hands clasped his face. "Ask me."

"I can't," Emmett's eyes dimmed.

A moment of quiet tension built up in their embrace. "The hell you can't!"

William lunged forward and kissed him turning him to the bed. Emmett didn't protest he let himself be led to the bed where they fell and continued touching each other.

Hours later there was no distinction between the two men. William's leg wrapped around Emmett's waist and he caressed it while his other arm was around William's neck keeping him close enough
to kiss.

"I want to marry you. Let's just get married as we planned. Anne will be the flower girl. She said she would. We'll take pictures and when Johannah's cooled down we'll explain everything to her from the beginning, and she'll understand."

Emmett wasn't on board. "William, it took me years to get over what you did with Elouisa and forgive you. Our daughter isn't going to just look at wedding pictures and get all mushy and forget about it. God knows how long it'll take her to come back home to Champton," he said, sadness, hopelessness taking over.

But William was not about to give up. "We won't stop trying. If it takes until my last breath I will get her to come back and forgive you."

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Aesthetic song- Deep Inside Of You, Third Eye Blind

Harry's pov

It was a gloomy Friday evening. The rain had been falling all day, recently stopped after dark, causing flying rain bugs and hoping frogs with tiny crawling bush creatures out for the wet night. The boys hadn't spoken much since last night's conversation, which meant Harry had time to think about everything thrown at him. But the most important thing was his mother finally telling him it was okay to be with Louis. That made everything he was feeling about what his granddad did better.

He spotted Louis in his red baseball t-shirt on the steps to the front yard and directed his Converse there.

"Can I talk to you?" he said over the loud toads in the grass.

Louis, who had been enjoying the remaining petrichor, pursed his lips and offered the seat next to him.

Harry slumped down.

"Three weeks ago I sat on these steps and told you about my Granddad, and how he was my best friend," he started. "I tried thinking back, looking for something, some instance where he may have told me about Emmett and I missed it. And it's funny and sad that all I found was all the ways he couldn't tell me.

"We know Emmett was his best friend. But if you're saying there was more than that, then it means he was heartbroken when he died and didn't want to show us that grief."

My granddad and I used to have this language, this understanding between each other. I told you I always felt like he knew me and I knew - well, thought I knew- everything about him. After you guys told me about him and Emmett I tried to understand Granddad's loss because he always got mine with my dad. And, all I could think was... It's how I would feel if I lost you." Harry's eyes were watery now, set on Louis like a telescope for the stars. "I can only compare it with you. And in that sense, I can understand him again."

A light hand came to rest on his forearm them it quickly retracted. Harry broke eye contact and looked down to see Louis' withdrawn hand. Harry grabbed it up again in both hands.
"I know you think I'm not in this with you, but I am."- although he did not look up, the little edges on the outer corners of Louis' eyes expanded to reveal his surprise- "I just needed time. Needed, as in past tense."

Harry lifted his hand and placed a devoted kiss on it, forcing the boy to look at him. Louis said nothing except to tangle his fingers in with Harry's longingly.

"Louis, you make me brave, and you make me feel like I can do anything." Harry smiled. "And I wanna be that for you. I want to be one of the things that make you strong because that's what you do for me. So I'm in."

"You are?" Two vertical lines braced the middle of the blue-eyed boy's eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

"I'm in this with you," Harry caressed his other hand as it found its way to him. "I know you said your mum lied to you just like my granddad but just like I can't be mad at him, I won't let you be mad at her. They loved us. I know they never lied about that."

"So the first thing on my new agenda is to make a rule that says you're not allowed to be mad at the people who aren't here to explain and defend themselves- even if that's part of the reason we're mad them - I won't let us."

Harry rested his head on his shoulder as they both looked out into the country road.

"I agree it's not fair to be mad at them," Louis said now. "But since we are on the topic of forgiveness there's one more rule I'd like to add."

He took Harry's hands up in his and looked deep into his eyes. "We need to forgive those still living too."

Harry frowned at him in indignation. He knew he was talking about Luke.

"I know you and Luke"- here we go - "have never gotten along but you can try to find some kind of common ground. He's not conventional but he's on our side, Harry."

In the dismissal of the topic, Harry blinked his eyes shut. With the sharpest sigh, he answered, "Okayyyyy. I'll try to put up with him...until he leaves." He leaned over and kissed Louis, and felt his lips spread open in a smile.

"So," Louis said, all bubbly now. "Looks like we made it- through the summer, that is. Didn't I tell you not to worry, it'll work out?"

Harry threw his head back in surrender, the dark sky in his vision. "Yes, Louis. You did." Louis gripped his collar and smooshed the spot right under his jaw. The gesture caused him to giggle, but then the sensation made his eyes close again and his face to grow serious with the want for more.

Harry's voice reached Louis' ear, "There some other things I wanna work out..."

Leaping to his feet, Louis reached out his hand and lead Harry back to his room in the study.

****

**Louis pov**

Louis shut the door as Harry peeled off his jeans in the dim room. The boy was left in his boxers and vest, with the nightlight throwing a soft light over the freckles on his shoulders, his back turned
to Louis.

Extremely turned on, Louis sat him down on the bed and hovered over him, clasping his face in a kiss.

Standing upright, he pulled off his shirt and pants, and underwear. The look on Harry's face matched the feeling he had for the boy in the hardness of his groin.

Climbing onto him on the bed, he kissed his neck and collarbone juicily. His fingers cherished the feel of his skin everywhere they touched. "To think I almost lost you...I don't know what I would have done."

He let his body shift down a bit to drag the boxers off of Harry, taking him in his mouth.

"You didn't. I'm here, Babe." Harry whispered, bucking into his mouth.

Louis sucked him like he hadn't eaten all week, slurping and clenching him hard. He had stopped, all ready to insert himself inside him when Harry said "wait" adamant to return the favor.

Louis knelt on the bed, hands in Harry's hair, his lips apart as he breathed fast with the feel of the boy's mouth on him.

Heat intensifying, he then pulled him rough by the thighs. Harry fell on his back and Louis shoved himself in hungrily, pumping loudly, breathing on his face.

Harry's expression was pasted with titillation, grinding up over Louis' dick with need, saliva falling over the rim of his mouth. Louis wanted it so badly as he fucked him hard. Slinging his arm around his neck to bring his elbow behind the boy's head and latch his mouth to his, Louis drank him in.

He needed to love him for nearly losing him. Pleasure him for all the pain he had to live with his whole life. And Louis' pain, nothing but a footnote in his mind, for the love he had for Harry outweighed his own pain and loss.

Harry groaned into his mouth, and Louis' stomach was bathed in hot cum. Harry fell limp and panted until his breathing evened, Louis, laying on top of him having come too.

Louis' emotions getting the better of him, he rolled off of him until he was facing the partition, his back to him, crying.

Harry's fingers ran down Louis' side, and he turned around to look at him with teary eyes.

"Promise me you won't ever leave me." He tried to hold it together but the tears came strong with loud sobs.

Harry lunged out an arm, grabbed his hair, and kissed it. "I promise you. I promise."

Louis' arm swung out and took Harry's shoulders in his grip, burying his head in his chest to sob in comfort.

****

Early the next morning Harry poured dog food out for Cliff on the porch and twisted the bag closed.

"Hey... Harry..." Luke said, pulling his tan cable knit cardigan close and folding his arms as he joined him out on the porch.
Harry hummed a response, and Luke took a deep breath.

"We need to talk sooner or later," the pointy-nosed man said. "Might as well be sooner."

Harry's left eyebrow went up high. Luke must have been talking to Louis.

"Just hear me out, okay?" Luke begged in a strained voice. "I know I pointed the finger at you and Jessie...but it was all Dean's fault. He was ruthless. And even though I hated him it rubbed off on me."

Eyes moving in reaction to his words, Harry's face softened a bit.

"Calum trained that horse," Luke went on. He didn't add to that for a long while. Then - "I don't know how to forgive myself for what I did. What Dean made me do... Calum loved that horse. I just-I couldn't look at it anymore. If that horse wasn't in the way... he'd still be here."

Harry planted his hand on the man's shoulder, making him jump with surprise. He nodded acceptance of his apology, and Luke's brown welled up eyes shed a tear.

"Not a day goes by that I don't think about how he pushed me out the way to save me," Harry said. "He's one of the reasons I want to be a good person and help horses and do anything to be proud of. I've been mad that Granddad didn't tell me he was gay. But I always had the memory of Calum to look up to when I feel hopeless and like a freak. I'd think he was amazing with horses and he was a hero, and he was gay. And I'd feel tons better and try to emulate him. I'll never forget him."

A loss for words, Luke grabbed him into a tight, awkward hug and cried loudly.

******

"Aww!" Gemma complained as she took the whole couch to lie down. Louis, Harry, and Cord all had scared faces.

She looked at them, realizing the concern. "I shouldn't have walked around so much in the London arena."

Cord dumped the truck keys in his pocket and slid under her legs. "Come here, let me massage it quickly before I head into town."

"Ahh! Nice!" Gemma remarked at the heavy grip on her toe joints. "Good! So good!"

"And you wanted to jump, aye?" Cord didn't spare the girl. Louis huffed in support. Harry giggled.

In a bid to change the subject, Gemma spoke to Louis. "So let me just say, Mr. Winston, is a pain in the ass."

Louis perked his head. "We didn't get to meet all the professors that day. What does he teach?"

"Drama and Theater."

"I think I might wanna take that class but I am planning on majoring in business, and Psychology."

Harry tilted his head to look in his eyes.

"Just everything about this summer had me thinking..." Louis continued. "I'm kinda excited about what's going to happen to the ranch now. If you'll have me I want to be a part of it all. I've been thinking for a while now on helping you open it back up. But with this new inheritance, we can
start the process a lot sooner."

Harry tried to gain his eye contact to question him, but the boy went on, oblivious. "I'm hoping my classes at college can help bring me up to speed on the business end of it. The money part on the other hand..."

Gemma rubbed her chin. "True. It's more than enough money to get the ranch back to what it was when Granddad ran it."

Louis shook his head subtly. "No. That's not quite what I was trying to say. When William was in charge of the ranch seemed like a big thing when you were kids but Grandma showed me the inventory and paperwork for the ranch during Emmett's hay day. It was way bigger and more successful. I think together we can restore it to that type of glory. The times have changed and we can make it better with technological advancements and new techniques. We can maybe even go bigger and better than the Cowell ranch."

Harry fixed him a stare, maybe Luke was right. Louis hadn't shared with Harry before now his intentions of such ambitions.

Gemma's eyes widened with sinister engrossment. "I like the sound of that. I like it very much."

Harry eyed her. "But you're having Aiden's baby. Wouldn't that cause a rift?" He reminded, and felt Louis' hand come around his waist to gently squeeze his pudgy love handles in what seemed to him a silencing mechanism. The only time he recalled Louis doing something like this was when he had quietly yanked him away from Grimmy at the fundraiser concert rehearsals. Harry found it more annoying than cute then and he certainly did not like it now.

"That doesn't have to get in the way of this, Harry," Gemma pointed out. "This is what we've wanted all along. Even Louis' on board with it."

Harry turned to him. Louis smiled and caressed the spot in his grip. "You already play a valuable role, Harry. Not only are you a horse whisperer but you are going to be a vet. We need both those qualities."

Harry blushed. He really believes I can become a vet?

"Speaking of which..." Gemma lifted her bum to get into her back pocket. She pulled out an envelope and handed it to Harry.

As he opened it his eyes flashed wide.

"Gem, this is the prize money from the jump."

She nodded. "You can use it for your veterinarian school expenses."

Harry threw it back at her like a hot potato. "Isn't it Aiden's?"

"Aiden gave it to me. Now I'm giving it to you," she drawled out, mock tired as she picked it up and slapped it on his chest. "Shut up and be grateful!"

****

"I called Grandma a while ago," Louis wiped Lysol over the table surface. He and Harry were doing the cleaning in the living room. Anne and Robin were the only two around at the moment and the boys didn't want to disturb them out on the porch.
"She said she hated keeping the secret but did it on my Mum's wishes. Said she flipped out when you recognized the painting and couldn't let the lies go on any longer so she gave it to you in a bid to urge Anne to tell us. Turns out William had asked Liam's mum to paint his portrait to send it as a gift to Mum hoping she'd accept it from her friend's hand and come home. Apparently, she turned her away with it and Larissa gave it to Grandma instead. She hung it up hoping whenever Mum visited she'd see it and have a change of heart. That change of heart came when she heard William died but then she was too ashamed to come back and face everyone after so long. But had she got the chance this summer would have included her as well..."

Louis paused, spraying disinfectant on the couch. He felt Harry's warm eyes on him waiting to hug him if need be, but he was alright at the moment. "Even Dad knew all along about William being mum's dad. What am I supposed to do with that? You were right before; when Anne came to the wake with the letter, that's when they all should have told us the truth."

Harry nodded along to his words, mopping the aged-wooden floors, passing it over the rug. From experience, Louis deducted that something was troubling him.

"Wanna tell me why you're so quiet?" he asked, not looking up from his wiping.

"You didn't tell me you wanted to open back the ranch?"

Louis pulled an 'Oh-that's-what's-bothering-you' face. "I didn't want to push if Gemma didn't agree. Now that she has, it's going to be amazing working together! We'll extend the stables, rebuild the workers' quarters... Harry, there are so many things we can do now. Don't say anything yet but I plan on hiring the best staffing." Louis was so excited he could skip.

Harry recoiled. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I'm still in high school and you have a couple years of college to do."

"I'm doing this for us," Louis pressed on, irritated. "I love you. I want a future with you."

"Yeah, but don't you think you're going too fast? I mean, I know it's your birthright and all, but -" Harry drifted off.

Louis knew that look. It was the same one he got when Anne first gave Louis the keys to the truck. He knew Harry felt insignificant because he was never really William's blood like Louis was.

"Just because I'm in the will now don't mean you're not important. Take Granddad Emmett for example. He isn't related to my Mum biologically, or to anyone else for that matter. Yet if it wasn't for him none of us would have the farm, and we probably would never have met. So even though you may feel like you don't matter, you do."

Harry still gave him a worried, yearning look, and he drew his arms around him making the mop lean in the bucket.

"You cheered me up when my Mom died and if you weren't there for me I'd be in a really bad place. I love you." Louis shook his head emotionally.

"I know, Lou. I love you too."

They swayed on the spot for a while, Harry's hair in his nose, head on his shoulder, arms around his biceps.

A loud vibration burst into their moment and Harry jumped away to get his phone out of pants.
"Hello? Yeah - Oh! That's great- I don't understand - Okay, I will."

Louis looked on, inquisitive.

"That was Niall," Harry breathed. "He finally got a call from Shawna. He says he's glad the ripple is over? Any idea what he's talking about?"

Louis replied, waving it off. "Something I hope was just a myth."

"Alright," Harry shrugged. "Anyway, he wants you to call him right away."

Louis jumped into action and called their friend.

******

Louis' pov

Murrey brought the jeep around and beeped for Louis to jump in. Cord had taken the truck into town to get feed for animals, and Niall sounded pretty nervous on the phone when he asked Louis to go with him back to Shawna's house for support, so Murrey agreed to help.

Louis spotted Harry watching from the sunny yard as he dived out of the house with a fine-toothed comb between his teeth.

Once outside, the comb was suddenly removed and he was being kissed fiercely. Countless times by now but this one was definitely different. Harry's mouth was humming a sweet song against his lips, hands planted on the sides of his face, out in the open evening air. This in itself was telling about the boys' progress over the past few days. But add to that Anne playing cards on the porch with Robin while looking over the scene in broad daylight, and now we're talking progress. Not to mention the fierce kisser being Harry.

Honk! Honk!

"Come on, Loueh! Nialler is waiting! Finish that sap later!"

A twenty-minute trip and already he felt like his heart was being ripped from him leaving Harry for that long. What's it going to be like when he leaves for college?

"Let's roll!"

Louis smacked one more kiss on his forehead and jumped in Murrey's jeep.

*****

HONK HONK!! - "Nialler! Come out, come out!!"

Buttoned up short-sleeved blue shirt with pink checks, a bunch of assorted flowers under his arm, Niall climbed in the back seat of the jeep. Sweat beaded down his temple, as he watched his house roll away.

"It's gonna be fine," Louis assured. "One more year of high school and you and Shawna won't have all these rules."

Murrey snorted. "Not the way it works around here, city boy. I'm twenty-one and even I have to be home at a certain hour or I'll be sleeping on my pile of clothes on the sidewalk."
Niall frowned. "I thought my dad told your dad that wasn't the best way to discipline you?"

Louis recoiled and looked from one to the other. "Wait- that wasn't a joke?"

"Nope. Sleep in Cord's dad's hut whenever my dad gets mad. Cord doesn't want anything to do with the place but we're staying there until Anne cools down. He and I grew up without our Mothers. It's what cemented our friendship. His mum died giving birth to him and his dad was a drunk. My mum skipped out when I was three and my dad was always grumpy and work-oriented. When we were little and Gemma would come complaining 'Oh my mum is a cucumber' we'd tell her 'At least you have your mum!' She'd go quiet after that." Then when we were about fifteen Cord's dad died. Got drunk and fell over, hit his head."

Louis felt for Cord's loss like it was his. It was. "I didn't know about Cord's Dad," he said sadly. "Got a lot to learn to learn, Swag master from Doncaster."

"Well, I'm fed up with my parents' rules anyway," Niall piped up. "I'm gonna be a man and do the right thing. I'm gonna ask her to marry me."

Flabbergasted at the statement, the other two threw looks at Niall.

*****

Harry turned back to the house, looked at his mother, and breathed out. Anne stacked up the cards and put them back in the box as she swung on the creaky swing. Robin whispered something in her ear and she laughed out loud, tapping him on the arm as he ducked inside.

Harry took Robin's seat on the swing, put his feet up and wrapped his arms around his knees.

"You look happy today," Anne smirked. "Enjoy the last of summer because you have school next week."

Harry smiled comfortably. "You seem happier too, Mum."

They stared at each other, and Anne ruffled his hair from her perch. Harry closed his eyes to the feel and his mind wandered back.

"There was this one time before Granddad died we had just moved in here and he was bedridden... We were playing go-fish with him on the bed, and Gemma won for the first time in her life and she made a face like she did when Luke told us about the inheritance," he laughed. "And Granddad started chuckling like, you know that low, building chuckle he did?"

Anne laughed. "Yeah, I do."

"Well, before Louis showed up, that was the one memory. The one time I remember you laughing. Just...happy," Harry said seriously. "When Granddad was dying."

He went silent for a moment, catching the loss in stride.

"Then he died and everything was sad again," he spoke. "And that was five years ago, Mum. I keep searching for more happy times- and there were; here and there- but not like that time."

Anne swallowed a lump. That time was happy for her because she had come back home to the ranch and made up with her father and could finally breathe again, then he passed and she had to bite the bullet.
"There will be more, Sweetheart," she said, rubbing her hand up and down his triceps. "I promise."

"Louis makes everyone happy," Harry crooned. "Even Cliff loves him. You know, come to think of it, he has some mannerisms like Granddad. The way he bites his bottom lip when he wants to stop himself from saying something. And probably something in his voice. I don't know."

"Awe. Well, he definitely reminds me of Daddy too. Louis' a good kid. I see how happy you are with him. I only ever wanted your happiness, baby boy. I just didn't know how to do it without your Dad. I gave up. But that was the past. We are all gonna be okay now. I'll make sure of it."

"I like Robin. He's had the sweets for you for years now. I'm glad you finally gave him a chance. He's pretty cool."

"God, now you sound like Daddy," Anne laughed. "But really? You think so?"

Harry showed his dimples. "Yeah, I mean, he's never gonna be Dad but..."

Anne gave him a quizzical look. "You know, the way you talk about your dad, sometimes I forget you were a baby when he died."

"Thank Gemma and Granddad for that. They told me everything about Dad."

"Oh, Sweetie. There is so much more about your dad than Gemma or Daddy even knew."

"Really? I wanna know!" Harry folded his legs in a yoga pose eagerly.

"Well, first of -"

"Harry!" an acute voice interrupted.

Nick was now climbing out of a chauffeured car with a large square-shaped package in hand.

Anne raised her eyebrows in exasperation when Harry gave her a 'let's continue this later' face, and trotted over to him.

The boys made their way inside where they leaned the heavy package on the wall and opened it.

Under the paper revealed a neat stack of large framed pictures.

"I told you I just wanted you to blow them up!" Harry said, kneeling down to observe the expensive-looking frames. "You didn't have to do all this."

Kneeling too, Grimmy protested. "Are you kidding me? They'll get mold!"

Harry sighed at the goggle-eyed boy. "You overdo everything. I guess I should have expected you'd go out of your way with this too. Thanks, I appreciate it nonetheless."

Harry scanned through the frames and when he came to the last one, Nick put his index on one of the faces in the picture.

Harry looked at him. He looked at Harry with larger eyes and a stronger jawline.

"That's the one. That's the person uncle Simon was talking to on the phone about your sister's pregnancy."

Harry lost his breath.
"No. No, you're lying. If you don't know, you can just say so, you don't have to lie," -Grimmy shook his head grimly- "Tell me you're making this up!"

"I wish I was."

"Nick, no- This is..." Harry couldn't have been hearing right.

"I know, but it makes sense doesn't it?"

No. It doesn't make sense. The person in this picture was someone he'd known most of his life. Someone he loved and trusted. The person in this picture would never... Then suddenly it dawned on him...it made all the sense in the world.

"This stays between us," Harry said determinedly. "Promise me you won't say a word to anyone. I will deal with this on my own."

Grimmy grew all side-kick serious. "You have my word."

*****

"What!!??"

"I'm gonna ask her to marry me! To heck with our parents!"

"She's not pregnant, is she?" Murrey suspected.

Louis clapped his hands in Niall's face. "Niall, proposing is a huge step. I'm not sure you thought this through."

"I'm not gonna elope or anything. I have one more year of high school and then I can marry her. We can be engaged in the meantime. To protect her virtue and my Dad's name."

Murrey gave a sorting outlook from the drivers' seat. Louis considered.

"Yeah, but are you sure you'll still want that in a year?"

"Do you wanna marry Harry one day?"

"Of course I do!"

Murrey snorted at the abrupt timing.

Niall continued. "Well, I'm that sure too. And for my situation, it's better it happens sooner than someday. I'd do it as soon as possible, but a year from now and a bunch of flowers," - he picked it up and dropped it back down, arms spread across the backrest- "is all I got."

*****

The sun going down, with Gemma and Anne taking over the kitchen, finally, Harry climbed down the small ladder in the living room and looked up at his handy work. "Not too bad."

"Okay, time to wake the dragon." He paddled up the stairs.


Muttering and laugh-noises came from behind the door. Not keen on interrupting, Harry rolled his
eyes and walked away.

Then the door opened and a bright smiling Luke swung the door away. Harry took a stagger backward. Whoah. He really had to get used to a happy Luke.

The smile, however, bounced back into a surprise face on seeing Harry.

"Uh? Can we talk for a minute?" Harry said sheepishly. "When you're done?" He looked down at the man's bare chest.

A quick nod and the door shut again.

Harry dropped and sat on the stairs and Clifford came up nibbling on his slipper.

The front door opened and everyone came flooding in. Clifford flew back down the stairs in a heartbeat and started barking and wagging his tail at Louis.

Then Luke's door opened again and Steve darted out to the shower. Luke, now fully clothed, gestured for Harry to come in.

Luke sat on the bed in a yoga position, holding his toes.

"When Callum and I used to sneak around this place, Emmett would look at us weird. Like Dumbledore." -Harry snorted- "Callum used to tell me I was imagining things. But even I could tell, William knew about us.

One day I strolled in the stables and... cousin William and Emmett were there tending to the horses. They weren't talking. Weren't even looking at each other, and I just knew. They had that unspoken but clear-as-day connection. I didn't see anything like that again... until I came to the party and rest eyes on you and Louis. By god, you two are just like Emmett and William."

"But, Harry, it's because you remind me so much of them I must tell you that relationship went through it. They hid it all their adult lives. They had separate lives bound by invisible ropes that always led back to each other somehow and they'd meet up and then break up again because the ropes got loose. I don't think you want that for your own life. I think you want all or nothing. The thing is, Harry, Louis' destiny is here in Champton. He's here for a reason I can see clearly. To take down Simon. And that destiny, even though it involves you, may cause you two to drift apart and sail away if you don't tie those ropes tighter. Louis coming home now is a massive card against Simon, but your role is important too, Harry. The thing is I fear just like Emmett and William seldom agreed on tactics to ward off Dean, you and Louis may be at loggerheads in the future. If you want to be a part of the narrative, Harry, you have to permanently ink yourself in the story. If you want to affect change, you must face the problem head-on. You've always ignored the bigger picture, Harry. I hope you take my advice and work with Louis. What Simon tried to do to Gemma, taking a percentage of the ranch, was only a fraction of what Dean tried to do in your granddad's days. Simon has other tricks up his sleeve. It's up to us to be one step ahead..."

Thinking of his conversation with Nick, Harry understood too well the lengths Simon could go, the people he could use... but right now was no time for plotting. He was rather hoping to show him the reason he knocked on the door in the first place.

He grabbed his hand and led him out of the room.

Steve was already downstairs dressed and chatting with Liam and Zayn.

"Oh! There you are," the man whipped his long wet hair as he looked up. "Come see this!"
Luke curiously skipped down the stairs and came to stand to the left of Steve, and Harry came on his left. They both motioned for him to look at the wall where the ladder was now tucked in a corner.

Harry caught the deepest blue eyes staring at him from behind Liam and they shared a smile as a tiny gasp escaped a totally surprised Luke.

"Harry?" Luke said in a barely-there voice. Harry looked up at the new picture next to his granddad's portrait. It was almost the same size and one would not need to get too close to see clearly the happy lines in the two faces about to lock lips in it. It had been a perfect angle. Annoying at the time but it made him immensely proud he had taken the snapshot after all.

"You told me you deleted it!"

Harry grinned cohesively. "From my phone, yes. The cloud, no."

Everyone laughed.

"This is your home too," Harry said resting his right forearm on the man's shoulder. "You and Steve are our family. You don't have to hide here."

"Who said I was in a closet here? I only remember one Harry Styles of Twist Ranch being in the closet!"

"Oh, shut up!" Harry back-hand-slapped him in the ear. Luke yelped and Steve burst out laughing. Louis recoiled on hearing the sound of it. "For a minute there I thought Fizzie was still here."

Liam, Niall, Harry, and Zayn laughed out loud.

"She does laugh like that!"

Gemma took a picture of the scene on her phone camera.

"But seriously," Anne included. "You and Steve will always have a safe space here."

Louis added jokingly, "A 'No Pap' zone."

"Oh, really?" Liam teased. "Speak for yourself. When Zayn and I come to visit and the paps are behind us snapping us in sunglasses with suitcases," he said, nodding to Steve and Luke, referencing the way they strolled in the Gazebo party.

Steve's eyebrows went up. "He's saying that now! In a couple of years when he can't even take a wee without covering the window with toilet paper he'll talk then!"

Everyone laughed, and Louis' arms went around Harry's waist, scooping him up in a bear hug. Gemma snapped it, and Anne leaned in for a look, deciding to herself that that one was going up on the wall next.

"Guess who's engaged?" Niall grinned from behind the others.

Harry looked at him baffled then dropped his jaw when Niall pointed at himself.

"No way! How?"

Louis answered for the boy. "We marched into the Mendez yard like the FBI, and Niall asked
Shawna's dad for her hand."

"He handed Mr. Mendez the flowers when he said it," Murrey informed, laughing so hard his abs crunched.

Anne cackled, patting Niall on his back. "I would give a herd to see his face!"

Murrey rejoined. "You mean his face when he grabbed it and hit Niall with it and ran us off the property?"

Louis shook his head. "That's not the point. Shawna mouthed a 'yes' before the flowers hit the jeep. Something about it was really romantic." He put his arm around Niall's shoulders and smiled proudly.

"Thank you, Louis." Niall chirped. "I'll marry her after high school, and go to college as planned. I have it all worked out."

"What did the Reverend have to say about that?" Anne inquired.

Niall made long turtle-nods searching for the easiest way to say it. "He supports the decision but he and Mom are fighting about it. She says it's better not to provoke the man more with a proposal."

They looked at all the pictures that Nick framed for Harry to put up there. A few pictures from the gazebo party of groups of individuals together, and one of Harry's father, which Anne kept staring at quietly. Harry smiled at that one before casting cold eyes on one picture in the far end. He had decided not to tell Louis about what Nick found out. Louis did not even know Harry had asked him to. Heck, Harry wasn't even sure if Louis knew it was because of that call Nick mentioned that Harry had threatened Luke in the first place. Harry was not going to say anything about it yet. So he put it out of his mind and smiled at the others.

"I like that one," Louis said in his ear suddenly. "I think it's my favorite." Louis handed him a soda.

Deciphering that he meant the one he was focused on, Harry frowned. "Really? That one? Not the one with my dad?"

Louis' teeth surfaced. "I love that one too, Babe. But something about this one...You can see the years of happy memories on the faces. It's beautiful."

"Yeah," Harry took a sip. "Spectacular."

The sound of a soft guitar started playing, and the boys saw Cord and Niall harmonizing. Gasping, Zayn jumped on the couch arm next to him and joined the beat. Liam patted Harry's and Louis' shoulder and they all joined them.

As everyone ended up the song, Gemma baltered across the floor with an envelope in her hand and a porky smile on. "Anybody in the mood for another surprise?" she waved the item around to the music.

Harry scrunched his nose at Luke. "Don't tell me it's another document. I can't-"

Louis grabbed the envelope and took a peek. A big smile burst on his face as he took out an ultrasound picture.

The whole room screamed and cheered and fought for a closer look, Harry ultimately grabbing it up.
"I'm I getting a niece or a nephew, Gem?" he said, emotions flooding his eyes.

"I don't know. It's too soon to tell," Gemma shrugged as Cliff wagged his tail whipping her leg.

Harry kissed the picture and wrapped his arms around her. "It doesn't matter, Gem. I love 'em already."

The two hugged and Gemma quickly tucked her phone in Louis' hand signaling him to take a picture of them.

While everyone chatted about the baby, Zayn and Liam cranked up the stereo and danced their way over to Louis, who was already grinding by himself in the middle of the room. Cackling at the sight, Cord and Murrey disappeared into the kitchen for food.

Louis spun Harry around and dipped him low while Niall bopped in sync with the other two boys.

Murrey came out from the kitchen with a tray of pigs in a blanket. "Got a lot to celebrate; Gemma's ultrasound, Niall's engagement, and isn't this like Louis' last weekend here before college? Let's make a toast or something!"

Anne jumped into action, leaving the others and going to get the Champagne for the toast. She spotted Cord washing up a few dishes in the sink. He pursed his lips solemnly.

"Okay, help me get some of those glasses down," she said quickly. "It's a wonder Louis managed. And he's shorter than me!"

Cord calmly did as he was told. He wiped them and placed them on the table, then turned back to the sink.

"Cord?" Anne said in a different tone, the atmosphere in the kitchen tranquil.

He looked at her, all timid.

"I'm glad you decided to stay. I don't want my daughter to go through a Grimshaw pregnancy without someone who actually loves her. I know it's hard for you but she needs all the support she could get now."

Cord tried to contain his smile under a serious demeanor.

Contented with her apology, she made to leave and heard behind her; "Plus let's face it, it'll take you about a month to complete what? Half the labor I put down in a week around here? -"

"Why, you!" she grinned and dashed back over to him pretending to tap hip upside the head. Some Champagne fell in his eye and they both threw their heads back laughing like wild hyenas.

Catching the moment just in time, Gemma snapped that too.

****

Sitting now on Louis' bed, Harry was too troubled to sleep even for the late hour. Although everyone had turned in for the rest of the night, the sounds of cocks crowing could already be heard in the yard.

He watched as Louis dragged on a fresh T for bed.

"Earlier, Luke said something about wanting to take down Simon for real. He said obstructing
Gemma's deal was only the beginning of what he had planned for Simon."

"I figured." Louis slid under the covers and kissed his neck before falling on his back comfortably. Is that all that's bothering you?"

"The thing is, he's acting like we have to go on this payback mission because of what Dean Cowell stole from his uncle Brick and the Paynes and the way Simon tried to use Gemma to get the ranch."

Louis' eyes stared back at him like two oceans. "Luke is right. Simon has gotten away with plenty until now. I personally wanna be the one to cut him off at the knees."

"What if we're in over our heads? What if the fight is too much for us to handle? Can a couple of teenagers like us face Simon and what he's got up his sleeve?"

Louis gave an intricate smile, showing his little lines and creases on his cheeks and under his eyes. His body jamming into Harry as his head brushed his. The oceans disappeared beneath his lashes and his warm lips found solitude against Harry's nose, lips, and chin.

"I'm ready to face whatever as long as I'm with you."

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Closing credits song- The Promise- When in Rome version.

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Chapter End Notes
Soundtrack-

Through the dark, One Direction.

Keep on Trying, Poco.

Faithfully, Journey/ Glee cast version.

I'll be Over You, Toto.

In the Background, Third Eye Blind.

Total Eclipse of the Heart, Bonnie Tyler

I Keep on Fallin, Alicia Keys.

All Through the Night, Cyndi Lauper.

The Promise- When in Rome version.

Sweet Disposition, Temper Trap.

Something Great, One Direction

Breathe, Faith Hill.

Deep Inside of You, Third Eye Blind

The Scientist, Glee cast version.

Everything, Lifehouse.

Fall For You, Secondhand Serenade

...And all them other songs scattered throughout the story.

************

Author's note-

It's finally over! This took me longer than expected as it's my first fanfiction, my first completed work, and the first work read by other people. I thoroughly enjoyed sharing the journey with you guys. Probably wouldn't have finished it if people weren't reading and waiting with baited breath for chapters. I'm so honored to have written this for our beautiful fandom. I love Larry so much.

Wow, I have a lot of issues to cover with this fic. Part two? Definitely! Roger's Bar, and the mystery person in the picture who Simon called (I left a clue so Leave a comment on your guess as to who it could be) are at top of the list of things to be covered. And I know I started other little questions that need answering as well like what else was in Anne's letters. They will all be addressed in part two and three. So in the meantime consider part one closed.

Okay, I already started drafting part two and part three- part two will be William and Emmett's story with cuts to Harry and Louis' story told over a seven-year span after the
summer was over.

The third part will be a jump to when Harry reaches twenty-two and is fresh out of vet school and Louis is in charge of the farm to finalize the series with lots of angst and of course a happy ending so I'm excited. I must reveal that the setting of part three will be with flashbacks to Anne, Johanna, Gavin, Larissa as teens and Gemma and Murrey as babies (what happened back then as Anne mentioned to Gemma). I will also be concluding Emmett and William's story here (how Emmett died etc). I will try to achieve all this without confusing the heck out of you guys. Gonna take time guys but I will posting my older Louis fic and my cannon fic soon so you can enjoy in the meantime. Please subscribe to stay in the loop for that!

~Vote of thanks~

To my readers, I'd like to thank each and every one of you (cute as a button.) You're amazing patience was crucial to me completing this fic in the manner in which it was done. I lot if scenes in this would not have been as thorough without your patience and support.

Huge thanks to my beta readers, Aleksandra, Shelly and Sara for being amazingly patient and kind with this. Shelly, my flashbacks were a pain and would have stayed that way if it wasn't for you. I love your insight. Aleksandra, you are so sweet. My favorite chapters are the ones you sign off on. Everytime you went like "That's it! That's your chapter! Post!" I knew the chapter was complete. Sara, you saved my last chapter! I was super nervous about posting the ending and I couldn't have finished it in time if it wasn't for your insight, and your support and love for the entire fic. Thanks so much to all of you❤️.

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My larrie twitter family:- Catya, Martina, Bella, Jam, Sam, Betchay, Kim, Kaylee, Leena, Maureen. You guys are the reason I'm still stanning Larry Stylinson so fiercely.

PLEASE DON'T FORGET TO LEAVE KUDOS, COMMENTS (WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT THIS FIC?), AND SHARE THIS COMPLETED FIC WITH A FRIEND. THANK YOU.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!