I'll Never Be Too Far

by Rearviewdreamer

Summary

Marrying Harry really was the single best thing Louis’ ever done, just as Cameron promised. It’s uncanny how right he was about everything in his famous letter, including how painful and unfair goodbyes can be when they come much too soon.

Notes

***Warning***
This fic may be triggering for some as it addresses losing loved ones, specifically when they are taken way too soon. There are happy moments written into this as well as some that are quite sad, but I hope you enjoy them all if you decide to read <3

Also, thanks so much to Tabby for reading over this since I know it wasn't always that fun. You're honestly the best! :)

See the end of the work for more notes.

At first, Louis isn’t even sure that he’s not sleeping anymore. His mind is still full of images of the dream he was having about Liam and Niall surprising him for his birthday with an elephant, his husband crying because they just redid all the hardwood in the house, and their kids cheering because they’ve been begging for a pet for months now. Seems pretty plausible, given the nature of
Louis’ friends to always be up to no good and his husband’s obsession with keeping their home as beautiful as it was the day they bought it six years ago. And, then of course, there’s the kids. All three of them squealing their heads off with excitement because a pet elephant is so much better than a pet dog or cat. All of these reasons, the squealing most of all, make it very possible that there is in fact a two-story tall elephant currently standing in the living room. That, or it’s just another typical Saturday morning in their household and Louis is in fact not sleeping anymore.

A rush of warm air blows across Louis’ chest and the familiar weight that always rests upon it shifts to rest on Louis’ shoulder instead. Louis cracks open his eyes, braving the morning light to catch a glimpse of wild, dark curls that smell of coconut and a slight frown that deepens at the sound of a fresh set of squeals turned peals of laughter from somewhere outside their bedroom door. Possibly from right next to it from how loud they were.

“They’re awake,” Louis whispers. “And hungry.”

His husband’s sleep-slack mouth turns up into a lopsided grin against him. “Shhh. Maybe if we lie still enough, they’ll leave and go back to sleep.”

Louis snorts at such wild optimism since the kids going back to sleep has never happened in the history of forever. And it isn’t about to happen now either he realizes as their bedroom door creaks open amid a fit of stifled giggles.

“They’re here,” Louis warns.

“Don’t. They’ll hear and know we’re alive.”

“They’re coming,” he sings, listening to two pairs of four-year old feet pad closer to their bed and stand on either side of it. “Accept it. Becoming human bouncy houses is all that’s left for us. Imminent tickle attack in five… four…”

“No!” Harry complains though his smile is anything but distraught at the idea of their kids bombarding them with affection.

“Three… two…” Louis continues, feeling his husband tighten his grip around his waist as he braces for the impact that comes before Louis can even say one.

Louis cackles and shields himself as best he can with the arm that isn’t holding Harry, tucking his face close to Harry’s amid the twins demanding that everyone wake up. He’s all dimples and crinkled green eyes and just as beautiful as the night they met almost nine years ago when Louis ran out of toothpaste, Harry ran out of chocolate mint ice cream, and fate decided to put them in the same corner shop. That feels like just yesterday even with all the love, years, and memories between them. In all that time, loved ones have come into their lives and sadly, and most heartbreakingly, they’ve also left. But, even with those people gone, they’ve got each other. That’s one thing that hasn’t changed. Never will.

“Morning, love,” Louis says just to him, momentarily ignoring the tiny elbows, knees, and fingers digging into his skin for the kiss Harry manages to steal from his lips.

“Morning,” Harry grins back before a few perfectly-aimed pokes in the side from Eli and Matthew have him spluttering laughs right in Louis’ face. Which is fucking hilarious and also slightly gross considering no one in this house has seen so much as a toothbrush, however, Louis wouldn’t have his mornings any other way.
It’s barely ten by the time everyone’s been fed. Breakfast was a team effort as always between Louis, Harry, and their eldest, Johanna who has more talent cracking and whisking eggs at the age of six than Louis has acquired in his thirty-seven years. Now, all that’s left is the big cleanup that Louis’ tackling on his own while Harry is busy upstairs wrangling everybody into getting dressed in time to make it to the twins’ football game at noon. A challenging task that his husband has always been better at because the man has the patience of a saint. Louis’ mum was always like that too with him and his siblings. Patience and understanding for days while getting seven energetic, opinionated, and highly indecisive children ready for the day. Unlike Louis who can’t tell one dinosaur t-shirt from another and has no problem pairing mismatched leggings and sparkly blouses so long as they’re clean.

His mother has been gone a long time now, almost as long as it’s been since Harry lost Cam, but that doesn’t make Louis miss her any less. She’s never far from his thoughts even after all this time, and there’s always something he wishes he could tell her about. And although it sounds crazy to most people, sometimes Louis does just that. Regardless of whether she can hear him or not. Kind of like now as Louis moves from tidying the kitchen to tidying the rest of the first floor groaning at the tension in his back when he stops every few steps to pick up stray socks, crayons, puzzle pieces, and remnants of snacks smuggled out of the kitchen. A service Louis never fully appreciated as a kid when it was his mum doing the same.

Louis walks over to her photograph over on the mantle where a random mitten has ended up even though it’s the middle of bloody spring. Beside it, there’s also a fresh drawing of a flower that looks like the handiwork of little Johanna, always curious to hear about the woman she was named after but never got to meet.

With a fond shake of his head, Louis removes the random mitten (probably put there by one of the twins in an exciting game of ‘let’s throw things in the house’), but he leaves the drawing there for his mother. It’s right next to the other photograph being displayed on the mantle. An unforgotten loved one from Harry’s past who Louis owes so much to, and whom Louis catches his husband grinning at or reminiscing in front of from time to time. Just as Louis is doing right now with his mum.

“Jesus, don’t know how you did it,” he chuckles, amazed at how his mother did this for more than twice the number of children he and Harry currently have making her a fucking superhero in Louis’ book. And she had two sets of twins.

“Mmm, she didn’t always do it alone,” a familiar, deep voice says behind him. “From what I hear, she had a wonderful little boy who was a magnificent helper.” A magnificent menace, more like, but Louis doesn’t say it. He simply grins as he tilts his head back in anticipation of the kiss Harry drops to his temple once he’s close enough. “Ready to go?”

Louis leans back into his husband’s embrace, feeling that same dull tinge in his back from before when Harry cuddles him closer. No doubt the result of the twins’ tickle attack this morning or one of the other half-dozen attacks this past week. Typical.

“Troops all in line? Any casualties?” Louis teases despite hearing three pairs of feet running around above them on the second floor.

“Three out of three tiny humans dressed. Three out of three tiny humans still alive,” Harry reports amid a couple of tiny human-sized thumps directly over their heads that make him amend his previous statement. “Eh- Probably,” he snorts. “We ready to go?”

“Just about,” Louis answers, mentally running through their game day checklist again. “I got a text from Liam a minute ago saying they’re already on the way, so.”
“Same. I got one from Niall and a picture of Connor wearing his jersey on his head.” Harry digs his phone out of his pocket to show him the picture of Niall and Thea’s son looking about as excited for today as Johanna, Eli, and Matthew sound. They better get going. “I’ll grab the troops, you grab the snacks and water bottles?” It’s as if Harry read his mind, smacking a kiss to Louis’ cheek. “Wish us luck! It’d be nice if you could pull some strings and get us a win.”

Louis frowns at the request Harry hurls over his shoulder before taking off up the stairs again, confused as to why his husband thinks he has any power at all over the boys winning their game until he realizes the request was aimed a bit higher up. Much, much, higher up if Harry’s fond grin at the two photographs behind Louis is any indication.

It’s later that night after a crushing 1-0 victory that everyone from the Tomlinson-Styles household is scattered around the living room, along with a couple of members of the Horan household, and also Payne since it’s their turn to host sleepover night. Not that looking after so many kids at once is difficult. Especially when all the anticipation and excitement always has them passed out in a sea of popcorn before the end credits of movie number one. It’s a pretty sweet deal. Mostly because when the kids are in bed before nine, the adults get the rest of the evening to themselves.

Louis’ arm tingles with fresh the blood flow when Harry sits up to make sure all the snoring in the room is genuine. All three boys crashed nearly half an hour ago and are currently stretched out amid pillow fort ruins. So are Johanna and Liam’s six-year-old daughter, Sadie, who gave up fort construction a while ago and seem to have fallen asleep mid-coloring session. Only their little feet are visible beneath Louis’ writing desk a few feet away where they hopefully stuck with decorating the blank pages and coloring books and not the songs Louis’ been working on. With the biggest kids all snuggled under blankets, that just leaves Liam’s three-year-old, Julia, who never ever passes up the opportunity to hang out with her Uncle LouLou. Even when there’s glittery crayons and Toy Story 3 involved.

Without waking her and ignoring the slight tinge in his back, Louis gently dislodges her from where she tucked herself into his side hours ago. She doesn’t even notice she’s been moved when she’s placed down on the sofa and tucked in with a spare blanket. Julia’s sleeping just as soundly as ever just like the rest of the bunch when his husband checks the time and then meets Louis’ gaze with a grin and pair of emerald eyes that still hold a spark of mischief in them despite their busy, kid-packed day.

“I’m knackered. Bedtime?” he smirks knowingly.

Louis can’t help but chuckle. One, at his husband’s insistence on calling it that, and also, at how ridiculous it sounds when they both know full well once they go up those stairs together sleeping will be the least of their concerns.

“Sure. Sounds good,” Louis smiles back, already on pins and needles just watching his husband stand up from the sofa. Definitely bedtime.

Louis entire body is humming where he’s standing in front of Harry at the foot of their bed, being stripped of his hoodie and t-shirt until all that’s left are the joggers hanging low on his hips. Harry’s fingers feel like the tips of feathers along his back with how gentle they are; his lips like tiny flames each time they brush below Louis’ navel and all he wants is to feel that heat a bit lower.

It only takes a few gentle tugs for his joggers to end up pooled around his ankles and for his husband
to run his tongue along his length from base to tip. Louis wills his eyes to remain open and connected to Harry’s as he’s swallowed down, however the feeling is so phenomenal they fluttered closed after just a few seconds. When he dares open them again, Harry’s lips are cherry red and glistening, and the heat pouring from the emerald gaze fixed on Louis’ face has him desperate to kiss him.

Harry’s chest is heaving when he pulls off to give his mouth a rest but the break doesn’t last long, both of them grinning when Louis bends down to capture those lips for himself to finally taste them. With Harry panting into his mouth to try and keep up, Louis coaxes him to stand up from the bed. He reverses their positions, discarding Harry’s clothes next to his on the floor until there’s only skin before him. It turns a soft shade of pink as Louis wraps his mouth around his tip and sinks down, Harry’s chest rising and falling even faster when he’s made to rotate so Louis can give his bum the same treatment.

More than the taste of him or the little sounds he makes, it’s the shaky grip Harry keeps around Louis’ wrist as he opens him up that Louis loves. Being connected to him even when they aren’t face-to-face. Knowing they belong to each other just by the thick, silver band that Harry said yes to seven years ago making Louis the luckiest man in the world, second only to the first person who had the honor of calling Harry his husband. An amazing, selfless person who’s gone, but to whom Louis is grateful for every day, because without him, they might not have made it here.

Louis thinks about it often. New chapters and how funny the world works. How closed doors always seem to open to another. How the loss of someone close to you; a mother, a first love, can consume every piece of your heart until you meet the one person you were always meant to, and then suddenly, your heart is so full of love again it’s bursting with it. Lucky is the word that comes to mind every morning he wakes up to his husband and their beautiful family. And privileged is all he feels whenever Harry smiles at him like he’s the person he’s been waiting for his entire life. Kind of like he is right now as they fall back against the bed, not really caring where they land as long as it’s together.

He wakes the next morning with a smile on his face as big as the one he fell asleep wearing.

His lips are still tingly from Harry being unable to stop kissing them, he’s delightfully sore all over, and every inch of their bed smells just like the two of them. Louis rolls into the spot where his husband should be and finds it empty, but knows exactly where he’s wandered to from the smell of bacon wafting up the stairs and half a dozen cheers from the word pancakes.

The kids must’ve woken him up first thing. Thankfully, they spared Louis from suffering the same early morning fate. There’s music playing downstairs and the kitchen is sure to look like a bomb hit it. Every kid down there can be heard begging to help stir (none more so than their own three), and Harry is probably wearing the biggest and most exhausted smile ever. One, because he hardly got any rest last night. And two, because he absolutely loves the chaos.

Louis sits up in bed more excited at the prospect of joining everyone than lazing around, however his grin quickly fades and turns to a grimace the moment he pushes back the duvet.

That twinge of pain in his back is just as sharp as it was all yesterday, however, weirdly enough it seems to have moved from the left of his spine to cover his entire left side. Carefully, Louis runs his fingers over the spot to inspect it, groaning when pain shoots through him again.

Eventually, the sensation fades and it’s only then that Louis realizes how badly he’s had to pee this whole time. He dares move again, fearing the worst when his bare feet touch the floor but nothing really happens. There’s no more aching or shooting pains when he stands, thank god. Just the dull
echo of a persistent cramp he must’ve gotten sleeping in a weird position.

He can still hear the commotion downstairs as he heads for the toilet, his excitement to head down there restored now that he’s no longer clenching his side. The feeling doesn’t last long though. In fact, the emotion disappears from his chest as swiftly as it came, leaving him hollow inside like he’s missed several steps going down when he looks down at the toilet bowl and sees red.

For several moments, Louis convinces himself he’s not quite sure what he’s looking at even though his brain grows more and more certain the longer he stares. It’s blood. A lot of it. And based on every other morning time piss he’s taken in his lifetime, that generally isn’t supposed to happen.

He holds a hand over his side although it isn’t cramping at the moment. Though now Louis doubts if it was ever really a cramp to begin with because it couldn’t have been. And whatever this is can’t be good, especially when if first thing he thinks about besides the nauseating level of fear bubbling up in his stomach is his mother and how perfectly healthy she was for years until one day, she wasn’t.

It’s a terrifying notion to consider. One he doesn’t get to dwell on which is probably for the best considering the unbelievable rate at which Louis’ thoughts had begun to spiral. He’s brought back from the brink by the sound of familiar footsteps going up the stairs, followed by his husband’s voice near the door.

“Lou, you still asleep? Babe?”

The questions sends Louis’ heart racing with panic and he feels miles away from everything; his body, this moment even. And yet he manages to snap the hell out of it and flush the toilet before Harry enters the room.

“Oh. There you are,” his husband chuckles behind him, the grin on his lips sinking the moment Louis turns around to face him.

Something in Louis’ face must be off for Harry to look as worried as he now does. Louis should tell him. He knows that, but for some reason he just can’t bring himself to do so. What he can do however is paint on a smile worthy of someone about to be invited to eat a post-sleepover, pancake breakfast and preferably not scare the living hell of his husband over something that probably isn’t even anything. It’s probably nothing.

“Lou?” Harry says taking a few tentative steps forward. “Babe, are-? Are you alri-?”

“I’m fine,” Louis chirps before his husband can even get out the words. “Perfect. Starving,” he amends making his husband’s grin return to about half its original glory.

“Oh. Okay. Well, breakfast is almost ready so that’s good news,” he offers, looking like he wants to believe Louis. And, eventually, he does, leaning in for the kiss Louis presses to his lips on his way back to their bedroom.

“Great! Smells delicious,” Louis beams, rummaging through the his side of the dresser. “Er- Just let me find some clothes to throw on and I’ll be right down to help?”

The sound of silverware hitting the hardwood steals Harry’s attention away from Louis and back to the six tiny people downstairs who just totally ignored any and all requests to wait to set the table until Harry got back.

“That sounded promising,” Louis snorts when he sees his husband let out a long sigh for the daily torture their floors undergo. “Go on and see what they’re up to, love. I’ll be right there. Promise.”
Louis keeps the smile on his face until Harry leaves, his stomach in knots after his use of the word promise because for the first time in almost nine years, it feels like a lie.

Six Days Later

“Hey, Haz?” Louis calls upstairs to his husband from where he’s been sat at his desk writing all morning. Unfortunately, it looks like he’s going to be sitting here well into the afternoon too. Which is why Louis’ expression is filled with sorrowful guilt rather than the excitement everyone else has been bursting with ever since the kids managed to sweet-talk their way to an impromptu park day.

When Harry pokes his head into the living room, he already senses that a letdown is coming. Louis can tell from the slightly disappointed yet loving sigh he lets out in spite of everything. Including their children’s bickering upstairs. He crosses the room to perch himself right on the edge of Louis’ desk with kind, understanding eyes that have already forgiven Louis for bailing.

“New song still giving you trouble, love?” he asks with a look down at the pages of lyrics Louis’ been scribbling all week.

“Yeah, just a bit. I’m sorry, Haz.” Louis winces, hating to have to ask what he’s about to. “Do you think it’d be alright if I skip the park today to keep working? You and the kids wouldn’t murder me, right? I could still keep my head and most of my other best parts?”

Louis had hoped that might pull a laugh out of his husband, and it did. To this day, it’s still one of Louis’ favorite sounds.

“Well, I need all your best parts in tact so I certainly won’t kill you, but I can’t promise they won’t,” he snorts with a glance towards the ceiling where three children can be heard arguing on the other side of it over who gets to be on Louis’ team if they play football. “You know you’re always first pick,” Harry grins with a poke to Louis’ chest. “You’re leaving them with me and my skills as the only option. They might revolt.”

“Can’t blame them, mate. You are pretty terrible.” Louis doesn’t even duck to avoid the playful slap against his arm, followed by a slow kiss to make up for it. The kids have all made it downstairs with them by the time Harry pulls back and calls him a dickhead under his breath. No one else hears it though. They’re still too busy debating over whose team Louis gets to be on.

“Daddy, tell them you’re going to choose me. Please?” Eli begs over Johanna insisting that she gets first dibs because Eli got Louis the last time and plus she’s the oldest. All Matthew is contributing to the conversation is a bunch of dinosaur noises thanks to the toy Pterodactyl he just wedged out from behind one of the bookshelves.

Harry fondly shakes his head at all three of them, partly because they’re hilarious, mostly because they’ve been searching for that fucking Pterodactyl all month.

“Behind the bloody bookshelf of all places. Of course,” he chuckles as he presses a goodbye kiss to Louis’ jaw. “Good luck writing. See you when we get back,” he says over all the noise, hopping down from Louis’ work desk to wrangle everyone towards the front door.

“I’ll miss you guys! Love you!” Louis calls after them, his chest tightening like a knot once the kids realize he’s not following them and their little faces are unable to hide the disappointment as well as their father’s.
“Daddy’s not coming?” Matthew asks for the group, no longer interested in the reemergence of his favorite toy or the park for that matter now that nobody gets Louis on their team.

“Eh- No, I’m afraid not, my loves,” Harry breaks the news to them. “Daddy’s got to finish some work here at home, but we’re still going to have plenty of fun together, right?”

“Right!” Louis agrees, quickly standing up to come give all three of their kids a kiss and a giant bear hug to make them giggle. “You’re going to have the best time together! It’s going to be so fun and I can’t wait to hear all about how you kicked your dad’s bum at football without me.”

“Oi!” his husband scolds. “Come on. I am not that bad.”

The giggled silence that follows such a bold statement and flat-out lie should be answer enough, but still. Louis can’t resist.

“He’s that bad,” Louis Assures them before smacking a kiss to Harry’s cheek too. “Bye. Love you all! Score amazing goals for me!”

“I’ll try, but apparently I can’t make any promises,” his husband mutters bitterly as he ushers the kids outside, but his grin gives him away.

“Also can’t score a goal, love, but who’s keeping track?” Louis teases back, counting the seconds that pass before he can let the smile fall off his face as the door shuts behind them.

Louis doubles over and clenches at his side as soon as they’re gone. The way he’s been dying to since the moment he stood up. He knew it was going to be painful to move before he even tried it because the pain shooting through him has kept him at his desk today and every other day he has tried to leave it this week. That’s precisely why he didn’t even attempt going to the park with everyone else. There was no way in hell he was going to be able to keep up with his husband and chase three kids around for an entire afternoon without anyone noticing how much agony he’s in when he could hardly even kiss Johanna, Matthew, and Eli goodbye without holding his breath to numb the pain.

Slowly, the knife that seems to be turning inside him eases up. After a minute or so, he’s able to breathe again and straighten up, however he almost misses the pain when it’s replaced by the wave of nausea that always seems to follow.

He waits it out. Taking deep breaths in and out through his nose to combat it and he’s just so frustrated. Annoyed that he feels like complete shit all the time and even angrier that he’s having to lie to people he loves because of it. Today with the park isn’t even the first time he’s has to make up a bullshit excuse. He’s had to lie to get out of something with his family or friends nearly every day for the past week and it’s killing him.

Liam had mentioned going to the gym, which Louis quickly declined knowing full well he can’t keep up with Liam on a good day let alone when he’s feeling so shitty. Niall wanted to hang out with him a couple of nights, but each time Louis has had to come up with an excuse to deter him. The first draft of that song Harry thinks is giving Louis so much trouble has been complete on his laptop for days now, but it’s all Louis has as far as viable excuses go whenever Harry tries luring him into bed at night. He hasn’t been able to play with the kids properly. There’s been no hide and seek on his end and no impromptu piggyback rides. He even yelled at the twins a few mornings ago in the midst of one of their tickle attacks when one of their feet collided with the very spot Louis had been secretly trying to shield beneath the duvet.

He’s never felt like a more terrible father than in that moment.
At this point, there’s no way he can ignore the fact that something is seriously wrong with him. He knows that none of this is normal and that it isn’t going away, but part of him has been hoping that it would. That he could chalk that first morning up to some weird allergic reaction or something due to stress, but it just keeps getting worse.

His brain has concocted billions of different theories about what the hell might be going on with him. It screams the word Louis has been intentionally keeping at bay since this all started. Mostly, because the last time he was forced to say it out loud, he lost the person closest to him in the whole world.

Something has to give, he thinks once he’s gathered the courage to sit down on the sofa in front of his laptop. This pain can’t keep happening and neither can all the lying and the guilt that comes with it. Being in denial is much easier for Louis to cope with in his head than having to actually acknowledge the truth, but in the end, knowing has got to be better than not knowing. It has to.

Googling symptoms has always been Louis’ preferred method of diagnosis even when it comes to the kids and all their childhood ailments. Which is the complete opposite from Harry of course who’d much rather take them to a doctor; a professional to find out if a bad cough is just a bad cough or if a prolonged tummy ache after dinner could mean something more. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that Louis’ symptoms are more serious that. A few doses of a cough medicine or bowls of homemade soup aren’t going to stop Louis’ insides from feeling like they’re being ripped apart or stop his chest tightening with anxiety each time he goes to the bathroom.

With a deep breath and look over at the mantle for good luck, Louis begins typing a couple of his symptoms. He hits enter and gets tons of results that almost feel comforting because at least he’s not the only terrified person whose experienced these things.

The first few results he gets are all STI-related, which Louis promptly ignores. He’s been having sex with the same person for almost a decade and the thought of either of them wanting to change that fact behind the other’s back is preposterous. It’s not even a fucking possibility as far as he’s concerned, so swiftly and confidently, he moves on.

Nothing he reads seems to be right as he scans the page for other possible causes as to why he feels so shit all of a sudden. At best, the results cover only one or two of his symptoms and come with a host of others that Louis doesn’t have. He’s about ready to call it quits and try a new search when his eyes catch a glimpse of the word he’s been dreading. He doesn’t want to click on it. However, at this point, he doesn’t have many other options. And just as he feared, almost every single thing he’s experienced over the past six days is listed before him in black and white causing a heavy weight to settle in Louis’ chest and sink to the pit of his stomach the more he reads.

The room feels like all the air has been sucked from it as his laptop folds closed, though Louis doesn’t remember deciding to do that. His hands don’t even feel like the ones that are shaking as he sets the computer beside him, but a quick look down confirms that they do in fact belong to him. Just like his mouth that has gone dry within seconds and the sick feeling in his stomach that has nothing to do with the bladder cancer he most likely has and everything to do with the hot panic he can feel rising up like bile at the back of his throat.

It’s not like he didn’t know that was a possibility. He had practically known it on day one, but he didn’t want to believe it. Not after everything this disease has already taken from him. And now, it seems it’s coming after him too, but that’s just the thing about cancer. It sucks for the unlucky person who has it, there’s no doubt about that. However, it’s damn near unbearable for the people around them who have to watch. It’s the people around Louis that come to the forefront of his mind instantly. His loved ones who don’t deserve the fear of potentially losing a friend, an uncle, a brother, a father. And, in this particularly fucked up turn of events for Harry, a second husband.
He can’t even think it. That after everything it took for the two of them to be together; the loss, and heartache, and pain. That it all ends the same way it began.

The two pictures displayed on the mantle have always given Louis sense of warmth and calm. The idea of his mother and Cameron watching over their family has always been a comfort, but right now, he just feels lost. Abandoned by the realization that things can still go to shit in the blink of an eye regardless of who’s watching over them. He almost laughs at himself for assuming they were safe. Special somehow. All that talk about luck and privilege and all the other bullshit he thought were things that were untouchable, when now, there’s just fear.

It’s been a couple of days since the moment Louis realized the severity of this entire situation. He’s had some time to process, though he feels no readier to accept the awful hand he’s been dealt than he was before. But, even so, he can’t keep running from it. Regardless of how scared he is of his life changing; their lives changing. And, despite his anger that this is happening, he doesn’t have to go through it alone necessarily.

Harry would want to know. In his heart, Louis knows that. He’d want to help and be there for Louis in any way that he can, no questions asked. But, telling Harry means intentionally destroying every part of him that Louis loves the most. Once he’s done that, there’s no going back.

He can’t bear to imagine his husband’s eyes filled with anything besides the pure happiness they exude every day whether it’s from one of the kids hugging him so tight he can’t breathe or from Louis whispering that he loves him out of nowhere just for the joy of seeing his face light up with a smile. Whenever Harry talks about their future together, it’s because he assumes they’ll still have one. Each time they kiss, he never plans on it being the last because there should be a lifetime more awaiting them. That’s what they promised one another. That’s the solemn vow Louis intended to keep, and taking that optimism away feels almost as cruel as hiding something from his husband to begin with when they tell each other everything.

With all that’s been going on, Louis hasn’t been paying attention to things he should be. His work email has been piling up and he hasn’t looked at a bloody calendar in forever. If he had, maybe he would’ve noticed the end of May approaching and his best friend’s birthday that he’s never once forgotten until today.

His dinner party is tonight. In just a couple of hours actually, and Louis can’t believe he didn’t realize it until Niall called to ask if they were getting a babysitter for tonight or bringing the kids along with them. It’s like Louis has been in a daze all week, and the feeling only grows as Louis walks into the kitchen with the scent of fresh cupcakes filling the air. His husband is just taking them out of the oven, half-dressed for dinner in a dark button up, old joggers he stole from Louis’ side of the dresser, and a pink headband to keep his freshly washed curls out of the way until he can style them. He’s on the phone with someone. Presumably Niall calling for answers to the questions Louis certainly didn’t know.

He stands in the doorway for a little while watching Harry zip around their kitchen and listening to their kids laughing at some movie playing in the living room. Harry doesn’t notice him there until after he hangs up with Niall and sets the cupcakes on the counter to cool.

“There you are. I was just coming to find you,” he says brightly. Louis tries to return his smile, though it’s nowhere near as brilliant. “That was just Niall. We forgot to tell him the kids are staying with your sister tonight. It’s a good thing he called. Poor Connor would’ve been bored to death being the only kid there,” he chuckles, the grin on his face dimming a bit once he realizes Louis isn’t chuckling with him.
Louis makes an attempt at a smile, but obviously isn’t doing very well in making it believable since Harry’s expression is still concerned.

“Hey. Are you alright?” his husband asks, pausing his progress with the birthday cupcakes to cross the room. “What’s up? You look a little lost.”

Louis leans into the hand gently cupping his face, feeling more than just a bit lost but he doesn’t say it.

“I’m fine,” he says instead. Lies instead but it’s worth it to not worry Harry. “I, uh- I just forgot Lottie was watching the kids tonight, I guess? I’m sorry.”

“And you’re apologizing for this, why exactly?” Harry snorts before he smacks a loud kiss to Louis’ jaw. “And anyway, everyone’s overnight bags are ready to go. Packed them myself about thirty minutes ago.”

Yet another thing Louis somehow missed. He swears it’s almost like he’s sleepwalking these days. His mind isn’t even here.

“Hey, I’m going to finish up down here and then finish getting dressed if you want to hop in the shower. I can keep an eye on the troops until you’re all done.” Louis nods a beat too late, making Harry frown a bit through his smile. He’s been looking at Louis like that all week. “You sure you’re alright, love? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I- I’m fine,” Louis repeats as he has each time Harry’s green eyes have narrowed at him like he’s missing something. “I’m fine,” he says again with more confidence. “Promise. I’m great. Just excited about the party.” The dimpled grin before him returns to full brilliance when Louis presses a kiss to his jaw. “Cupcakes smell amazing.”

“Thanks!” he beams. “One dozen lemon, one dozen chocolate, and eleven red velvet with cream cheese, all to add up to the ripe old age of thirty-five.”

Baking the exact number of cupcakes for whatever age their friends are turning is just one of the many little things his husband does to make aging even more special for them. Even on days like today when he’s all smug about everyone else getting old before him because he’s the youngest. Harry’s only thirty-four and his birthday isn’t until next year. And in a weird train of thought, Louis’ chest tightens at the realization that he may not be here to see it.

*"They drop the children off at their Aunt Lottie’s and despite the ache in Louis’ side he bends down to wrap each of them in a hug so tight he almost doesn’t want to let go. The only reason he eventually does is because of the look on his sister’s face while teasing him for being so sentimental about a bloody overnight as if it’s their first one. She continues teasing Louis and calling him ridiculous when he stands to pull her close to him as well. His sister rolls her eyes the entire time she’s trapped in his grip until he’s reminded by his husband that they actually have someplace to be. It should be as easy to walk out the door without his children and his sister as it is every other time he’s done so, and yet leaving them behind tonight is like a knife to the chest.

The feeling doesn’t dissipate once they make it over to Liam’s. Somehow, Louis just feels worse being surrounded by even more people he loves. With all the kids staying with relatives for the evening that just leaves the adults to celebrate Liam’s big day the same as every year. Niall and his wife, Thea, keep everybody entertained as they tell stories about all the dumb shit they’ve witnessed Liam do and say over the years. Liam’s wife can barely stop herself from spluttering into her drinks,
right along with Harry who’s so drunk his eyes have crinkled to the point they’re no longer visible. And then there’s Louis. Sitting at the kitchen table with all them, wondering if this will be one of the last times their smiles and happiness comes so easily.

Everything hurts to see from the stupidly giddy smile on Liam’s face while opening his handmade gifts from his daughters to the obnoxious, drunken kisses being stolen all over the room after every toast. It sucks to think that the next time they’ll all be together this way that it’ll be different. That jokes won’t come as easily and his loved ones won’t tease him for being weirdly quiet and sober when he’s usually the loudest and it’ll be because they’ll all know.

When everyone has finished eating their last cupcakes and downing their last drinks, Louis drives him and Harry home. His grip around the steering wheel is so tight it’s almost painful, but not quite as painful as the dimply grin visible from the passenger seat in the intermittent glow of streetlights above. His husband doesn’t comment on the stiff position Louis is sitting in to calm the ache in his abdomen or the way his fingers have gone white trying to hide it. It’s possible Harry doesn’t notice any of those things at all, which Louis is eternally grateful for because he doesn’t yet have the words to explain what’s wrong. Thankfully, he doesn’t have to say anything, all the tension in his body melting away the moment Harry pries the hand closest to him away from the steering wheel to hold it against his chest. After a beat, a warm pair of lips caress his knuckles and then rest against his wedding band like a comfort Louis never said he needed, but, God, does he ever.

“Your hands and feet are forever cold,” Harry chuckles, temporarily stopping the constricting feeling taking hold in Louis’ throat.

“Sorry,” he says, making an attempt to reach the heat control but Harry just squeezes his cold hand tighter.

“Nah, it’s fine,” he grins. “That’s why my hands are so much bigger. Very important job keeping yours warm. A lifelong burden really, but someone has to do it.”

It’s not like it’s the first time Louis has heard that rationale. Harry’s been saying that to him for nearly ten years and they’ve both always laughed. This is the first time it has made Louis’ eyes feel so heavy.

Walking into the house together should feel like a relief, but it doesn’t. Not even with his husband’s mouth pressed to his neck and those big, warm hands of his determinedly pulling at Louis’ shirt to take it off. It feels incredible as always to have all of Harry’s attention this way; the best way. To be this wanted and loved and Louis should be able to revel in it. They should be able to stumble up those stairs and crash into bed together like always but Louis could barely make it in and out of the car tonight without wincing. Regardless of how much Louis needs Harry in this moment, he’s going to have to look his husband in the eye and make him believe the exact opposite. He’s going to have to lie and say he’s tired or not feeling up to having sex again just as he has almost every night this week, and it’s not fucking fair. Not to Louis, and certainly not to Harry who hasn’t done a single thing to deserve the complete bullshit that life keeps throwing at him.

He doesn’t even know anything’s wrong, smiling against Louis’ skin as his hands dare to move lower. Louis’ heart races with anxiety rather desire at the feeling of his zipper sliding down. He needs to speak up; he has to, but by some miracle the persistent vibration of the phone in Harry’s back pocket saves him. It makes his husband stop trying to strip him out of his clothes and he sighs aloud at the interruption. He sounds set to ignore the vibrating altogether, however the uncertainty of who it might be or if it could be an emergency involving one of the kids forces him to dig the phone out of his pocket.

“It’s just my mum. Hmm. I guess she must’ve just gotten home from that date she finally agreed to
“with her friend?” he says with a slight frown that slowly morphs into a grin when he notices it’s nearly midnight. Louis assumes he’s referencing David, the man Anne met about a year after losing her husband to cancer years ago, and who coincidentally has been completely and helplessly in love with Anne ever since.

Harry looks a bit torn as the phone continues vibrating in his hand, his eyes apologizing to Louis before his mouth even forms the words. “Can I at least find out if she had fun? It’ll only take a minute. Two minutes tops,” he promises, an estimate Louis already knows to be incorrect when Harry answers the phone in full gossip mode and instantly grabs the kettle. Louis can’t judge him because if it were his mother ringing him up Louis wouldn’t care what time of night it was or what he’d be giving up to chat with her about whatever she wanted. He wouldn’t even think twice. And besides that, Harry choosing Anne over him at the moment is a good thing because at least now he doesn’t have to lie.

Louis’ ascent up the staircase is the loneliest he can remember in the six years he’s lived in this house. Nothing at all about it has changed. The door hinges creak when moved, the paint is still faded every place the sun shines during the day, and the air smells like home. Like fresh oak floors, and kids bubble bath, and hints of Harry’s cologne, but it all feels so wrong. Like someone else’s skin overlaid on top of his, compressing everything inside of him until he bursts. The feeling only grows when Louis steps inside his and Harry’s bedroom where everything he sees is a symbol of their lives together. Louis can’t imagine it any other way. Picturing the end of his life and their time together breaks his heart to the point that he can’t even be there anymore. Just the thought of leaving Harry here alone is suffocating.

He doesn’t even realize where he’s going when he starts down the corridor, but Louis’ feet carry him to the guest room regardless. It hurts slightly less as he bypasses the wardrobe that holds random pieces of clothing from pretty much everyone who has ever slept over at their house. The guest bed is still unmade from last week’s sleepover and it’s impossible to tell exactly whose tiny socks and jacket are shoved under the bed. Ordinarily Louis would take the time to tidy up. Usually, he can take a step without his stomach twisting in pain and he can actually fucking breathe when he thinks of his family rather than feeling like his chest is caving in. Today is different so he ignores the mess. He ignores it all, heading straight for the closet on the left side of the room. To the only other person in this world who knows what this is like; who knows how painful goodbye can be.

The closet door creaks open to reveal heavy winter coats and blankets stored here until they’re needed again, but it’s the wooden box on the top shelf his eyes can’t look away from. Louis reaches for it, carefully wrapping his fingers around its cedar edges. He settles down on the bed with it, letting his thumb caress the letter C carved into the front of the box Louis hasn’t held in ages and yet never leaves his thoughts.

He has only opened this box twice before. Once before asking Harry to marry him and again when they decided to adopt Johanna. Each time Louis has come to Cameron it has been a time of complete and utter happiness. Happiness that Louis wanted to share with the man who loved Harry first and wanted him to have all the love in the world. The man who would’ve loved to see the amazing man and father Harry has become, but fate had other plans.

Once he’s brave enough, Louis slides the top of the box back to reveal all the keepsakes from Harry’s time with Cam that he couldn’t bear to part with. It’s filled with everything from pictures of their life together to the drink receipt Cam scribbled his number on the night they first met. Louis even comes across Cam’s obituary and also with their wedding bands that are so tarnished from age now that the inscriptions on the inside are hardly visible.

Louis doesn’t touch them. None of those memories are his and they weren’t preserved for him.
They’re for Harry on all the birthdays and anniversaries; the hardest days. Nothing in this box belongs to Louis except one thing: a letter printed inside a magazine and written directly to Louis without its author even knowing who he was. He doesn’t even have to read it. He’s had every word of it memorized since the first time, but he turns to the page anyway.

The first line about him probably being gone since the letter was published hurts so badly that Louis can’t even continue reading. Can’t even make it to the part where Cameron accepted the fact that his and Harry’s chapter was rapidly ending, however there was still time to ensure that Harry got another one. A better one.

Louis doesn’t understand how the hell Cameron did this with such grace. How he was able to leave the person he loved the most despite being fucking terrified. Louis certainly is. They have so much left to do together and he’s terrified of what comes next; of the thought of his and Harry’s story ending just like the one that came before it. With all evidence of Louis and their life together packed up in a little wooden box at the top of some closet.

It’s one of the cruelest and most unfair things Louis has ever heard of; a man who watched one husband die before his eyes forced to live it all again and it makes Louis so angry he could scream. He doesn’t of course. His lungs are barely doing their job as it is making Louis feel as if all the air has been sucked out of the room and it just gets worse when he’s no longer able to hold back the tears stinging his eyes. It feels a bit like drowning, finally letting out all the fear and anxiety he’s been harboring since this mess started. There’s nothing graceful about it and Louis’ chest aches with every sob but it feels good to just be honest with himself. To admit he’s overwhelmed and the uncertainty of not knowing what the future holds is indeed scary.

He's unsure of when exactly Harry hung up with his mother and came up the stairs, only that it all happens much too quickly for Louis to react. The magazine in his hands is soaked by the time Louis realizes he’s been crying all over it though it was always a bit wrinkly from Harry doing the same all these years. Louis tries blotting at it with his sleeve, his heart racing with every step his husband takes toward the light coming from the guest room.

“So, apparently, David was the perfect gentleman all night, they chose McDonalds over gourmet, my mum’s face hurts from laughing so much, and she hasn’t had that much fun in ages. I think it’s love,” Harry reports from just outside the guest room, the happy smile on his face going flat the moment he turns the corner. “Babe, what are you-? What’s wrong?”

He looks even more frightened than Louis feels as his eyes move back and forth from Louis to the memory box in front of him and Louis has no words. They won’t come no matter how many times Louis tries to assure him that he’s alright. But, perhaps it’s better that he’s been caught and isn’t able to lie anymore because at least when the drowning feeling starts again there’s somebody he loves whispering it’s okay and a familiar pair of arms there to keep him afloat.

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The soft rain tapping on the kitchen window is a good distraction from the old kettle on the stove that has yet to boil because it takes forever. They need a new one. Harry’s been thinking that for nearly two years since the kettle they currently have is ancient. It’s a hand-me-down Louis got from his mother before she died and the kettle was already over a decade old. All he and Louis have done is add more scuffs, rust, and years to it. However, that’s just all the more reason to keep it. It’s part of their history together, Louis’ childhood spent with his mum, and their children’s childhoods spent with their two dads. Realistically, Harry isn’t sure if they could ever part with something that holds so much sentiment. Especially now with so much about their future uncertain. This old kettle and what it means could end up being the thing that gets Harry through the day sometimes, if it ever
came to losing Louis. Harry prays every second that it won’t.

Harry moves to stand before the cupboard next to him and pulls out two big mugs. Usually, he’d grab three more and fill them with something yummy like lemonade or hot chocolate, but unfortunately there are no children running around today to drink it. Not that any of them would ever complain about the thrill of having extended sleepovers while their parents get their shit together.

It’s been two days since Liam’s birthday though his party wasn’t exactly the most memorable part of the evening for Harry. That came later when he found his current husband crying over a letter written by his late husband, hardly able to breathe from the sobs. The reason why was enough to make Harry’s heart stop and fracture into the same billion pieces it did back when it was Cam realizing how painfully short life can be when there’s illness involved.

They don’t know anything for sure yet which is good. Really, it’s the only thing keeping Harry from a complete fucking breakdown over potentially living this nightmare for a second time. Because Louis’ symptoms sound bleak and scary and from what Harry has been able to stomach while looking online, cancer very well may be the culprit, but they can’t know that for sure. Not until he’s been properly seen by a doctor. Which is why Harry made an appointment the first chance he got. Now, all that’s left to do is wait and pray that it’s good news tomorrow.

A high-pitched whistle pulls Harry’s attention away from the gloomy weather happening outside to the water that’s finally boiled. He grabs two tea bags and drops them into their respective mugs; black with sugar for Louis, jasmine with a bit of honey for Harry which was always Cameron’s favorite drink that Harry simply adopted.

Usually, the sweet combination never fails to warm him from the inside out, but today nothing helps. Everything is dark and cold from the weather to the light in Louis’ eyes which hasn’t been quite right for a while. Harry blames himself for that. For not realizing sooner. For the past week, Harry has noticed small differences in his husband but just assumed it was due to stress from work. He feels like the worst partner in the world. He overlooked hundreds of signs that should’ve tipped him off right away to something being horribly and completely wrong, because Louis hasn’t been his loud, happy, bright self for some time now. He should’ve noticed. And for that, he can’t forgive himself.

Carefully, Harry carries the two mugs out of the kitchen with him, taking a few deep breaths to steel himself before he reenters the living room. Louis stops pretending to be interested in whatever’s playing on the t.v. when he notices Harry walking towards him on the sofa. He meets Harry’s gaze with tired eyes and an equally exhausted grin that’s still genuine somehow despite running off hardly any sleep.

“Thanks, love,” Louis says like always whenever Harry brings him his tea. All crinkle-eyed and raspy-voiced and with an appreciation that warms Harry’s chest.

“Don’t mention it,” he whispers back, leaning into the kiss his temple receives the moment he’s settled down on the sofa too.

They try to focus on the t.v. again, but Harry can feel it each time Louis’ gaze drifts away from it to check in on him. He’s been watching Harry ever since he admitted what’s been going on. Waiting for a reaction different from the one Harry’s been giving him. Harry assumes his husband expected more; devastated tears of overwhelming sadness or perhaps just pure rage at being kept in the dark, but Harry didn’t do any of those things. Mostly, he’s just been really quiet which is a surprise even to himself. Maybe he’s just in shock.

Neither of them have been getting any real rest the past two nights. They’re still processing obviously which has taken a lot longer than they would’ve guessed. However, it’s a lot easier for them to do
with Matthew and Eli staying over at Niall’s and Johanna over at Liam’s. Neither of their friends asked many questions when Harry asked them for the favor. They only wanted to know if everything was alright. To which Harry gave the best and most honest answer he could: they don’t know. That’s scary to think. Even scarier to admit out loud, but at least they’ve got loved ones to help and support them. And most importantly, they’ve got each other.

Their teas are still way too hot to drink. Harry realizes that when he takes a scalding sip and immediately yanks the mug away from his mouth. Louis chuckles at his impatience and it’s the first sound even resembling a laugh that their house has heard in days. Harry has missed that sound.

“That’s quite rude. What would the kids think?” Harry teases as he places his tea on the table to let it cool a bit. However, when Louis tries to copy him and do the same the movement causes him to suck in a sharp breath. His face screws up in pain that must be coming from his lower stomach from the way he holds it. He applies pressure to the spot for a long time. It hurts Harry to see him hurting. It’s the most awful thing in world watching someone you love suffer and knowing there’s nothing you can do to stop it. Minutes pass before Louis’ expression relaxes and he’s able to remove his hand from his stomach. He’s no longer in pain but his eyes still hold echoes of it when he dares to face Harry again.

“Shit, love. I- I’m sorry,” he says making Harry wonder if his own expression looks at frightened as he feels. He is scared; terrified, but he doesn’t want Louis to know that.

“No, don’t apologize, love. I’ve told you it’s fine,” Harry assures him with a squeeze to his hands. “It’s not your fault. There’s nothing to be sorry for.” Louis doesn’t seem to think that’s true. It’s written all over his face that he’s to blame for all this and he’s just not.

Harry kisses his husband slow to fight the guilt he feels, smiling when he pulls back to see Louis doing the same. The t.v. is still on though Harry has no idea what they’re supposedly watching. He presses one more kiss to Louis’ lips before curling up next to him and rests his head in Louis’ lap. Usually, it’s a silent request to have his hair played with. Today, that’s still true, but it has other benefits as well. One being that no one can see his face or the fear etched into it each time thoughts of losing Louis creep up in Harry’s mind. He needs to be here for Louis even if he doesn’t feel very strong, but he’s done that before he thinks, purposefully ignoring Cam’s photograph on the mantle. Harry’s done all this before. Vowed to be here for two people in sickness and in health and he meant it both times. He just really wishes he didn’t have to keep proving it.

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The rain has stopped by the time Louis wakes up on Monday morning. He doesn’t have to step outside to know that. The birds chirping outside the windows and all the sunlight warming his face are indication enough of the beautiful day that awaits him. Louis glances down his chest at his equally beautiful husband sleeping and finally allowing himself to get some rest. What a shame they have to waste such a perfect day stuck in a doctor’s office rather than enjoying it. All Louis can think about are all the sunny days his mother, Cam, and Harry’s step-father were forced to miss out on while they were sick. He wonders if they ever felt this guilty about it.

It’s been days since they’ve seen the kids outside of Facetime or the odd photo one of their friends send of them doing something funny or sweet. They’re all back home now. It’s certainly not because Louis and Harry are any more prepared to explain how one of their dads is ill and soup isn’t enough to make it go away, but because life has to resume as normal regardless. Their friends have to return to work now that the weekend is over and their eldest has school first thing. Getting her ready and keeping the twins busy is a lot for Harry to handle on his own since every other step leaves Louis breathless and wincing. It’s also a lot to think about on top Louis’ soon-to-be diagnosis looming
closer every second. Luckily, Harry’s mother is able to step in to help get her ready and also watch the twins while they’re gone.

Louis hugs each of his babies close to him, earning a similar reaction to his sister when his arms don’t want to let go. His kids all giggle at being squeezed so warmly and their bright smiles make Louis smile. Loving them is the best feeling in the world besides getting the chance to be their father. It crushes him to think that could all change so quickly.

Even worse than the pain of having to let go of his children and watch them run off is the look he gets from Anne as he stands up with much effort and pain he’s no longer doing a good job of hiding. Her eyes are as kind and loving as always; just like her son’s. However, there’s so much more behind them today. Harry must’ve told her. Louis’ not surprised. Harry and his mother tell each other everything and Louis’ glad about that. He doesn’t want Harry dealing with any of this alone.

“I’m fine,” he says as Anne continues watching him.

The words roll off his tongue on instinct. Louis doesn’t even remember deciding to lie, just that he needed to say something to reassure her. He doesn’t want his people worrying about him. Especially not his mother-in-law who has already had to do this twice before; once with Cam, and again with her own husband. It’s the familiarity visible on her face that scares Louis the most.

“Uh… so, lunch,” he changes the topic. “Er- We didn’t really have time to shop for her favorites this weekend. Sorry about that,” Louis says referencing Johanna’s lunch box that Anne had already started to fill regardless. “Right. Um, she loves fruit. There’s still some apples in the fridge, I think. Possibly some grapes too if that bottomless-pit son of yours hasn’t eaten them all,” he jokes, or at least he tries to. It falls flat and his accompanying laugh sounds more nervous and scared than anything else.

Anne doesn’t comment on it or the fact that Louis finds it easier to stare at the floor than meet her gaze. In fact, she doesn’t say a word as she ignores Johanna’s lunch box and all the food lying out on the countertops to pull Louis into the embrace Louis needed but couldn’t bring himself to ask for. Anne isn’t his mother. They both know that, but she’s the best and closest thing Louis has to one and just her presence alone makes it easier to breathe.

Their hug ends at the sound of footsteps halting at the kitchen door. It’s just Harry, his cheeks a little pink from interrupting them.

“S-Sorry, I didn’t mean to-”

“You didn’t. Not at all,” Louis smiles at him. “I guess it’s time, then?”

His husband nods after a quick consultation with their clock hanging over the kitchen table. “Appointment’s in half an hour. We should get there a little early. They’ll have paperwork.”

Just like Anne, there’s a familiarity about this process in Harry’s voice that Louis hates. He doesn’t mention it though, choosing to make his husband smile rather than focus on what is and isn’t fair.

“Paperwork,” he sighs before dropping a kiss to Harry’s jaw. “Yum, my favorite.”

The drive over to Louis’ appointment is interesting to say the least. Quiet mostly and a little tense, but Louis supposes that’s to be expected considering their destination. It helps that Harry refuses to let go of his hand over the middle console. And that his eyes have trouble focusing on the road from how often they drift over to the passenger seat. He offers Louis private little smiles as if this is any other
drive across town; as if they’re just taking another road trip together and nothing at all is wrong. Pretending even just for a few minutes helps so much. It helps more than Harry will ever know.

Louis’ nerves about today have remained mostly in check considering. That all changes the moment they pull into the car park. Louis has never felt more nervous about anything in his entire life. It makes sense that his amazing husband would choose that exact moment to make Louis forget about it all.

“It doesn’t matter, you know?” Harry tells him with a firm squeeze to his hand. “…Whatever the doctor says. Whatever happens. Because…Because, I love you. And we’re going to get through this, Lou. Together.”

He sounds so confident. Louis knows his husband must be as terrified as he is, but his eyes don’t show it. He can’t tell if it’s an abundance of practice or an abundance of faith that has Harry sounding so sure, but it fills Louis with hope he didn’t previously have.

The doctor’s office feels formal and cold as they’re led through it. They walk past the children’s wing where Louis and Harry have spent plenty of time ever since starting a family. The oncology wing just next to it is also familiar, but thankfully they’re able to avoid it. At least for the time being.

Based on Louis’ symptoms, all his doctor wants are x-rays which are simple enough. Louis doesn’t have to do much except lie still under the machine. That’s easy, however it’s the waiting after it’s all over that puts him on edge. The doctor had said it would only take minutes for his x-rays to develop so they can know more about what’s wrong with him, but those minutes feel like eternities.

Another firm squeeze to his hand and a kiss to his right temple, momentarily pulls Louis out of his thoughts. It’s about the billionth time Harry has done that in the last half an hour. Probably because he can tell Louis’ anxiety level is through the fucking roof despite him pretending otherwise. He’s hoping for the best but expecting the worst which sounds terrible, but it’s the only rational way Louis can approach this situation. It’s the moment of truth. Afterwards, his life changes forever; their lives change, but at least they’ll be on the other side of it and they’ll know for sure.

A series of footsteps outside the room followed by a quick knock on the door forces Louis to take a deep breath.

“I’m right here beside you,” Harry whispers with one last squeeze to his hand. “Not going anywhere.”

Louis nods, repeating his husband’s promise in his head as the door swings open to reveal Dr. Edwards and all of Louis’ x-rays she’s steadily flipping through. She probably analyzes a billion x-rays per day. It can’t be a good sign that she’s giving Louis’ so much attention.

“So… what do you see?” he asks before she’s even halfway across the room. “Is- Is there a mass? Do you think they’re cancerous?” His real question is if he’s going to die and how much worse is this going to get before it gets better; if it gets better, but he doesn’t want to be so blunt with Harry here.

“There are a few small masses in your bladder…” Dr. Edwards confirms like a blow straight to Louis’ chest. “However, none of them appear to be cancerous because you don’t have cancer.”

Although, Louis just watched Dr. Edwards’ mouth say the words, his brain has a hard time processing them, running them back through his mind a few times to make sure he didn’t just imagine it all. Apparently, Harry is also having a hard time taking in Dr. Edwards’ claim.
“He- He doesn’t?”

“I don’t?”

“No, not that any of these x-rays show. You’ve got a few persistent kidney stones, but that’s about it. No cancer.” She’s said it twice now, and Louis still can’t believe his ears. “Uric Acid Kidney stones are very common and also extremely painful, especially when they’re as large as yours so I can see how that may have caused some alarm. Especially when Googling symptoms in isolation.”

Harry always did try to convince him looking up symptoms is dumb.

“So, you’re saying I’ll be fine?”

“Well, you’ll need to start drinking a lot more water since the amount you’re currently drinking obviously isn’t enough to prevent buildup or flush them. And we may need to cut down on how much oxalate you’re consuming to prevent the stones from coming back, but essentially, yes. You’ll be fine. We can take care of them with a prescription and have you out of here within the hour.”

Louis exhales with the knowledge that they can leave this place today. That they don’t have to be referred to oncology or sit and talk about options or any of the unbearable situations he’d been dreading. They get to go home.

The relief he feels is echoed when he hears his husband release a deep breath that’s accompanied by teary eyes and a shaky inhale. Seeing Harry cry has always been heartbreaking. Usually, the knowledge that his husband is upset is devastating to Louis, but normally, his tears aren’t complemented by a giant, watery smile.

Harry goes willingly when Louis opens his arms to hold him. When they left the house this morning, Louis assumed this was the way they’d spend most of the day; the two of them leaning on each other for support, but he never would’ve guessed those moments of comfort would include laughter of all things.

“You never drink enough water,” Harry chastises him, sniffling and giggling into his neck all at once. “I’ve been telling you that since the dawn of bloody time because all you ever drink is tea.”

It’s true. Even when they pack for game days or an afternoon in the park Louis remembers to fill bottles for everyone except himself, and when Harry does it, Louis only takes sips.

“That would explain a lot,” Dr. Edwards chimes in. “Tea contains high levels of oxalate. Black tea especially.”

And coincidentally that’s Louis’ all-time favorite. Between the multiple cups he drinks in the mornings and then all throughout the day as he writes, it’s no wonder there were consequences.

Eventually, Dr. Edwards leaves them to go request Louis’ prescription and the look in his husband’s eyes is smug behind the tears still welling up in them.

“Alright, alright,” Louis rolls his eyes. “You’ve been right all this time. I’m a stubborn, dehydrated black tea addict who doesn't know how to use the internet and who didn’t listen.”

“Yes. Yes, you are,” Harry affirms with a snort.

“And, because I didn’t listen, you now get to hold it over my head for the next fifty years since apparently you’re not getting rid of me,” he teases. “Sorry to disappoint, love.”
Louis’ never been happier about something in his entire life and he knows Harry hasn’t either when he forgoes gloating for the first time in their entire marriage to kiss Louis instead.

It’s the best Louis has felt in a very long time.

One Year Later

The end of May (and Liam’s birthday as a result) arrives much quicker than Louis was expecting, but he guesses time always feels that way. Especially now with how busy he and Harry have been with the new puppy they finally agreed to after more than a year of begging from all three of their children, and also, the new baby girl they welcomed home just over a month ago. There was already never a dull moment in the Tomlinson-Styles household with five people living in it and things have gotten even crazier with a little beagle who still hasn’t figured out pissing on grass instead of hardwood, the eldest kids in the house learning to clean up after him, and their beautiful four-month old called Ella who cried a lot during the transition from the adoption agency to their house, but is now settling in as if she’s always belonged there with them. Maybe it’s because she has.

Louis pulls their car in behind all the others parked outside of Liam’s house and grins over at his husband paying him zero attention due to the phone in his hand. He hasn’t put it down since Aunt Gemma kicked them out of the house and ordered her little brother to go have fun doing something besides doubting her babysitting skills.

“She’s finally stopped crying and gone back to sleep. I guess she was just hungry still? The other three are still watching the movie,” he reports from the novel length text message Gemma just sent him. A message Louis can’t help but notice starts with the greeting ‘Dear loser with no life’ and ends with, ‘Kindly fuck off’.

“Well, that’s a relief,” Louis smirks in answer. “You know, for Gemma, the person babysitting her along with the rest of our children who will also be perfectly fine without us for a few hours while we celebrate Liam Payne becoming more and more ancient. Also, I’ve heard babies do cry from time to time. It’s the weirdest thing. Scientists can’t figure it out.”

Harry bites down on a grin, finally looking up from his phone.

“I’m doing that thing we talked about, aren’t I?”

“Being completely and irrationally insane? Yes,” Louis laughs. “But, at least you’re cute while being obsessive. Most parents can’t pull that off.” It’s also something Louis isn’t actually judging him for since this is the first time they’ve been out since adopting Ella. It’s a big first step in the lives of any new parents, so Louis gets it. However, he’s also perfectly fine leaving their children in Gemma’s trustworthy hands for an evening with his husband worry-free.

Well, worry-free on Louis’ side at least.

“It’s just for a few hours. I’ll guess I could leave my phone in the car...” Harry muses out loud.

“Probably. I mean, the world could be attacked by aliens at any moment, but at least everyone else will have their phones. Good call.”

Just as Louis hoped, their car fills with laughter and also the sound of Harry’s phone being shoved into the middle console.

“Remind me why I put up with you again?” Harry teases back.
He answers his husband with a kiss that is eagerly returned. Louis isn’t quite sure of the answer to that question, but he thinks it’s got something to do with how much Harry loves him and the way Louis loves him right back. It’s something Louis has thought about a lot over the past year; back when he feared he might lose all of this. He’s so glad that wasn’t the case.

“I’ll grab the gifts and you grab the cupcakes?” Harry asks once they pull back.

“Jesus. All thirty-six of them?” Louis complains with a smile.

He doesn’t mind carrying them in. Actually it’s quite an honor because this time last year, Louis wasn’t so sure he’d get the chance to.

When they were all younger, birthday parties were events that started around dinner time and lasted well into the early hours of morning, however that hasn’t been the case lately. At least not for Louis and Harry who have four kids waiting at home and also Niall and his wife who’ve been trying for a second child ever since Connor was born five years ago and have finally gotten their wish as they announced tonight. It’s been a night full of celebrations, all of which Louis was lucky enough to be present for. He hopes to be here for many, many more.

Their house kind of looks like a bomb hit it when they get back home, but it’s not like Louis expected any different. Everyone must be sleeping upstairs since the living room is deserted aside from all the crayons, toys, and snacks strewn all over the place but whatever happened it looks like their kids had a blast. There’s a stack of drawings on the sofa, all of which are addressed to either him or Harry or the both of them. They sit down to look through them all, laughing at one of the twins’ interpretation of their new, larger family that features the dog as a brown and black rectangle with legs and his sister Ella as a pink blob with a heart in the middle of it. It’s undoubtedly the best thing Louis has ever seen.

“Should we be concerned at this point that only Eli has a head in literally all of his drawings?” Harry snorts.

“At least he’s consistent. Johanna makes my hair a different color every time;” Louis jokes back as he folds up all their family portraits to hang them on the fridge.

“I’m going to go check on Ella and see if Gemma needs anything in the guest room.”

“Okay. I’ll be up in just a minute,” Louis says, leaning into the kiss Harry presses to his lips like a promise.

When he’s gone, Louis is left downstairs by himself, however he doesn’t feel alone. He glances over at the mantle and the two photographs of the people that are no longer here, but it doesn’t feel like it. It never really does.

For a short time, Louis had been terrified of potentially losing all of this, but looking back he has no idea why when he’s got the two best people this world has ever known watching over him; his mother, Johanna, who’s dream it was to see him be this happy one day, and then of course there’s Cameron, who did everything in his power to ensure Harry would get this level of happiness too. Louis thinks about them often. The way heartache and pain have a tendency to heal and turn to joy. Mostly, he just thinks how grateful he is that their family gets not one, but two angels in its corner. It doesn’t get better than that.
End Notes

I had been thinking about this addition for such a long time! Thank you if you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it! <3

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